MORAL INJURY, SOUL REPAIR, AND CREATING A PLACE FOR GRACE

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Abstract

Our returning veterans face many challenges from loss of limb and physical disabilities to posttraumatic stress disorder, depression, substance abuse, homelessness, family problems, and unemployment. The greater challenge, though, for returning veterans is the injury to their soul due to the war and violence they have experienced. Our challenge is to create a place for grace to help them unlearn violence.

DEFINING THE BASIC CONCEPTS

The increasing number of returning veterans in our churches and communities signals a growing need for clergy and religious educators to assess the pastoral concerns and requirements that these veterans and their families may be facing. It also presents an opportunity to initiate a more serious discussion of the moral and theological issues that accompany war and global violence. In doing so, it is important to first name and understand the central issues.

Wars have been a reality throughout human history. However, we are actually only now beginning to understand the true impact of war and violence on those called to fight and those for whom they fight. These men and women have been taught to be violent. Yet, when they return home, they are not taught how to unlearn violence. Unmaking violence is hard to do when our veterans are reliving their experiences of violence daily.

Utilizing the vantage points and experience of religious education and military chaplaincy this article is organized around two main sections. The first section discusses the psychological, theological, and ethical dimensions of moral injury in conjunction with how it aids the

perpetuation of violence both within the individual and between the individual, their families, and communities. The second major section will discuss the role that religious education can play in order to support the healing and recovery of our veterans and our communities as well as genuinely teaching how to unmake violence.

MORAL INJURY

In an effort to more accurately diagnose what could be the major cause of suicide among American veterans returning from Afghanistan, Iraq, and even Vietnam, professionals across multiple disciplines—including clinical psychologists, social workers, Christian ethicists, and clergy—are using with greater frequency the phrase *moral injury*. "PTSD, as officially defined, is rarely what wrecks veterans' lives or crushes them to suicide," writes career Veterans Affairs psychiatrist Jonathan Shay, "Moral injury does both" (2012, 58). Military professionals now warn of the real danger of "spiritual and moral trauma" and advocate "education about moral injury and its relationship to spirituality and stress" (Hufford, Fritz, and Rhodes 2010, 73, 85) and "development of spiritual fitness" to help "mitigate moral injury" (Sweeney, Rhodes, Boling 2012, 35–36).

A shift of focus away from the language of "disorder" to the language of "moral injury" presents both a "challenge" and a "call" to spiritual leaders" (Lettini 2013, 37, 44). Medical professionals admit they cannot adequately address what they are calling "moral injury," and are reaching out to religious leaders and communities for help. Jonathan Shay, who spent decades working with combat veterans, acknowledged as early as 2002 that "religious and cultural therapies are not only possible, but may well be superior to what mental health professionals conventionally offer" (152). Yet in order to provide competent pastoral care, education is needed. Effective religious education can equip clergy and faith communities to speak and act with greater pastoral authority in addressing moral injury and its root causes, moving beyond the constraints of the medical model, in order to meet the real needs of individuals and society.

Since the language of "moral injury" has emerged out of the medical community, let us begin with the definitions of moral injury from that community. Although efforts to name the hidden wounds of war go back to ancient times, Shay, perhaps the first to use "moral injury," defines it as "a betrayal of what's right" and considers the injury "an

essential part of any combat trauma that leads to lifelong psychological injury" (1994, 20). Brett Litz, a Veterans Affairs psychologist, together with colleagues, has built upon Shay by defining potentially "morally injurious" experiences as *"Perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations"* (2009, 700; italics theirs). Shay responded to Litz with further clarification of what he means by "moral injury" in a way he says "complements Litz, but differs in the 'who' of the violator." His revised version includes three components:

1. Betrayal of what's right
2. By someone who holds legitimate authority (in the military—a leader)
3. In a high stakes situation. (2012, 59).

The fundamental distinction between moral injury and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is in the core emotion: moral injury is based in *shame* and *guilt* whereas PTSD is rooted in an overwhelming experience of *fear*. Litz further distinguishes moral injury from PTSD noting that "anguish, guilt and shame are signs of an intact conscience" and that the existence of moral injury indicates healthy "expectations" about "goodness, humanity and justice" (2009, 701). Rita Nakashima-Brock and Gabriella Lettini contend, "Veterans with moral injury have souls in anguish, not a psychological disorder" (2013, 51). Edward Tick rejects PTSD as a diagnostic label, initially preferring "identity disorder" and "soul disorder" (2005, 5) and most recently "social disorder" and "soul wound" (2013, 14–22; 2014, 96–97, 147–148, 174).

