

SYMPOSIUM ON MORAL INJURY AND SPIRITUALITY



The overall theme for this volume of *Reflective Practice* considers the role of spirituality in ministerial formation and pastoral supervision. Spirituality is both a individualized perspective or way of being in world **and** a natural expression or embodiment of religious beliefs and practices. Contrary to some current popular sentiment, it is possible to be both religious **and** spiritual simultaneously. In later sections of this volume, we will consider the role of spirituality in relation to ministerial formation and pastoral supervision. However, when the beliefs we hold and the spirituality we seek to embody or the unexamined values we espouse are challenged by destabilizing and traumatic experiences of war, a crisis ensues that is more than psychological. This volume begins with a discussion of Moral Injury that presented itself to the Journal with urgency as a spiritual crisis profoundly affecting the souls of veterans of modern warfare.

It was the submission of the essay by Lt. Com. Beth Stallinga, a Navy Chaplain stationed then in Afghanistan, that began the process leading to this **Symposium on Moral Injury and Spirituality**. At the same time, I met Caroline Knowles, a passionate octogenarian and a recent graduate of a Unitarian Universalist seminary, who had been preaching and counseling and advocating for years on behalf of returning veterans experiencing moral trauma. Her wisdom, drawn from years of conversations with veterans of Vietnam and Iraq and Afghanistan, permeates this introductory editorial. Shortly thereafter I personally heard the story told by the Anonymous Military Chaplain that appears in this collection. There was no turning back. By that time, moral injury was receiving more attention as a diagnostic metaphor for identifying the struggles of military personnel.

The aim of this symposium is to increase the effectiveness of military chaplains and hospital chaplains and religious leaders of every religion who care for people suffering from the consequences of modern warfare. We hope this symposium **will provide ministers and supervisors of future chaplains with information and sensitivity about this moral and spiritual crisis** affecting individuals and families and the entire society. These essays first of all address the experience of those who return from war wounded in spirit as well as body. However, veterans are not the only wounded. The families of military personnel are forever changed and that change may last

for generations. War creates a ripple effect in families, Larry Graham observes in his essay. Because *Reflective Practice* is an OPEN ACCESS journal, available at <http://journals.sfu.ca/rpfs>, it will be read by ministers and religious leaders in parts of the world where war, or the threat of war, is a daily reality fostering fear and diminishing hope. **Moral Injury is a global crisis.** For another resource on moral injury and spiritual care, see the free online publication, *Caring Connections*.¹

For some time, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has been widely recognized as the diagnostic category for the emotional and physical response to overwhelming stressful experiences. PTSD is about immobilizing fear. The addition of Moral Injury makes it possible to assess how operational stress injury and trauma affects the soldier's soul. Moral injury describes a wound to the spiritual core of service members who believe that what they have done or not prevented or witnessed has violated their deepest sense of right and wrong or challenged moral convictions they did not know they had. For women and men whose religious traditions provide an ethical framework of absolutes, it is particularly difficult to navigate through the ambiguous moral waters that war generates. The collaborative work of reweaving the moral fabric in the lives of wounded veterans will depend on authentic and honest responses to their penetrating questions about why they were sent to war: it will be enhanced by the creation of religious communities of moral inquiry, in which the experience and questions of veterans will be taken seriously and heard without judgment. In addition to expanding the consequences of war to include soul matters, acknowledging moral injury is beneficial because it depathologizes the military person's struggle.

The introduction of moral injury or moral trauma invites collaborative reflection on the nature and origin of this malady of the soul. Tending to moral injury requires the best resources and skills of many helping professions in an interdisciplinary and collaborative way but, as Chaplain Stallanga observes in the first essay, "it is chaplains who will be called upon to walk with those for whom the 'dark night of the soul' feels endless, and those for whom 'the knowledge of suffering' may seem at times too heavy to bear, certainly too heavy to bear alone" (p. 18). The purpose of this symposium is to explore what chaplains and religious leaders of all traditions need to know and to effectively do soul repair with morally injured veterans. Given that about 2.7 million Americans have been deployed to Iraq and

Afghanistan over the last 10 years, the need for spiritual caregivers who are equipped to respond effectively to moral injury is immeasurable and urgent.

