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MORAL INJURY

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### Military Service, Moral Injury, and Spiritual Wounding

#### Ben's Story

**B**en was an army tanker in the Iron Triangle in Vietnam, serving during the height of the war. "I don't know where I was in Vietnam," he says. "All we ever saw was deep, thick jungle." Ben was in fierce firefights during which he saw both friends and enemy combatants injured or killed. His unit also fought in Cambodia, "the place we never were."

During one incident Ben was sitting atop his track on the lookout for enemy combatants. As his mechanical beast rumbled through the jungle, Ben looked down at the ground next to his treads. A spider hole suddenly popped open off the jungle floor. He watched as a Viet Cong soldier tossed a hand grenade up toward him. Ben heard the clunk of metal hitting metal, then saw the grenade bounce off the side of his track. He watched the grenade fall backwards. His eyes met the Vietnamese soldier's eyes. Ben saw his look of unspeakable disbelief and terror. Then the grenade exploded.

Shortly thereafter hostilities ceased. Ben came to a bunker and looked in. He found three unarmed and confused Viet Cong fighters. Ben's sergeant told him to frag them. Ben declared that they were unarmed and had

surrendered. Fragging them would be murder, he said, and was against the laws of humane warfare.

But other squad members clambered for the opportunity. Some expressed willingness and glee to waste them. Ben walked off and listened in dismay as his comrades taunted the prisoners and one tossed a grenade for the execution.

"Even though one of their comrades had tried to kill me just twenty minutes earlier, I still knew that killing those unarmed prisoners was wrong and I wouldn't do it," Ben said. "When enemies were armed and trying to kill me, I had to defend myself. But nobody has the right to kill unarmed prisoners. They were just sad and helpless human beings, a lot like us."

We might think that, even though ordered to, Ben resisted doing wrong and therefore did not sustain Moral Injury. Is that the case?

### Contemporary Interest in Moral Injury

In the last half decade there has been a flood of articles, books, radio programs, psychological tests for, and other explorations of Moral Injury. It is as if the concept of Moral Injury has been hiding in the bottom of humanity's Pandora's Box, waiting to be rediscovered. Why has it been so long ignored?

Directly put, we have not asked the right questions, studied the experiences of other cultures and times, used the right spiritual, ethical, and cross-cultural frameworks, listened deeply to our warriors' pain and to the ambiguities of their service, been honest about our country's moral inconsistencies, or facilitated a complete practice of warrior spirituality and tending of invisible wounds that includes attention to the soul and its deepest concerns.

We make war in ways that harm our own warriors. As a nation we want to continue these ways but without such harm. We maintain the belief that this is possible and that resiliency can be so strong as to resist moral breakdown and injury.

We rely on fear, mental illness, and biologically based models of care. Issues like shame and guilt are not commonly addressed. We believe we can treat the brain and neurological functioning while ignoring the full human being before us. Medical and pathological models of war wounding dominate. As pioneering psychiatrist Karl Menninger once observed, challenged people today may be considered either mentally ill or criminal, but "whatever became of sin?"<sup>1</sup>

1. Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?*

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2. Shay, *Odysseus and his Achilles in Vietnam: Moral Injury in War and at Home*.  
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3. Ibid., 21.

4. Michaud, Joe. "S

Clinicians can feel helpless, unprepared, frightened, or uncomfortable with their own responses, unprepared to deal with moral and spiritual issues, judgmental or repulsed by what they must witness. Chaplains may fear punishment or harm to their careers if they challenge the rules of engagement that produce Moral Injury.

Some practitioners contend that Moral Injury and post-traumatic stress disorder, though manifesting similar symptoms, are actually different animals. Others say that Moral Injury is at the root of PTSD. And some say that they are different aspects of the wounding of the whole person—Moral Injury wounds the character and soul while trauma can also wound us biologically, physiologically, cognitively, or psychologically. It seems to finally be accepted that doing what one judges to be wrong, even in life-threatening combat, harms the inner life, the psyche, the soul of the actor.

