

Moral Injury and Soul Repair: A Sermon for Memorial Day Sunday

Rev. Roger Jones
Unitarian Universalist Society, May 25, 2014

Shared Offering: [Effie Yeaw Nature Center \(American River Natural History Association\).](#)

Hymns: “Gonna Lay Down My Sword and Shield,”
“This Is My Song,” “Go Lifted Up.”

Readings for Reflection:
Hebrew Scriptures/Old Testament: [2 Samuel Chapters 11-12](#); [Psalm 51](#). Suggested: King James Version or *The Message* translation by Eugene Peterson, see bibliography at end of sermon.

Sermon

Memorial Day is a day to remember the costs of war, in particular the sacrifices made by those who have served in the military. We have learned to count the costs not only in lives lost in combat, but in post-combat afflictions like mental illness, addiction, divorce, homelessness, and imprisonment. And suicide. While veterans account for only 7 percent of the United States population, they account for 20 percent of all the deaths from suicide in the country. On average, every day, 22 of them will die by suicide.

We understand this, in part, as the result of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Arising from a past experience of abuse, violence, or intense fear, PTSD changes part of our nervous system. Ordinary stressors can trigger disproportionate reactions. After a scary burst of anger at the family, a person with PTSD may feel ashamed for hurting someone they love. Not wanting to cause more hurt, they withdraw. Even in a normal disagreement, they fear to speak their feelings. Because anger, shame and emotional withdrawal are trauma’s effects, family members are also its victims, losing emotional intimacy, and living in fear of harm by a loved one or fear of their suicide.

PTSD is not the only affliction of war. Today I want to talk about moral injury. While

PTSD is a disorder of the nervous system, moral injury afflicts people spiritually and emotionally. It emerges from an awareness of actions in which we have gone against our moral instincts. For veterans with moral injury, feelings of grief, dishonor, and shame are strong. Moral injury can subvert your sense of the meaning of life, can rob you of purpose and hope. Therapists and clergy suspect moral injury is the cause of many veteran suicides.

Some service members feel betrayed by their country. They feel that their senior officers care only about their own careers and their own safety. Colonel Theodore Westhusing, for example, was a professor of English and philosophy at the military academy at West Point. A married father, a Roman Catholic, and a patriot, he believed in the cause in Iraq and volunteered to serve in 2004.

In Iraq he uncovered cases of contractor theft, corruption, and prisoner abuse. He took them to his senior officer and was pressured to deny them, which he did. Then he shot himself. In a letter to General Petraeus and other senior officers, he said he couldn’t trust Iraqis or his own people. He had lost faith in the mission. He wrote: “I am sullied—no more. I didn’t volunteer to support corrupt, money-grubbing contractors, nor work for commanders only interested in themselves. I came to serve honorably/ and feel dishonored.” (Brock and Lettini 2012, 41)

Clinicians from Veterans’ Health Centers have written that moral injury can afflict veterans who have witnessed atrocities or participated in them. If they killed others, they may believe that they are sadistic and cruel at the core of their being. If they saw women, children or other civilians in pain or need of help but could not help them, they may feel powerless and hopeless. (In an “in press” article on moral injury for *Clinical Psychology Review*)

In this and other UU congregations, I’ve known therapists who have worked with vets on healing. One told me that 26 percent of them come back with chronic emotional trauma. Moral injury is one such trauma. He explained that morally injured veterans come to believe three things from their part in war: 1) The world is bad. 2) Other

people are bad. 3) I am bad. Such beliefs threaten every level of one's life.

Seminary professors Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini wrote a book on moral injury. From interviews with veterans, they say, "We have come to understand how moral conscience is deeply important for those who choose military service." (17) A moral wound arises from knowing that you have disobeyed your conscience.

Brock and Lettini say that moral injury is an "ancient wound" of war. Classical poetry, the Psalms of the Bible and other forms of literature have depicted the agony of those who've broken their own moral codes. Moral injury is nothing new, yet now we know it as a wound. It is a wound of the soul.