RELIGIOUS CONTRIBUTIONS TO UNDERSTANDING MORAL INJURY

If the deepest wounds of war are spiritual, how might religious traditions expand our understanding of moral injury? In response to real guilt that war generates, the promise of forgiveness or the assurance that ‘God’s love always wins’ may over time be restorative. But shame is not so easily healed because shame isolates people from the communities in which healing might occur. Veterans express their torment in many ways: “I lost my soul;” “How can I ever accept myself again, how can people ever accept me if they know what I’ve done, what I allowed to happen?” The shame veterans describe is not just for acts committed: it is that one’s being human is forever tarnished. Their shame is for ‘what they have become’—‘monsters’ who have done, or just seen, unspeakable evil that cannot be washed away. Healing shame happens in community, but it needs to be a community that can hear the stories veterans tell without revulsion, but with understanding of the moral awfulness and compassion. Those communities are most easily built by veterans themselves who come together to support each other. That is not enough, however, because they may still feel isolated like colonies of lepers in ancient times, doomed to live outside the gates of normal society. Religious communities offer an alternative context for healing shame, but only when they embody compassionate ‘waiting in the darkness of the human soul’ without needing to resolve agonizing moral suffering quickly. One response to the persistence of isolating shame, Chaplain Mary Q. Browne suggests, entails fostering an empathic group context in order to build *shame resilience* and repair moral injury. Her emphasis on the healing power of empathy is constant throughout all the essays.

Gabriella Lettini’s essay reaffirms the importance of **including death in life** as prelude to effective care of veterans. The American denial of death (that also permeates some religious communities as well) makes it difficult for returning veterans to speak openly of their encounters with death. The inability of many pastoral leaders to engage with the aftermath of war may be related to deeper patterns of death avoidance in US society and with the complex relationship faith traditions themselves have in relation to war and violence. This death avoidance may be one reason veterans do not feel that the ministers, imams, rabbis, and other spiritual leaders are ready to listen

and understand them or unambiguously welcome them back into the community. Lettini concludes with this challenge: "Regardless of our personal positions on a war, a society that engaged in warfare must come to terms with its responsibilities for its effects and with its own moral injury." The review essay by Kent Drescher et al. also makes this point drawing on the book *Spirit and Trauma* by Shelly Rambo. Morally injurious trauma that cannot be simplified "presents survivors with the inescapable task of accommodating death into their life narrative."

From years of conversations with veterans since Vietnam, Caroline Knowles reports that recurrent nightmares are among the most common experiences of men and women. Over and over, in dreams, come the images of fallen or maimed comrades, or enemies slain, or innocents caught in the cross-fire. These bad dreams are not unique to our modern wars. In cultures all over the earth, returning warriors have dreams like that. When victims of military action or inaction continue to haunt the veteran in the present, we are aware in new, and sometimes painful, ways of the **mysterious connection between the living and the dead**. For most cultures of the world, the living dead are an active presence and their presence must be taken seriously. Mary Rorro took seriously the Korean War veteran's continuing dream of the girl he killed. When the veteran's own daughter died, the Korean veteran hoped that his daughter could tell the Korean girl now that he "never meant to kill her; it was a mistake." Care that takes mystery and transcending spiritual realities seriously will be able to respond sympathetically to the lingering presence of victims and fallen comrades.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SPIRITUAL CARE OF THE MORALLY INJURED

It is important for all caregivers of veterans and their families to recognize that we are only beginning to understand how the wounds of the spirit may be healed. There are, however, some creative suggestions and challenging questions for spiritual care in the essays that follow. While these general observations have merit, each soul is damaged uniquely each time.

Courage Enough to Stay in the Darkness

While it is not said directly by any of the authors in this Symposium, the ability of spiritual caregivers to hear stories of necessary and unnecessary violence and questionable 'sacrifices of war' depends on their willingness to embody Cicero's motto: "I am human; because I am human, nothing human is foreign to me (*Homo sum; humani nil a me alienum puto*)."

sible until the spiritual caregiver conveys the willingness to enter the particular darkness of a particular human spirit and hear the stories told enough times until they can be incorporated into a life narrative. Here is what Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall says about the importance waiting in the darkness. "For it is known that only as we become accustomed to the night, the deepening gloom, are we able to see the light that is specifically light for this darkness. Otherwise we are simply deluding ourselves with artificial light."² It takes both courage and humility to wait in the darkness of a veteran's world.

Courageous Collaborative Conversations

Larry Graham proposes that his genuine curiosity and high regard for what Mr. Meiners was telling him created a new web of belonging for both men. It led to new knowledge, to new understanding, and to a sense that we are in this together "bearing one another's burdens" and making the power of forgiveness a stronger spiritual reality than the moral injury that he carries from the war. Graham concludes his essay this way: "By courageous and curious inquiry and mutually disclosive conversation, the ravages of war may be modified and a life worth living may more naturally appear." Such a spirit of courageous collaboration could make any caregiving a moment of healing mutuality.

