

Revisiting Family Narratives of War through Courageous Collaborative Pastoral Conversations

Larry Kent Graham

Summary

War never goes away. For many families war engenders negative narratives and permanent gaps in the fabric of their lives. Collaborative conversations provide a sense that we are in this together “bearing one another’s burdens” and making the power of forgiveness a stronger spiritual reality that the moral injury that he or she carries from the war.

INTRODUCTION

The conversation about war never ends for those whose lives are touched by war. War creates a ripple effect in families. Families who have been exposed to war, whether through direct military service or indirect collateral consequences, carry war’s narratives over the generations. That effect may be extremely positive, as in the case of the social status arising from heroic and sacrificial efforts on behalf of others during hostilities. Efforts at peacemaking before and after war may lead to personal and social advances. War may enhance the economic and social status of one’s family. For some it affords a new location and a new start, which over time is regarded as providential or redemptive.

However, for many families war engenders negative narratives and permanent gaps in the fabric of their lives. Physical loss, psychological damage, and moral anguish are too frequently war’s legacy over the generations of family life. Those losses and legacies are often hidden from sight—those bearing them may be unaware that they do so or believe that they have sufficiently resolved them. Those closest to them may conclude that they are

Larry Kent Graham is Professor of Pastoral Theology and Care, Iliff School of Theology, 2201 South University Blvd., Denver, CO 80210 (Email: lgraham@iliff.edu)

Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry

ISSN 2325-2855

© Copyright 2013 *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry*

All rights reserved.

doing well or feel that their unusual behaviors arise from some source other than ongoing consequences from war.

The actual picture of war's aftermath in families over the generations is, of course, more mixed than either a positive legacy or a life undermined by demise. Like most intense human experiences, war leaves an ambiguous mark with gains and losses and hidden, as well as apparent, outcomes. Whether from positive, negative, or mixed outcomes, war perpetually infuses the life of individuals and families with its admixture of benefits and toxins. Every individual and every family it seems has a story or many stories about how they are "made and remade by war" over time.¹

I have come to a fuller awareness of these mixtures of experiences accruing from war through a five year research project on the impact of war on the care of families. I interviewed just under a hundred families in the United States, Vietnam, Germany, and Bosnia-Herzegovina about their experiences of war over at least three generations. I interviewed Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist families and families of no or mixed religious identifications. I wanted to learn about the stories of war that carried through the families and how their family narratives related to their religious orientations and nationalistic and ethnic affiliations.²

In this essay, I venture several insights on how pastors might better respond to those they serve who are dealing with the aftermath of war. Above all, to assist with recovery from and integration of war, pastors do best when they find a way to enter the consciousness of those who are carrying war's legacy in their bodies, souls, and social interactions over time.

WAR NEVER GOES AWAY

The strongest insight I carry from my interviews is that war never goes away. It is not something individuals and families "work through" or resolve, or transcend. Whether known or not, war creates an underground stream, with many backwaters and rapids, flowing through the generations and in individual psyches over time. War engenders a new consciousness of life in the world. That new consciousness is seldom articulated in full or accurate terms. What individuals and families know about their experience of war has yet to be discovered by them—and often they are surprised by the discovery.

Consider the Reverend Phil Jacobsen—I casually mentioned my research to him at a church convention, which led to the following reflection:

It sounds like a fascinating topic. I have never thought much about it. But now that you mention it, I think war had an influence on my family. I am an only child. I was born when my father was fighting in Germany in World War II. As I understand it, my mother and he were deeply in love when he left. When he came home, my mother was very close to me but didn't seem to care as much about my father. I don't know if he changed or she changed or I was the wedge. But I know that my mother and father fought a lot and I was never close to him. I think he was jealous of me. Maybe the war changed my family more than I realized. I wonder what it was like for my father to feel left out after all he had been through.

The longstanding damage brought by war to the Jacobsen family was not recognized until much too late. Bringing the family's experience into awareness through an ordinary conversation evoked painful memories as well as deeper understanding to Phil Jacobsen.

Also consider the story of Vietnam Jet Fighter Pilot Johnny Mack and his wife Jane. They sought marital counseling to rebuild emotional empathy between them after their two children had left the "nest." Johnny, a successful businessman, wondered "Why my pilot friends as young men chose to take the risks of combat rather than learn to take the risks of intimacy with our loved ones?" As Johnny and Jane sorted out their relationship, they were surprised that feelings of anger at their country's lies about the reasons for the war in Vietnam and deep grief at the loss of cherished friends in combat still drained life from them. Johnny felt guilt for what he had done and Jane worried about the impact on their daughter when she realized that Vietnam was not just a war—but a place with people who died at her father's hand. Identifying these war-generated emotions—though they were nearly 30-years-old when they surfaced unwittingly—is critical to addressing the current challenges in their relationship. Fortunately, with pastoral and therapeutic assistance they were able to understand and negotiate these turbulent waters in a positive manner. The beginning of marital renewal began with the recognition that war had left a permanent footprint in the landscape of their marriage and family.