Jonathan Shay is credited with introducing Moral Injury into modern thinking by defining it as “a betrayal of what’s right in a high-stakes situation by someone who holds power.”<sup>2</sup> Such betrayal leads to “indignant wrath,” in which “the primary trauma [is] converted . . . into lifelong disability.” This rage is not the same as the berserker rage that can awaken on the battlefield when life is at stake, but arises from feeling misled and betrayed by leadership such that it “impairs a person’s dignity.”<sup>3</sup> As veteran Joe Michaud wrote in a poem called “Shame,”

now we’re the Four Horsemen

of the Apocalypse. Each freedom  
that is taken away from another,  
enslaves me. Each indignity  
suffered at our hands, belittles  
me. Each death from above

by drone, each home invasion,  
each kidnapping, each rendition  
by our armed representatives, causes  
me to die a little, causes me to feel  
ashamed for the crimes of others.<sup>4</sup>

2. Shay, *Odysseus in America*, 240. Shay introduced the concept of Moral Injury in his *Achilles in Vietnam*, in which the entire first chapter is entitled “Betrayal of What’s Right.”

3. *Ibid.*, 21.

4. Michaud, Joe. “Shame,” 20.

Our warriors, acting with little choice on other's orders, may find these actions shameful or wrong. In the absence of leaders or society taking responsibility, the warriors take on that responsibility themselves and may carry it for life with crippling consequences. Veteran Glen Miller said, "As a LRRP team leader, I indeed prevented some cruel and immoral actions. On the other hand, I was nearby while witnessing two murders—no weapon, no honor, all fear. Moral Injury is inversely related to Just War." When the cause is unjust, whether it is the immediate individual action or the pursuit of an entire war, Moral Injury is inevitable.

During the Vietnam War, morality and legality were in constant question. Both veterans and anti-war activists protested all they judged as wrong—wrong war, cause, politics, enemies, actions, and interpretation of history. They felt betrayed by our country for committing these wrongs and sending them to enact them. Recall the 1971 testimony of John Kerry before the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, who stated that the war and what we were asking veterans to die for was "a mistake."<sup>5</sup> Robert Jay Lifton's seminal work on veteran wounding *Home from the War: Vietnam Veterans, Neither Victims Nor Executioners* came out toward the end of the war. That early he observed the "moral inversion" that occurred in some soldiers: their ethical standards reversed and they "killed without inner justification."<sup>6</sup>

Shortly after the war Peter Marin wrote in *Psychology Today* that veterans live in "moral pain."<sup>7</sup> He declared that veterans and their helpers had to embark on a moral journey together that would be long and painful but could not be overlooked or therapy could prove "morally insufficient."<sup>8</sup> Or as my veteran client Dick cried from his depths, "Medications don't heal this kind of pain!"

William Mahedy, who served as a chaplain in Vietnam, also wrote shortly after the war. He observed that the reality of war is sin and we were participants in it; that veterans knew that they had witnessed, participated in, and perpetrated evil; and that this caused their suffering and was not reducible to stress. He also declared chaplains morally culpable for not naming that war what it truly was.<sup>9</sup> Or as Robert Emmet Meagher has recently written,

Moral injury . . . is what used to be called sin. . . . The deepest and most intractable PTSD has its roots in what veterans

5. Kerry, "Vietnam Veterans against the War Statement."

6. Lifton, *Home from the War*, 37.

7. Editors' note: Peter Marin's essay is also collected here, in selection 27.

8. Marin, "Living in Moral Pain," 119–36.

9. Mahedy, *Out of the Night*, i, 149, 155, and elsewhere.

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perceive as the evil they have done and been part of. . . . They have become convinced by their own experience of the essential criminality of war.<sup>10</sup>