In other words, moral injury is not a personality disorder but rather a wound suffered by a self-reflective and conscientious moral agent. As such, moral injury is best understood as the inevitable outcome of moral engagement with the harsh reality of war and killing. Understood in this way, should religious leaders really seek to "mitigate moral injury" and find ways to "prevent" or even "treat" it? Nakashima-Brock and Lettini offer this well-placed critique of the spiritual fitness dimension of the U.S. Army's Comprehensive Soldier Fitness initiative: "it seems to glorify soldiers as spiritually fit who can remain unaffected in any deep moral or emotional way" (2012, 101). "Veterans who experience moral injury testify to human capacities for empathy and to the resilience and persistence of moral teaching," writes Lettini (2013, 44). "A person of good character feels moral pain—call it guilt, shame, anguish, remorse—after doing something that caused another person

suffering, injury, or death, even if entirely accidental or unavoidable," writes Shay (2002, 112). If we define spiritual fitness to include the capacity for empathy, moral engagement, and all the rest that good character entails then it would seem moral injury is *directly*, not *inversely*, proportional to spiritual fitness. Moral injury is a hopeful sign we are no longer on the "road to ruin" that David Grossman warned us about in *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*; but rather on "the road home" toward "the resensitization of America" (1995, 328).

Evidence-based research indicates moral disengagement aids in the perpetuation of violence both within the individual and between the individual and their wider relationships. Albert Bandura, a pioneer in the field of research on moral disengagement, has established the high costs of such disengagement: "It contributes to social discordance in ways that are likely to lead down dissocial paths. High moral disengagers experience low guilt over injurious conduct. They are less prosocial. They are quick to resort to aggression and transgressive conduct" (2002, 115). Despite these costs, the U.S. military systematically trains soldiers to morally disengage to produce more efficient killers. Admittedly, some soldiers may need to morally disengage and embrace what the psychologist Daniel Goleman calls "vital lies" (1985) to cope with the anxiety inherent in combat. But a veteran who remains morally disengaged never returns home. As Shay notes, "To really *be home* means to be emotionally present and engaged" (2002, 39).

A pastoral intervention rightly directed toward human wholeness ought neither mitigate nor prevent moral injury but rather accept it, honor it, and perhaps even celebrate it as the "sacred wound" (Tick, 2013) that it is. From the perspective of the religious leader, fostering moral reflection on killing and war, even if it means bearing moral injury, is better than condoning a military and society that is morally disengaged and desensitized from the unsavory business of killing. "If we must have a military at all it *should* hurt," (italics his) wrote M. Scott Peck in *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil* (1983, 232) after resigning as Assistant Chief of Psychiatry and Neurology Consultant to the Surgeon General of the U.S. Army during the American war in Vietnam. Peck argues that if we refuse to acknowledge the harmful consequences of our war-fighting—confess our own "sin"—and live in a state of moral disengagement, psychic numbing, denial, and self-deception as "people of the lie," then "as a whole people we will become ... evil" (233). Reinhold Niebuhr

called this the "final sin," that is, "the unwillingness to hear the word of judgment spoken against our sin" (1964, 219).

Perhaps, then, the most important task of religious leaders and educators is to move a culture that is sin- and guilt-averse into a new way of seeing that values moral engagement, and the resulting moral pain and injury, as critical for the moral development of individuals and society. If we understand guilt as Niebuhr does, "the objective and historical consequence of sin" (222) then a pastoral intervention must both tend the guilt and expose the root sin. "If guilt is not experienced deeply enough to cut into us, our future may well be lost," writes one combat veteran reflecting on the carnage of World War II (Gray 1967, 212). "If a nation, seeking peace and security forgets its own conscience or the judgment of God upon it, the nation loses its soul," writes another (Shinn 1946, 57). In order to foster this development, religious educators should learn and teach the distinction between shame and guilt. June Tangney, Jeff Stuewig, and Deborah Mashek have researched moral emotions like shame and guilt and offer this helpful distinction: shame is maladaptive and contributes to acting-in and acting-out violence toward self and others whereas guilt "goes hand in hand with other-oriented empathy" is "adaptive" and "bene-fiting individuals and relationships in a variety of ways" (2007, 350). Once religious leaders understand this distinction between shame and guilt, they will be better prepared to help the morally injured veteran unlearn violence-inducing shame and tend to appropriate guilt.

THEOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS

Talk of sin, evil, and redemption moves us beyond the constraints of the medical construct of moral injury into a dimension that inte-grates the insights of theology and the resources of religious traditions, and this is exactly where religious educators can make their greatest contribution. Warren Kinghorn contends moral injury "is an impor-tant and useful clinical construct" but the phenomenon it attempts to name "beckons beyond the structural constraints of contemporary psychology toward something like moral theology" or "penitential the-ology" (2012, 57, 62). Kinghorn says Christian moral theology, which has to do with Christian character and conduct, offers a "depth of context to moral injury that clinical psychology cannot," which makes

the psychological construct (Litz et al. 2009; Shay 2002) "unhelpfully limiting."

Kinghorn considers the advent of "moral injury" within the literature of combat trauma "a very welcome development" because it "forces critical analysis of the relationship between combat trauma and the moral agency of the acting soldier." He says, the focus on agency is helpful in three ways: (1) Combat trauma can no longer be understood apart from "a sociocultural matrix of language and meaning and valuation," which, Kinghorn says, "resonates with Christian affirmations of the embodied, relational, responsible self"; (2) Combat trauma understood as moral injury "forces a more complex account of human agency than is often displayed in cultural conversations about combat trauma"; (3) Moral injury reminds us that "traumatic effects of war on soldiers and civilians cannot be separated from the more theoretical considerations of war's moral justifiability, and vice versa." The benefit of this to Christian communities, he writes, is that "moral injury can call Christian ethics out of abstract arguments about just war and pacifism toward closer consideration of the concrete psychological and individual costs of war" (2012, 62–63).

For Kinghorn, the moral injury construct offered by Litz and Shay is nothing more than the "transgression of a soldier's own internalized rules and assumptions." Out of such a construct, he argues, the clinicians' response to the suffering of veterans is sadly inadequate. We are left with "therapeutic instrumentalism" or "the use of technique to relieve suffering." These techniques, he says, have great "moral zeal" but are constrained by "teleological silence."

> They cannot pass judgment on the validity of the moral rules and assumptions that individual soldiers carry, since to do so would be to venture into the ethics of war. They also cannot name any deeper reality that moral assumptions and the rules that engender them might reflect. (2012, 67)

A more accurate diagnosis of a person suffering combat trauma, Kinghorn says, is "moral fragmentation of a teleological whole." In response to this, he says, Christians, through pastoral and congregational care, can provide what psychiatrists and psychologists cannot: reconciliation to God and community. Such reconciliation, he says, "calls for the interlocking practices of patience, of confession, and forgiveness" (2012, 67). "Unlike the clinical disciplines, Christians can name the moral trauma of war not simply as psychological dissonance

but as a tragic and perhaps even sinful reminder that the peace of God is still not yet a fully present reality" (70).

To arrive at a pastoral diagnosis of the problem facing returning veterans, we need to wrestle with the word *sin* and be open to what Bernard Verkamp called "recovering a sense of sin" (1983, 305). This point was made more than a quarter-century ago by William Mahedy, who served as a chaplain in Vietnam. "I believe the essential failure of the chaplaincy in Vietnam was its inability to name the reality for what it was," wrote Mahedy. "We should have first called it sin, admitted we were in a morally ambiguous and religiously tenuous situation, and then gone on to deal with the harsh reality of the soldier's life" (1986, 135). Could "moral injury" amount to nothing more than a euphemism for sin, or at least, the consequence of sin? One marine combat veteran dismisses moral injury "as deceptive a euphemism as collateral damage" (Kudo, 2013). Kinghorn reminds us, "the language of 'wound' and 'sickness' is deeply rooted in Christian speech about sin, particularly in the Eastern tradition" (65). Church history reveals times when Christians imposed penance on soldiers returning from battle, even when the battle was just and the soldiers fought justly (Verkamp 2006, 18–19; Cole 2002, 314). Religious educators who disable the insulating walls and confront the vital lies that shield us from our complicity in war and killing may not alleviate suffering, but may very may well redeem us from sin and deliver us from evil.