After serving overseas in the Army, Camilo Ernesto Mejia was back with his family, finishing the last of his 8-year service commitment through the National Guard. In 2003, his college graduation was in sight. So was our invasion of Iraq. He was troubled by a war that lacked a clear national security purpose. He feared leaving his wife and baby. But it was his duty to go. Over there he observed systematic abuse of Iraqi detainees, many of whom were not even combatants, "but he was afraid to speak out" about it. (34)

One day his "squad faced a crowd of protestors," and took "shelter in a building." Up on the roof with his rifle, Mejia saw a teenager "who appeared to have a grenade in his hand." Mejia was ordered to fire. Later he saw that his rifle had spent eleven bullets, but "he still has no memory of the killing." (34)

Author Karl Marlantes served in Vietnam in the Marine Corps. He said it "took him 10 years to feel any real, deep feelings about his killing in Vietnam. When he did, it shattered him." (18)

When I was a child, what I knew of war came from TV shows and movies about the good guys fighting the bad guys in the Second World War, and from my father, who was a veteran of that war. I don't remember knowing anyone in harm's way during the war in Vietnam. One summer day after the U.S. had left Vietnam, my parents told me

a young Vietnam veteran was coming to the house to do some heavy yard work. I was curious, I was nosy. *What was it like? Did he kill anyone?* Thank God, I was too awkward and shy to ask.

Recent U.S. wars do not fit the "images people have from past wars." In Vietnam guerilla fighting made it confusing for soldiers to identify the enemy, risking their own lives and sometimes killing their allies and civilians. Likewise, in Iraq and Afghanistan the boundaries are blurry between friend and foe. There is "no frontline," and no obvious rearguard position. "Even a child or a pregnant woman can present a lethal danger, hiding a bomb or a grenade.... [Yet] killing a civilian violates the code of conduct for war." (43) The psychologist Robert Jay Lifton says that the tension, fear and confusion of war are "atrocious-producing situations." (109)

A friend of mine is 30 and a veteran of Iraq. He is a husband and father, and a seminary student. He told me that *no story* coming out of a war is too strange for him. Surrealistic war movies like "Apocalypse Now" capture this truth: in a war, he said, everything is "messed up."

He likes Iraqi people. He said they are very genuine, "very unpracticed at lying." They won't hide how they feel about you; "they will scowl at you, or they will hug you." He said those Iraqis who fool foreign troops in order to kill them are probably insurgents from a different village from the one where they do this.

Seeing the reality of a war zone or of a country in dire poverty makes it hard to return home to a world of endless consumer choices. Returning home to our world is hard, my friend said. Iraqis "confront reality for what it is," but here, "We have 100,000 ways for distracting ourselves from reality." After graduating from seminary, my young friend plans to return to the Army and serve as a chaplain. He wants to face the realities of war, and offer what ministry he can.

He said this about Iraqis: "The fact that reality can be brutal makes them able to be more compassionate, hospitable, and generous." On any visit to an Iraqi home, soldiers would be given tea and vegetables. He said: "Even if we had raided

the wrong house at 3 in the morning, the mother of the house would make us tea.” (Seminarian 2014)

“The Hurt Locker” is a recent film about a U.S. bomb disposal team serving in Iraq. In one scene, a man has returned home. His wife asks him to pick up some cereal at the grocery. A simple request. Yet when facing shelves loaded with countless colorful choices of cereal, he is overwhelmed. Home has become an alien territory.

Many service members volunteer out of patriotism. They support the cause of battle. Yet in the terror of battle, the sense of mission, pride or patriotism fades as training and instinct are triggered--the instinct to survive and help your buddies to survive. This means killing others before they kill you. Veterans grieve and miss the people they couldn't save, even if saving them was impossible. Intense times together forge a strong bond.

Walter, a tall man with white hair, was in his 80s when I was his minister long ago. Now he's gone. In the Second World War, he flew in multiple missions on bomber planes as a navigator. Such flights had a high probability of casualties; bullets penetrated the planes, taking out some of the crew. Walter didn't like to show emotions, but he would break down when mentioning that most of the men who had flown with him hadn't survived, while *he had*.

Even if the country welcomes veterans home, many vets don't feel that civilians can understand their experiences. With other veterans, however, they can talk and listen; experience empathy and show it. Talking to each other can be healing.

Treatments are emerging now especially for moral injury. In groups, veterans learn the facts about PTSD and about moral injury for several weeks in a row. In a later stage of group therapy, they talk about their own experiences. They hear one another express the grief and remorse which have been burning their souls. They may write letters and read them—letters to comrades lost, or civilians they killed, hurt or couldn't save. They may even write one to an enemy they killed, and

read it aloud. Because they all know the reality of battle, doing this together is powerful.