Sanctuary for the Wounded

The ability to create a 'sanctuary for the wounded' is essential in caring for those who are morally injured. What Chaplain Stallinga has proposed might well characterize every response to those in spiritual or emotional or moral distress. What is desperately needed is a safe place for remembering and mourning and for reconnecting traumatic stories with our life narrative. Because the soul does not hurry, these 'sanctuaries for the wounded' or sacred caregiving bonds need to be built for the long haul. In a prayer, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ admonishes us to 'trust in the slow work of God' because we are impatient and eager for healing from pain. It is law of all progress and healing, de Chardin insists, that it includes times of instability and 'that it may take a very long time'. And only God can say what new spirit is being formed within along the way.

Representing a Larger Sacred Reality

Religious leaders have the privilege to bless as representatives of a sacred reality large enough to embrace the most intractable events of life and death. The work of chaplains and spiritual caregivers, Chaplain Stallinga observes,

points to narratives and sacred stories that speak to the fundamental questions of human existence, universal stories that convey the deepest truths of our experience. As the morally injured veteran seeks to fold his war experience into a life narrative, it is beneficial to have an awareness of centuries of people and stories with similar struggles who have found pathways to a merciful and forgiving God or to benevolent transcendence. When customary means of coping and traditional beliefs have failed, healing often comes from connecting transcending realities like ancient stories and rituals in order to access a new belief system that is linked to communal bonds and personal ways of being.

Grief and Empathy

Two themes are constant throughout this collection of essays. Healing moral injury depends on building a trustworthy **and** empathic bond between the caregiver and morally wounded service member. The promise of confidentiality is a beginning, but accurate empathy combined with compassion needs to be demonstrated consistently enough for the veteran to let the caregiver into his or her world of moral darkness. Empathy is hard work because it requires attending to the particular story of grief where the wounds hurt most. When such deep empathy occurs it is a healing moment of grace. Fostering a deep empathic bond requires courage and collaboration as caregiver, as Graham suggests, and the willingness to be helpless in the face of moral suffering and shame. We are never finally powerless in the face of meaningless or irrational suffering, however, because we can lament. The existing order of darkness is not the final reality. What is happening in the world can be named and described clearly because it will not be forever. As long as we keep lamenting, the need for justice is never out of sight. Soul repair is labor intensive. The reflections of the Anonymous Military Chaplain are palpable evidence that empathy may also be costly.

It should not be surprising that grief is a significant aspect of moral injury—grief for comrades lost, but also grief for the loss of a moral framework that has been shattered and trust betrayed. The grief is for interpersonal loss of comrades. Young women and men have returned for a second or third tour of duty in Afghanistan or Iraq because the company of military comrades is a deeper bond than any civilian experience of friendship or community. My wife's grandnephew has the name of a comrade tattooed on his arm as a permanent reminder of his grief. The grief of morally wounded military is also for internal, intangible loss of innocence or dreams, or trust

in the government, and because it is loss connected to a secret shame it cannot be expressed easily. The work of grieving a lost soul or lost dreams takes time and the ability to imagine a new narrative that includes painful past stories. Hope that heals is born anew when spiritual caregivers are able to form enduring bonds for such deep grieving.

NOTES

1. "Light in the Darkness: Hope, Resilience, and Moral Injury," *Caring Connections* 10, no.1 (2013), online journal, last accessed April 2, 2013, http://www.lutheranservices.org/PDF/CaringConnections_Winter2013.pdf.
2. Douglas John Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness: Toward an Indigenous Theology of the Cross* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1976), 203.

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THEME

Volume 34, 2014

Supervision and formation of individuals and groups in these times must navigate complex, multi-variant identities. In one sense, cultural competence is an impossible ideal. Cross-cultural experiences are more than binary relationships in which people of different cultures, religions, gender identities, sexualities, social classes or races come into alliance. Because every human encounter is a cross-cultural one, we need to embody and train emerging religious leaders in humility, flexibility, curiosity, respect and empathy to meet the challenges of our increasingly globalized communities. What are the expanding forms of cultural complexity in power, privilege, particularity, humility, shame, fear, and regret (to name just a few) that affect care, supervision, and the formation of future religious leaders? How do these forms challenge collaboration, which is further enhanced and complicated by a growing awareness of, and respect for, all forms of diversity?

The deadline for submission is December 31, 2013 for an article to be published in Volume 34. It is beneficial, however, to indicate your intention to write to the Editor (handerson@plts.edu) sometime prior to the deadline. Ordinarily, articles are 5,000 words in length with endnotes (Chicago-style citations) and submitted electronically.