It is one thing to talk about moral injury from the perspective of medicine and theology and the challenges it presents for not only our veterans and their families but for our communities as well. It is another to consider how we might constructively and effectively address it, for their sake and for the sake of our communities. Religious education has the opportunity to address these challenges posed by moral injury and soul wound on the educational and pastoral levels.

POSSIBILITIES FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN THE UNMAKING OF VIOLENCE

Creating a Space for Grace

What can religious educators contribute? One important response is to create a space for grace. A challenge veterans face is to feel grace and acceptance again as they try to distinguish shame from guilt and move from the divided life of moral fragmentation and disengagement

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toward integration and wholeness. It is all the more difficult for them because the very training and initiation they received that helped ensure their survival in combat (moral disengagement) also plays into their feelings of guilt and shame. But a space in which grace is present and experienced offers support that enables them to let go and begin the healing process. How do we do this? We need to create what Parker Palmer calls a "circle of trust" that is "safe for the soul" (2004). Confession and forgiveness contribute to such a space.

Confession is just one among many classic spiritual disciplines that religious leaders and educators can employ and teach about to tend moral injury and reconcile the morally wounded to God and community. The story of one soldier, "Angelito," illustrates well how confession can open the path toward forgiveness and reconciliation in community.[1] Angelito was burdened with guilt and shame. He had tried it all—PTSD counselors, anger management, medications, alcohol, but nothing would ease the pain. He was preparing to shoot himself in the head. He wanted peace, yet finding the peace of God in this world seemed to him an impossible dream; suicide seemed the best option. Over the ensuing weeks, after building a relationship of trust, he could share his story. His unit had shot a civilian and then left him on the road all the while shouting obscenities as the man bled to death in front of his wife and children. The image of the blood and the sounds of the children screaming haunted Angelito. "I betrayed my true self," he said. His father had taught him to be compassionate, like the Good Samaritan in Jesus' parable, yet moral reflection on his behavior led him to conclude he did "the exact opposite" of what the Good Samaritan would have done. "My heart was so cold," he said. "I'm a monster."

"Relationships with the missing and the dead, and with death itself, are at the core of the soul wound we call post-traumatic stress disorder," writes Tick (2005, 140). After Angelito confessed he turned his confession into a song called "Driving By as I Watched You Bleed," that he performed publicly before a religious community that had gathered one Sunday morning at Kandahar Airfield. The community functioned as a "circle of trust," heard Angelito without judgment and became a channel for him to experience forgiveness, mercy, and grace. In creating a song and dedicating it to the man he had helped kill,

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[1]Angelito authorized a release from privilege so his story and his song could be public for the lessons it holds for us all. You can find the song and interview conducted by Chris Antal at http://bamiyan.us/wordpress/?p = 737.

Angelito moved from the moral emotion of shame to appropriate guilt for real harm done, and ultimately to gratitude: "Thank you for being there in my life. Thank you for reminding me of who I need to be in the world." His relationship with the dead was transformed; the man was no longer a haunting phantom but part of his conscience. By the end of this time, Angelito no longer hated himself and his broken soul was on the mend. While this intervention did help Angelito achieve post traumatic growth, it fell short of the demands of restorative justice, which requires tending the unmet needs of the traumatized widow and children, and all the others harmed in this incident.

It is important that pastoral leaders and students recognize the value of confession for both the returning veteran and the congregation as a whole. As Richard Foster describes it: "The discipline of confession brings an end to pretense. God is calling into being a Church that can openly confess its frail humanity and know the forgiving and empowering graces of Christ. Honesty leads to confession, and confessions leads to change" (1988, 157). In addition, the congregation that is able to confess together with the veteran signals that it too is moving toward reconciliation together. Kinghorn sees this as a strength and advantage of the faith-based communities as opposed to the medical community. For Kinghorn, the veterans need:

> . . . a community that can help them be forgiven when appropriate as well as to forgive the wrongs inflicted upon them in war. And they need a community that is able to own and to acknowledge its own violence, as embodied in the lives and actions of its soldiers, yet that is capable, with the veteran, of imagining a world in which violence is not ultimate and does not rule. (2012, 69)

