

Engaging the Moral Injuries of War: A Call to Spiritual Leaders¹

Gabriella Lettini

Summary

That war affects the human soul is hardly new learning. Yet Western societies have mostly forgotten how to speak about the effects of war in moral terms, favoring clinical approaches that pathologize individual soldiers. Civilians must understand that we are not only to serve as witnesses of veterans' struggles, but we must also engage in our own ethical questioning in relation to war. Moral injury is an issue for civilians, not just veterans.

Nothing ever prepares you for going to Iraq and seeing the destruction of an entire nation. Nothing ever prepares you for...the unmeasured killing of civilians, nothing ever prepares you for what that does to you as a human being...to kill an innocent person. Nothing is going to really prepare you for the level of destruction that you bring upon a nation and you bring upon yourself for being a part of it. And yet I have a conscience, you know, which goes way beyond any law, it goes way beyond any order that I can receive.

—Camilo Ernesto Mejia, *Soldiers of Conscience*²

The culture of the United States has certainly shifted its ways of representing the human cost of war of its own combat veterans and society at large. Between 1942 and 1946, John Huston directed three war documentaries. This trilogy was commissioned by the US Army to celebrate the bravery of soldiers during World War II. Though the purpose of the films was clearly propagandistic, Huston portrayed the complexities of war, from acts of heroism to acts of brutality. In the first movie of the trilogy, *Report from the Aleutians* (1942), Huston spends much time focusing on the faces of the soldiers, capturing the emotions of the young men as they fly flimsy planes, often with no radar and very little experience in the air, knowing when they leave that many pilots will never come back to the base. In *The Battle of San Pietro* (1945), which took place in Southern Italy in 1943, Huston document-

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ed the killing of US soldiers. He showed their body parts being bagged by their comrades and an Italian woman balancing a casket over her head as she walked. When the movie was screened for the Army, several generals walked out of the room in outrage.

The trilogy was shelved as “anti-war,” and was only released later because of the direct intervention of General George Marshall, who understood its importance. *Let There Be Light*, shot in 1946, was the end of the trilogy. It followed the daily struggles of veterans in the military hospital of Mason General in Long Island, NY. Characteristic of the first two documentaries, Huston interviewed soldiers and let them tell their own truths. There were stories of heroism and sacrifice, which the Army certainly expected—but there were also other realities—stories of psychological trauma and images of veterans crying. Some described ambiguous feelings, including anger about the war and contempt for the military authorities. Some looked broken and anguished. One had started stuttering because of “combat fatigue.” Huston also showed how military psychiatrists treated such suffering as “psychoneuroses,” with methods such as hypnosis and shots of sodium amytal. The movie ended on an upbeat note by validating the positive effects of such treatment. Nonetheless, the Army refused to release *Let There Be Light* and the movie remained unavailable until 1981. In his 1980 autobiography, *An Open Book*, Huston claimed that the Army only wanted the public to see heroic warriors who remained strong even when physically injured; they could not bear to have veterans shown in their pain and vulnerability as broken human beings.

Today the plight of veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has dramatically reminded us of an old truth: war does not end when the troops come home—it continues to affect the bodies, psyches, souls, lands, and communities of everyone involved. Its tragic legacy passes on from generation to generation, more dangerously so when it is ignored and left unattended. The psychological and emotional effects of combat are often referred to as the “hidden wounds of war.” However, given veterans’ rates of suicide, depression, and homelessness—to mention only some of the issues affecting our returning combat people—are such wounds really invisible or hard to detect?

THE LINGERING LEGACIES OF WAR

That war affects the human soul is hardly new learning. World literature is full of stories about the difficult homecomings of warriors deeply wounded by the acts they perpetrated, they were subjected to, and that they witnessed.

Odysseus is one of such tragic figures. Yet Western societies have mostly forgotten how to speak about the effects of war in moral terms that make the whole society accountable for them, favoring clinical approaches that pathologize individual soldiers. We have become familiar now with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)—the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) posits that at least one in five soldiers is afflicted by it. In the last 40 years, veterans have been subjected to a variety of procedures to treat PTSD, including psychotherapy, pharmacological therapies, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR), and cognitive behavioral therapy. While PTSD needs to be understood and addressed very seriously, it should not be equated with moral injury. Clearly PTSD treatments have not been able to deal satisfactorily with the sense of anguish and moral alienation of many veterans.