There are two implications for pastors following from the recognition that war never goes away. First, pastors who engage their own war history and the narratives of war in their own families will be better prepared to engage the underground stream that runs in the families to whom they minister. Second, the most helpful pastors will be those who successfully find a way to enter the turbulent and dangerous underground stream swirling within families across the generations. Active pastoral initiation of conversation about the narratives of war in families under their care assists families

to do what they often simply cannot do without external stimulation and guidance. How might pastors enter the murky, and sometimes tumultuous, waters of war's ongoing consequences? I suggest that pastoral curiosity is the foundation for entering family narratives of war and that collaborative conversation is the means by which new narratives of meaning are fashioned in the pastoral relationship.

PASTORAL CURIOSITY SPINS NEW WEBS

I did not approach the subjects of my research as a pastoral counselor. I came as a researcher who was genuinely curious about how families talked about war. I honestly wanted to know what families had to tell me. They, not I, were the experts over their own lives and meanings. I was interested in knowing what they would tell me, and felt emboldened to follow my curiosity as it became stimulated by their disclosure.

To my surprise, I discovered that this open curiosity was also a foundation for building a relational context in which care became possible. I learned that curious inquiry into the dangerous territory of war had an inherently positive effect in itself. Attending with interest, openness, and empathy to their stories had surprisingly ameliorative effects. The positive effects were accelerated when the curious interest that I brought was accompanied by my willingness to respond openly and honestly to the questions my interviewees wanted to know about me. And sometimes their disclosures took on a new depth after I volunteered some of my own history and experience in response to what they shared with me. The conversation was not always comfortable—sometimes it became difficult—but it had the effect of creating a bond of experience and a network of knowledge that helped us carry our histories of war with great strength.

Not all pastors and caregivers will embrace the challenge of discussing war with individuals and families. For those desiring to do so, I suggest several preparatory and self-monitoring steps. First, pastors should explore their own family stories as much as possible. Gaining reasonable levels of comfort with one's own family history is the best way to sustain the anxiety and stress of discussing painful material in other families.³ Second, to positively assist others, a prior self-assessment of one's attitudes, biases, and possible negative judgments toward war, the military, and the social context of the conversation partner is essential. If one cannot identify and neutralizes one's negative judgments and aversive reactions, it is likely that the

conversation will be unproductive, if not outright harmful. Third, it is critical to draw upon safe and trustworthy conversation partners to share, within the appropriate boundaries of confidentiality, the impact of the stories one hears. Fourth, pastors who do best with traumatic conversations will be those who are able to develop mechanisms in themselves by which to address, out of their known strengths and positive coping mechanisms, the difficult stories they will hear. Finally, pastors will do best if they know their limits and can comfortably expand the conversation to include more specialized counselors, chaplains, and other available resources without abandoning or rejecting their parishioners. I will turn now to some examples of how courageous pastoral conversations might proceed.

In Sarajevo, I interviewed Mrs. Becerivich and her daughter, Amina, through a translator, Maida. Amina's brother and Mr. Becerivich did not want to interview me because they were angry at Americans (and NATO and the European Union) for their contribution to the suffering of Muslim's in the Serbian Nationalist aggression and genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1991–1995. It was difficult in the interview to receive the anger targeted at my country. It was also difficult in the interview to experience the raw anguish in Mrs. Becerivich as she recounted in detail the massacre in Tuzla on May 25, 1995. Rockets were fired into the central square a little after 8:00 PM. Seventy-one people were killed and 200 injured. Since Tuzla was populated by Serbs and Croats, as well as Muslims, persons from all three groups were affected. Mrs. Becerivich's 17-year-old niece, Lejla, and her friend, Sonia, were killed. Though it was nearly 13 years after the massacre, the feelings were incredibly raw. I wondered if it had been wise for me to be so curious and probing about their memories and feelings. Recounting this story in the interview was deeply painful, reactivating difficult memories. Mrs. B and Amina became quite distraught. It was very upsetting for me and the translator to experience their sorrow, but when I asked if they thought it wrong for me to go into this again, they said that were very glad to revisit the experience and to share it. They felt that I had listened to them with care and compassion and that this helped them bear it. They said that they felt more comfort and strength each time they told this story. Amina explicitly said at the end, "I think that you get this pretty well—for an American."