As noted, patience, confession, and forgiveness are all essential to reconciling the morally wounded back to God and community. Without patience, we risk "premature forgiveness." Shelly Rambo, in her book *Spirit and Trauma, a Theology of Remaining* suggests remaining with Holy Saturday, between death and life, instead of rushing to the joy of the resurrection on Easter Sunday (2010, 45–80). The time of remaining is also the time when the community can face the tragedies of war, accept appropriate guilt for their complicity in war, and share the burden of responsibility with the veteran who served on behalf of the community. As Stanley Hauerwas writes:

> A commitment to nonviolence rightly requires those who are so committed to recognize that we are as implicated in war as those who have gone to

war or those who have supported war. The moral challenges of war are too important for us to play a game of who is and who is not guilty for past or future wars. We are all, pacifist and nonpacifist alike, guilty. (2011, xiv)

By patiently *remaining* with Angelito he learned to trust, and on the foundation of that trust he was able to confess, experience appropriate guilt for real harm done, grow in empathy, begin working toward forgiveness, and make meaning out of tragedy. The community, in bearing witness, shared the burdens of the veterans and grew in awareness to the human cost of war.

Education of the Wider Community

Equally important is the need to generate and foster theological reflection and examination by the veterans and the wider community on the larger fundamental issues and hard reality of war. This means asking the hard questions: Can war ever be "just"? Is war always collective sin? Is the act of killing by individuals in war sinful? Why must we as a peace-loving people rely on war for our sense of security? As men and women of God and as a nation that proclaims the centrality of God, can we continue to sanction killing on a national level? How do we view our returning veterans knowing some of the actions they had to commit? How do we make sense of the atrocities committed by our soldiers and atrocities committed by "the enemy"? These are questions that require discussion if our religious leaders and communities are to go beyond "therapeutic instrumentalism" and reclaim their pastoral authority. As Nakashima-Brock expresses it: "To treat veterans with respect means to examine our collective relationships to war with the same standards of courage and integrity veterans themselves have modeled" (2013, 115).

Changes in weaponry, language, and how we conduct a war also point toward the need for a public discussion and theological reflection. There is a danger of losing touch with the moral issues involved in war due to the use of medical clinical language that can be misleading. Talk of delivering a "surgical strike" or "eliminating the target" leads us to forget that the action will result in loss of life. We therefore stand to lose sight of the moral issues involved in war if there is no venue or forum in which to examine and reflect on these assumptions and issues.

As Nakashima-Brock offers: "Engaging in collective conversations about moral injury and war can help us all to strengthen the moral fabric of society and the connections that tie us to the rest of the world. Our collective engagement with moral injury will teach us more about the impact of our actions and choices on each other, enable us to see the world from other perspectives, and chart pathways for our future" (Nakashima-Brock and Lettini 2012, 119). The veterans need to see this level of conversation taking place. It is one thing for those going through therapy to bring these issues out in the open on an individual level as they deal with their own feelings of guilt and shame but the guilt and shame they may be experiencing is not confined just to them. They are part of a larger social contract and system that had a hand in the decision to deploy the troops in the first place either directly or indirectly. The authors of this article think this system of which many of us are a part is broken. Conversations about moral injury, soul repair, and creating a place for grace within the religious community are essential to repairing the break, unlearning violence and learning peacemaking.

CONCLUSION

World War I was hailed as the "war to end all wars." However, we unfortunately learned that this was not to be so. Since 1917, there have been numerous armed conflicts impacting millions of people. With each conflict, we have become more adept at waging war through new technology and new forms of warfare. But one thing has not changed: returning veterans who are left to pick up the pieces of their lives and to move on, family members who must deal with their loved ones and a public that struggles to make sense of it all.

On the other hand, our improved understanding of what returning veterans are dealing with through redefining this experience as moral injury and soul wound and the willingness of some to pose the larger questions of the moral rightness of war and global violence is a step in the right direction. What is needed now to complement and move this effort forward is a religious education program that understands these issues and needs. One dimension of this educational process involves creating a space for grace for both returning veterans and the wider community to heal and be reconciled with God. The second equally important educational dimension is a public conversation to

discuss the real issues of war or, essentially how to unlearn violence and war. Religious education has the opportunity to initiate and guide this twofold educational process. The question remains though, is there the will to do so?

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