From the testimonies gathered in the last 10 years by VA clinical psychologists, by US army chaplains, by leading trauma scholars like Judith Sherman and psychiatrist Jonathan Shay, by journalists such as Pulitzer Prize winner Chris Hedges, by the Winter Soldiers, and the Truth Commission on Conscience in War (TCCW) testimonies, the psychological and spiritual effect of witnessing or taking part in acts of brutality can haunt veterans and bystanders for the rest of their lives. At times the pressure and the suffering become unbearable, and veterans can no longer cope with the most basic demands of their lives, or even with life itself. This is how Camilo Mejia describes his first recognition of moral injury:

When I...fired eleven bullets at the young man...I knew something had forever changed inside me. I felt a hole within me that had no bottom, an infinite void that could never be replenished. For weeks after the incident my mind could not shake off the images of the young man walking, and breathing, and then down on the ground, bloody, and dead.

I once spoke with a therapist about this event. I described...how I had felt and continue to feel about it. He told me that I shouldn't be so hard on myself. The young man had actually thrown a grenade that could have killed people from the crowd or, at a later time, he might have ended up killing other soldiers or civilians. I had also followed a lawful order, and I had not opened fire until I was convinced that he was indeed going to throw a grenade.

On a certain level, I had to agree with him. The problem was that, as I observed that young man through the sight of my rifle, when he was still alive, there was something inside me, a voice that was telling me not to squeeze the trigger. And I knew, without a shred of doubt, that I should not disobey that voice, and that if I did, there would be serious consequences to face.³

Spiritual leaders know that for some people the consequences of violating one's moral core and values can be devastating, even when the act committed may have been unavoidable, and even required, by one's professional role. Engaging with questions of faith, personal responsibility, and conscience are at the very core of practicing spiritual care. However, many veterans do not trust that they can address their moral struggles in relation to war with their spiritual guides. In a military context, chaplains are part of the US Army and, therefore, some soldiers do not feel comfortable with making themselves vulnerable about their deepest inner struggle with someone in uniform. On the other hand, coming home, many veterans also do not feel that the ministers, imams, rabbis, and other spiritual leaders who welcome them back into the community were ready to listen and able to understand them.

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 that faith traditions themselves have to war and violence. Many veterans have told us of their distress in having been welcomed back by their faith communities as heroes—they could not bring themselves to speak about their deeper questioning when people thanked them for their service and sacrifice. Others told us of communities where war had been deeply criticized and so their coming back was glossed over and their presence was the cause of awkwardness, tension, and resentment.

MORAL INJURIES OLD AND NEW

The official report of the TCCW had a charge to spiritual leaders and communities among its three main recommendations:

To Religious and Community Leaders the Truth Commission on Conscience in War recommended Education of our larger communities about criteria governing the moral conduct of war, about the needs of veterans and their families, including healing moral injury, and about the importance of moral conscience in war.⁴

At the same time that we were working on this Truth Commission in 2009, a group of VA clinical psychologists identified moral injury as a wound of war that is related to—but also different from—PTSD and that is rarely addressed. According to this study, moral injury comes from “perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations.” The long-term impact can be “emotionally, psychologically, behaviorally, spiritually, and socially” devastating—sometimes lasting an entire lifetime. The impact of moral injury can foster in-

ternal conflict and self-condemnation so severe that their burdens become intolerable and lead to suicide.⁵

The rate of veterans' suicides certainly speaks to this issue. In January of 2010, VA Secretary Eric Shinseki inadvertently released a report on military suicide rates. He announced that suicides by returning veterans amounted to 20 percent of the total number of suicides annually reported in the US and claimed that nothing the VA was doing seemed to be able to stem the tide of this tragedy.⁶ The same report revealed that an average of 18 veterans took their own lives every day, a 26 percent jump in recent years.⁷ Also, the VA reported that preliminary data reflected that the suicide rate among 18- to 29-year-old male veterans had increased significantly, going up 26 percent from 2005 to 2007 alone. VA officials said they assumed that most of the veterans in this age group had served in Iraq or Afghanistan.