Curious, collaborative, and mutually open conversation is not easy when matters of war are the subject. It takes trust of oneself and one's conversation partners. It requires confidence that shared truth sustains and strengthens, and it requires courage to move beyond control and strate-

gic interventions to accomplish caregiving strategies. However at the same time, this curious, collaborative, mutual inquiry, and discovery generates new knowledge, new human bonds, and empowering possibilities for living differently with the histories that we now share rather than deny or hide. It has a great transformative potential in the day-to-day ordinariness of pastoral conversations.

COLLABORATIVE CONVERSATION REPAIRS TORN SOULS

Postwar care is discovering that alongside or intersecting with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a phenomenon called Moral Injury, Moral Trauma, or Soul Wound. Moral trauma is the feeling of moral distress arising from the sense of shame, guilt, and failure that occurs when an individual fails to live up to their moral codes. It is particularly acute when a person witnesses, performs, or is impeded from performing acts that violate the sense of right and wrong at the core of their personal and social identity. Moral distress can lead to a sense that there is no moral center to the universe and that God cannot be counted on to prevent evil and fulfill good. Moral trauma may be temporary or chronic, as well as latent or manifest.⁴

I learned in my research that collaborative conversation may uncover deep reservoirs of moral trauma and provide a context in which forgiveness may become possible.⁵ Pastors are in a unique position to curiously inquire about the moral weights carried by veterans and their families and to fashion a conversation that may help the veteran bear the moral weight of guilt and shame by sharing it with an emotionally available conversation partner.

Consider Jack Meiners as an example of war's hidden moral legacy rising to crisis levels after a long dormant period.⁶ Jack Meiners was 32 years old when I interviewed him. Jack is a veteran of the United States Navy. He entered the Navy right after he graduated from high school and qualified as a nuclear submarine communications specialist. For reasons of conscience he asked to be transferred. He was subsequently stationed on the USS Missouri and saw combat in the first Gulf War. He is the youngest of a family of two sons. His father was in the Army during the Korean Conflict and the Vietnam War, but did not serve in combat. He is not aware of military service in other members of his family through the generations. In the interview he recounts in detail the horror he felt at seeing Iraqis blown to bits by the ship's sixteen inch guns, targeted and viewed by remote controlled vehicles. For about a ten-year period he did not know that his behaviors and

drifting had to do with unrecognized feelings of guilt and shame from the war. Please note that Jack Meiners' words are designated with "JM" and mine, as interviewer, with "IN:"

JM: I didn't want to talk about it, I didn't even know what was wrong with me. And, again, because my family didn't know what was wrong with me they would say things like, 'Why don't you just get your act together? Why don't you just pull yourself up by your bootstraps? It is time to grow up! 'Why don't you take on some responsibility?' That was the feedback I was getting from my family.

I think the thing that helped me the most was just experiencing God, so just having an experiential relationship with God. And for me that came through meditation and it came through Kung Fu. I see my life working now. I don't get angry any more. During the first five to ten years there were times when I would have to pull over a car that I was driving on the side of the road and just bang the steering wheel because I could not get my emotions under control. I was red with rage and could not bring it down. I was completely out of control. If someone had cut me off at that moment I would chase their car and try and peel the trunk off. That is how angry I would be. So those days are gone. I am able to focus. I was able to go to college and focus and study every day and write papers. You just can't do that when you are in that state back there; it is impossible. There is a certain level of confidence that I have now that I didn't have then.

This new state has come with forgiveness of the guilt and shame that I felt before. I never felt that I was worthy of anything. I had severe self-esteem issues. That has changed. Being able to focus has changed. I know things have changed because I have been able to accomplish things over time, starting at about age thirty-two, which was ten years after. I was twenty-one or twenty-two when I got out. And finally at about age thirty-two things are better.

IN: I want to ask you more about your experience of forgiveness; tell me how you came to that.

JM: Well, I didn't realize that I felt guilty about it. I didn't realize that I had so much shame about it. [Tears up] And now I am going to get emotional again...but I can't imagine telling a veteran that you are forgiven for what you did. I can't imagine that coming out of my mouth because it goes against what we were taught and why we were there... and it goes against what American culture would say about why we were there. The culture says that you were right to go over there, you were right to blow those people up, you were right to kill those people because they were going to hurt you. Better them than you. If there were ways to bring to the surface the feelings of guilt and shame that

they don't even know that they had and to tell a serviceman or woman that they are forgiven for what they did over there would help them. But, again, I don't know if that direct approach would be appropriate at first, but I think at some point along the way that needs to be done.