Feeling another person's empathy for you can be a step toward compassion for yourself as well as compassion for the people you harmed. Hearing fellow veterans taking responsibility can help you face your own regrettable acts, and go on living.

Later stages of therapy include building social connections and repairing family bonds. Brock and Lettini call this kind of work soul repair (the title of their book). They say it's “how we hold on to our humanity” while also facing the truth of “who we can be in war.” (115)

As one therapist in our church explained it, the healing comes by replacing a sense of shame with an awareness of guilt. At the core of moral injury, shame is the belief that we are bad inside. We have no worth, no goodness, and no hope for showing any worth or goodness. Because it keeps our focus on ourselves, shame isolates us. This is dangerous for us and for loved ones.

Guilt, on the other hand, is the healthy sense that we have done wrong, violated a moral principle, hurt someone. Guilt reminds us of our duty to others, so it urges us toward healing and connection again. This therapist church member says to a veteran: “The bad news is that you feel terrible. The good news is that you still have a conscience.”

In war zones, military chaplains can be of help... with spiritual and moral conversation about rough battle experiences. They offer healing rituals such as confession or communion, even baptism. (24) One chaplain leads a discussion on moral guilt, confession, and atonement using one of the Psalms from the Hebrew Scriptures (Psalm 51). (26)

The long path to healing calls for courage. Trusting one another in groups, veterans can face their personal guilt, confess it, and forgive themselves. The people they've harmed may not be able to forgive—may not even be alive. And all others, those of us here at home, have no such authority. If we have not been harmed by a person, forgiveness is not ours to grant. It's not our job to make meaning of another's experience.

Brock and Lettini write: “Veterans need each other, and they may never share with the rest of us what they share with each other. But they also need ... those of us with whom they must learn to live again. To listen ... requires patience with their silence and with the confusion, grief, anger and shame it carries. We must be willing to listen carefully without judgment and without a personal agenda.” (128) “It is not for us to forgive them but to ... let them know their lives mean something to us.” (128)

As with healing from other kinds of trauma, there is no quick fix. There are no simple answers. Simple answers are cheap. With simple answers our government will put our devoted service members in harm’s way. With simple answers, rebel and guerrilla leaders in other lands will urge young men to risk their lives and ruin their lives, and ruin others’ lives.

Brock and Lettini say “To treat veterans with respect means to examine our collective relationship to war,” to accept our collective responsibility with the same standards of courage ... that veterans themselves have modeled.” (110)

Protecting people from battle wounds and moral injury means not sending them into war unless it’s necessary for national security. Though we have officially an all-volunteer military, the reasons vary for people who volunteer. Some young people see the military as their only way out of poverty. High unemployment is persistent, and jobs at good, livable wages have not come back. One of our members says we still have a military draft in this country, but now it’s an economic draft.

Some immigrants to this country join the military to improve their visa status, and risk their lives in battle alongside U.S. American citizens.

All human beings are of the same species. All of us can do harm as well as good. We capable of lashing out, hating, even killing. We are vulnerable to turning away and not caring about others. Most of us, given the training of combat soldiers and placed in the same extreme circumstances, could act in similar ways, in violent ways, in ways that violate our moral code.

Given this truth about human nature, let us commit ourselves to minimizing and averting the tragic circumstances in which human beings are likely to cause harm. If war leads to behavior violating our moral instincts, let us work to reduce war and the various causes of war.

In the face of so much that confuses and unsettles us, let us practice empathy and kindness. Let us not rush into moral condemnation as a way to clear our own conscience or vent our own agony at the brutality of war. Let us practice letting go of the quick urge to judgment. In the face of the troubling mysteries of human life, let us practice being present with our own discomfort in the silence of not knowing.

On this Memorial Day, and on many days, may we recognize those who serve and remember those who have lost and sacrificed and suffered so much.

Let us also give thanks for all those who work to heal the wounds of war and violence in all its forms. Let us pray and work and hope for peace in our lives and in our world.

For ourselves, for others and for this world of ours, let us pray and hope for the courage to heal. Amen.

Bibliography

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