For some people the effects of moral injury never subside. The work of Nancy Sherman—and our own experience with the TCCW—revealed that the current wars have moved many Vietnam veterans to be more outspoken about their own moral struggles related to armed conflicts and horrors that are decades old. Not all veterans of war will experience moral injury. Yet not experiencing it in the present is no guarantee that a deep moral struggle will not abruptly emerge and disrupt one's life in the future. In *What it is Like to Go to War*, Karl Marlantes recounted how this happened to him years after he had returned from Vietnam and thought that he was a well adjusted family man.⁸

Moral injury is not only related to the acts committed by soldiers, but also to the betrayal felt by soldiers when the motivations that were given for going to war are discovered to be false. This is what Tyler Boudreau recounts in his Truth Commission testimony, his long struggle to finally admit that he was not in Iraq to discover "weapons of mass destruction" and, even less, to help the Iraqi population. Paralleling the language used by many soldiers interviewed by Judith Sherman in *The Untold War*, many veterans felt betrayed, used, and morally tainted—"suckered." They acknowledged personal responsibility, while pointing to the larger system of deception.

DESCRIBING MORAL INJURY: TORMENTED SOULS

Moral injury occurs when soldiers' core moral beliefs are shattered, and in evaluating their behavior negatively, they feel they no longer live in a reliable, meaningful world, and can no longer be regarded as decent human beings. Killing, torturing prisoners, abusing human remains, or failing to pre-

vent such acts can elicit moral injury. Anyone exposed to these acts and the aftermath of war can experience moral injury, such as medics and body baggers. Seeing someone else violate core moral values or feeling betrayed by persons in authority can also lead to a loss of meaning and faith. It can even emerge from witnessing a friend being killed and feeling “survivor’s” guilt. In experiencing a moral conflict, people may judge themselves as worthless; they may decide no one can be trusted, and isolate themselves from others; and they may abandon the values and beliefs that gave their lives meaning and guided their moral choices.

PTSD is a fear-based reaction to being a victim of extreme life-threatening conditions. Moral Injury, however, is a negative evaluation of the use of personal agency in such conditions—and though it is not PTSD, it can provoke or intensify it. It comes from having a sense of empathy for others and from understanding moral reasoning and values. The consequences of violating one’s conscience, even if the act was unavoidable, can be devastating. Responses include overwhelming depression, guilt, and self-medication through addiction to alcohol or drugs. Moral injury can lead veterans to feelings of worthlessness, remorse, and despair; they may feel as if they have lost their souls in combat and are no longer who they were. Connecting emotionally to others becomes impossible for those trapped inside the walls of such feelings.

As noted earlier, the term “moral injury” names old wisdom about the effects of war. In *Packing Inferno*, Tyler Boudreau reflects on the apparent inability of societies to learn from the many witnesses that the arts and history have left for us about the torture war inflicts on the souls of veterans. He concludes that societies have understood it in the measure they really wanted to learn about it and acknowledge its deeper meaning. For instance, after WWI, the culturally prescribed process of reintegration silenced and pathologized the moral suffering of veterans by treating “shell shock” mainly as an individual inability to put war behind them. Yet not everyone was so unable to understand. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf did portray the suicidal anguish of Septimus Smith as if she were a veteran herself:

She was just a writer. That tells me, if nothing else, that the information was there. The capacity to know existed. It wasn’t beyond human understanding. They weren’t too primitive. If Virginia Woolf knew about combat stress, everybody else could have known, too. They did not know because they didn’t want to know.⁹

Yet not even Tyler Boudreau, when working as a Casualty Assistance Calls Officer (CACO) after leaving the Corps, had the courage to call soldiers’ fami-

lies and honestly report that among the other wounds, “Your boy is coming home with a broken heart.” Never once was he able to say it and he regrets it.