IN: Forgiveness of guilt is the core psychological and spiritual issue that is on the surface for you—and from what you know of vets you believe that it is true for them too, but that is not often named by them or by our society.

JM: It is not. After I shared this in my sermon [where my family first heard my struggles with guilt and shame after the war, ten years later], there were people that completely rejected the idea. There was a World War II guy that completely rejected that idea. He got mad at me for saying that. And more than asking for forgiveness, I took forgiveness one step further. I would ask the serviceman or woman to forgive society for throwing us into the bus.

[Jack recounts several other elements of his struggles with forgiveness: self-forgiveness, forgiveness of the nation for its unjust decision about war, and the steps he took that led to restored moral integrity: service to others, trans-national solo bike trip, and study, to name a few. At the end of the interview, our conversation proceeds as follows:]

JM: You are really good at this, I feel very comfortable sharing it with you.

IN: Well I am so moved and I am so touched and so enriched by what you are sharing. What you are sharing is really moving and I feel it is a great gift that our lives came together because I didn't have a clue who you were before this interview. My colleague had told me you had read about my work and were interested—and then the next thing I know, there you are. So this is a real gift, not only for the work I am doing but I feel that it is just a gift to know you, to speak to you, and then to let you know me a little also.

JM: I appreciate the experience. You know I have got to tell you that I feel better having talked to you for the last couple of hours. I really do. You know, maybe another layer just got lifted. I am sure there are a thousand more but really I feel better. I am not necessarily sure what it was that made me feel better. I think it had more to do with the fact that you are genuinely interested in me. I am not sure, but maybe you are being dipped by every person that you talk to and I pick up on that because I don't get the sense that you haven't been in the military. I get the sense that you really understand what I am talking about, so maybe over time and over all these interviews that you had, maybe you are being dipped each time. Maybe you are just getting this profound appreciation for what these guys have gone through. So thank you for doing that work—and maybe that projects out to people who

haven't been in the military and are on this side of the gap. Maybe it does get close by being genuinely interested in humanity and the pain that we are feeling. If you stay in that long enough, if you are able to—I would think it would be kind of hard to stay in that. I certainly don't get the sense that there is a gap in our understandings of what I went through, and it may just be that you have so much experience in pastoral counseling that you are so good at this. But the way you were able to articulate back to me really, what I felt sort of mirrored back to me what I was saying to you, was extremely helpful to me. Yeah, thank you, that is exactly what I am trying to say. I needed to get that off my chest, but I would say again, the place to start is to experience it and not talk. That is the starting point.

The collaborative conversation with Mr. Meiners—characterized by genuine curiosity and high regard for what he was telling me, created a new web of belonging for both of us. 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.

CONCLUSION

Pastors, family members, friends, and other caregivers of soldiers, veterans, and all families who have encountered war—directly or indirectly—have a naturalistic resource for entering the world of war through the stories of families. 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.

NOTES

1. Edwin Muir, “The Wheel,” *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1960), 105. Quoted in Donald W. Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies: Forgiveness in Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 12.
2. My research was funded by Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada and the Ford Foundation. It was first approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Denver on September 11, 2007. A fuller description of the research is available at Larry Kent Graham, “Narratives of Families, Faith, and Nation: Insights from Research,” *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 21, no. 2 (2011): 1–18.
3. I ask students in my course on the pastoral care of families to include in their required family history answers to the following questions, among others: What were the major family stories about war? Who tells them? Are there some others you would like to ask about? Who might you ask? Who were the family war heroes? What impact did they have on your family? Whose participation in war caused difficulty for the fam-

ily? What are the ongoing current problems in your family resulting from its relation to war over the generations? How are these being addressed? What might be helpful to your family in addressing them? What were the costs to your family in relation to war? What insights and questions emerged for you from talking to your family about war?

4. For a fuller description of moral trauma, see Larry Kent Graham, "Exploring Forgiveness of Veteran Guilt through Collaborative Pastoral Conversation," *Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling* [Online, forthcoming]. See also, Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini, *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury after War* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2012).
5. "Collaborative Conversation" is a form of family therapy originally developed by Harry Goolishian and Harlene Anderson at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston. Anderson has continued to develop this approach and my work is indebted to her. For an excellent introduction, see Harlene Anderson and Diane Gehart, eds., *Collaborative Therapy: Relationships and Conversations that Make a Difference* (New York: Routledge, 2007).
6. The names of all the families in this essay are described. For a fuller description of my interview with Jake Meiners, see Graham, "Exploring Forgiveness of Veteran Guilt through Collaborative Pastoral Conversation."