When veterans return to our communities and civilian life having experienced the moral ambiguities and devastations of war, we owe it to them and to ourselves to do our best to support their recovery and reintegration into our midst. Moral injury feeds on despair. Its negative self-judgments can torment a soul for a lifetime. Moral injury destroys meaning and erases feelings of mattering to anyone, even oneself. It sinks soldiers into states of silent, solitary suffering, where bonds of intimacy and care seem impossible—it torments souls.

MORAL VALUES AND MORAL INJURY

The suffering of moral injury is grounded in the basic humanity of soldiers—that humanity lies deeper in them than its betrayal in war. They learned their ethical values first from their families, neighbors, schools, and religious organizations. They were trained to respect others, to serve a world bigger than themselves, and to feel compassion for those who suffer. For many families, a military career is one way to embody core moral values like love of country and service to others.

Also, the military teaches moral values to all who serve. Soldiers are instructed in the principles of just war and the legal and ethical conduct of war, including the need to protect noncombatants and to refrain from torturing prisoners. People in the military often understand the principles of just war and international standards better than members of the religious traditions that espouse them. Paradoxically, current military regulations require soldiers to fight all wars, regardless of their moral evaluations, which can create profound inner conflicts for them. That movements against wars emerge from those who have served in the military is one testimony to how soldiers understand the moral dilemmas of war and seek to maintain the honor of military service.

Combatants who support a war and serve willingly can also experience moral injury because the actual conditions of war are morally anguishing. Traditionally, in many societies, because of the effects of combat, returning warriors were required to undergo a period of ritual purification and rehabilitation before reentering their ordinary lives. As every veteran of combat knows, the ideal of war service, the glamour of its heroics, and the training for killing cannot capture its true horrors. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, especially, have created terrible moral dilemmas for engagement because the

lines between civilians and combatants are invisible—the absence of clear battle lines makes every situation potentially lethal. Even women, children, and family pets can be dangerous. These categorical confusions create moral confusions and they are aggravated by the reflexive shooting methods the military started teaching after World War II: the training suppresses combatants' ability to exercise moral discernment before taking action. Many veterans recount with anguish stories about shooting reflexively at unarmed civilians.

War's lingering phantoms haunt every society. In the bodies and souls of those who experience combat, war always comes home to our communities. Many American families carry these burdens. While the suicide rate is especially high among the veterans of the current wars, suicide bedevils the nearly 18 million combat veterans of all wars in the US. The country has sent its forces into war nearly every year since 1945. During the years of the war in Vietnam, conscription and public resistance to the conflict traumatized an entire generation who reached adulthood between 1964 and 1975.

Veterans who experience moral injury testify to human capacities for empathy and to the resilience and persistence of moral teaching. Many veterans and their families will benefit from communities that can listen to them and offer them a chance to examine their experiences in the light of their consciences, to express contrition, and to grieve. To thrive, they need those who will support their re-creation of an ethical life and who will offer caring relationships that can help them reestablish and maintain the quotidian rhythms of a long, sustainable life.

THE CHALLENGE TO SPIRITUAL LEADERS

Whether we support or oppose a particular war, we contribute to a better, more moral society when we take responsibility for healing the devastating aftermath of combat. To undertake it requires people courageous enough to face into the moral questions that war raises, and people willing to listen compassionately and carefully to the moral anguish of veterans.

We have to support veterans in telling the truths of war. Though the term moral injury is new among VA clinicians, the concepts underlying it ring true to many spiritual and religious people. We know that the loss of faith and meaning, the sense of isolation, and the self-condemnation characteristic of moral injury cannot be repaired by short-term therapies. While around 90 percent of the public claim a spiritual affiliation, only around 40 percent of clinicians claim one. VA psychiatrist Jonathan Shay, who received a MacArthur

Foundation Genius Award for his work on PTSD, noted in 2002, "Medical-psychological therapies...are not, and should not be, the only therapies available for moral pain. Religious and cultural therapies are not only possible, but may well be superior to what mental health professionals conventionally offer."¹⁰

Kent Drescher, who works with veterans, notes that the more judgmental and punitive a veteran's idea of God and religious authority, the more difficult is the recovery from moral injury. Veterans who grieve the losses of war and seek ways to make amends for the harm they have done need trusted places to have conversations about meaning and ethics with others who understand such issues. They need the company of others who understand the lifelong struggle to be their best selves after they have violated their deepest moral values. Recovery includes the restoration of trust in a power strong enough to carry the weight of all inner anguish and honest prayers, and it comes through trusting in a benevolent spiritual power who is deeply moved by injustice, violence, and human suffering.

Spiritual leaders are familiar with the personal transformations that occur in pastoral care, worship, and community practices when they are repeated over time. Such activities embed the moral values of the community in the whole person and support their being lived out. More veterans seek counsel from clergy than from clinicians, and the clergy they need are those willing to offer an open and caring presence. In addition to veterans who seek out clergy themselves, those in clinical treatment who ask moral questions and express grief, contrition, and shame are usually referred to chaplains because the formal training of mental health professionals does not include theology, discussions of faith, or philosophical questions about evil.

Veterans who do not identify themselves as either spiritual or religious need communities where they can explore their moral struggles and address their moral injury also. More such spaces need to be created and more civilians need to be trained in understanding the moral injury of war.

Whether support for moral injury in veterans occurs in religious or secular spaces, civilians must understand that we are not only to serve as witnesses of veterans' struggles, but we must also engage in our own ethical questioning in relation to war. Moral injury is not only about "them," but it is about "us" also.

In his powerful testimony¹¹ at the TCCW, Tyler Boudreau challenged the members of the audience to remember that they will never be able to speak the truth about war until they can speak the truth about themselves. Moral injury is an issue for civilians, as well as veterans. Regardless of our personal posi-

tions on a war, a society that engages in warfare must come to terms with its responsibilities for war's effects and with its own, society-wide, moral injury.

NOTES

1. This article is based on the book by Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini, *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury after War* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2012).
2. Gary Weimberg and Catherine Ryan, *Soldiers of Conscience*, a film (Luna Productions, 2007), first shown on PBS's *POV* series on October 16, 2008.
3. All the following quotes come from Camilo Mejia's speeches at the Exploring Moral Injury Conference organized by the Soul Repair Project, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA, March 18–19, 2011. Camilo's comments were subsequently edited and published online at the following: Camilo E. Mejia, "Healing Moral Injury: A Life-long Journey," *Fellowship of Reconciliation*, online newsletter, accessed March 16, 2013, <http://forusa.org/multimedia-publications-for/fellowship-magazine/winter-2011-rethinking-money/healing-moral-injury>.
4. Truth Commission on Conscience in War, *Truth Commission on Conscience in War: Final Report: November 12, 2010* (Oakland, CA: Faith Voices for the Common Good, 2010), accessed March 16, 2013, http://conscienceinwar.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/TCCW_REPORT_FINAL_110710.pdf.
5. Brett T. Litz, Nathan Stein, Eileen Delaney, Leslie Lebowitz, William P. Nash, Caroline Silva, and Shira Maguen, "Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy," *Clinical Psychology Review* 29, no. 8 (2009): 695–706.
6. Leo Shane, "VA Chief: Why Can't We Stop Vets from Killing Themselves?" *Stars and Stripes* (Jan. 12, 2010), accessed March 16, 2013, VA chief: Why can't we stop vets from killing themselves? - Stripes Central - Stripes.
7. Kimberly Hefling, "Suicide is Rising among Young Male War Veterans," *Stars and Stripes* (Jan. 12, 2010), accessed March 16, 2013, <https://extranet.dhss.alaska.gov/sites/stopsuicide/News/Suicide%20is%20rising%20among%20young%20male%20war%20veterans.pdf>.
8. Karl Marlantes, *What it is Like to Go to War* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2011).
9. Tyler E. Boudreau, *Packing Inferno: The Unmaking of a Marine* (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2008), 212.
10. Benedicta Cipolla, "Healing the Wounds of War," *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly* (November 30, 2007), accessed March 16, 2013, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/episodes/november-30-2007/healing-the-wounds-of-war/4640/>.
11. Tyler Boudreau, recorded testimony, Truth Commission on Conscience in War website (July 25, 2010), accessed March 16, 2013, <http://conscienceinwar.org/2010/07/25/tyler-boudreau-testimony-video/>.