### **Inevitability of Moral Injury in Warfare**

“The Golden Rule” is so common in world religious, spiritual, and ethical traditions that it might be considered universal. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” has emerged through many traditions as a revelation meant to guide humanity’s behavior. Commandments to not cause others pain, to treat others as we want to be treated, to protect and improve our own souls by doing right, to never return harm for harm, have been voiced by the great religions and spiritual teachers for millennia. We find them in the teachings of Hinduism, Zoroaster, Confucius, Socrates, and the Old Testament. Two thousand years ago Jesus called us not only to love our neighbors as ourselves, but also to love our enemies and “do good to them that hate you” (Luke 6:27 NIV). When directly hurt we are to “turn the other cheek” (Matthew 5:39 NIV). The world’s root moral traditions indicate that we are wounded whenever we harm others.

It is a fundamental truth that killing another human being under any circumstances may be the most traumatic act a person can perform. My Afghanistan veteran client declared, “The business of war is killing, and it makes everyone crazy.” As Lt. Col. Dave Grossman writes, “Killing is what war is all about, and killing in combat, by its very nature, causes deep wounds of pain and guilt.”<sup>11</sup> Or as declared by Iraq veteran and poet Brian Turner: “No matter / what god shines down on you . . . / it should break your heart to kill.”<sup>12</sup> To kill is to entail Moral Injury.

The question should be not whether but how severely impacted the troop is by the act of killing. Moses dictated in Numbers 31:21–24 that purification after battle is necessary and required for all returnees. Indigenous cultures the world over have had extensive practices for cleansing and purifying the returned warrior after combat, including honoring and making amends for lives taken. But in our modern era, we ignore most necessities of warrior return, leaving it up to the warrior to find his or her way home and diagnosing them as disordered if they cannot. The result—our warriors

10. Meagher, *Killing from the Inside Out*, xvii–xviii.

11. Grossman, *On Killing*, 93.

12. Turner, *Here, Bullet*, 56. Editors’ note: this poem is also collected here, in selection 1.

bring home invisible battle poisons still entrenched in their systems, even from moral behavior during warfare.

In the modern era the Geneva and Hague Conventions were early international and secular attempts to define the laws of war, codify its moral behavior, and attempt to preserve a humane code of conduct. The 1997 Mine Ban Treaty, signed by 162 countries but not the powerful big three of China, Russia, and the United States, represents one such effort. In fact, humanity has searched for millennia for principles and practices by which war can be rendered more humane, and through which we might limit the emergence of the bestial.

We only need to contemplate the Ten Commandments and examine whether during our practice of warfare we keep those second five commandments that dictate humanity's proper conduct toward others. Troops ask, and are tortured by, questions of whether our nation, our leaders, and they themselves as our frontline representatives, killed or murdered, stole, rendered false witness, coveted others' possessions, or committed adultery. They judge the leadership who sent them by these standards: Were there WMDs? Am I fighting for someone else's oil and profits? And what happens to our sexuality and intimacy under these conditions? Though we have all been trained in these core religious beliefs, we see that to enflame a people to war leaders violate these principles. Then during warfare it is inevitable that warriors may betray them, especially during politically and economically motivated conflicts in which the troops may not believe, or urban warfare where we cannot separate the innocent from the foe.

About 2,700 years ago Deuteronomy attempted to present a code for humane behavior during times of war. Chapter 20 insists on faith and sacrifice and details what actions are or are not allowed before and during combat and who is fit for service under what conditions. King David begged God not to allow him to kill wrongfully, and in Psalm 7 begged for death if he had without cause done violence to his enemy. Saint Augustine offered the first theological defense of war in the Christian tradition and attempted to expel its pain, guilt, and shame with divine approbations. Proponents of war have leaned on Augustine's Just War theory throughout the ages but have ignored his warning in *Literal Commentary on Genesis* that our sword blade thrust with envy and hatred cannot reach our neighbor unless it first passes through our own bodies.

We see that attempts to limit war's brutality and define moral behavior under its dire conditions date to the beginnings of civilization. The concept of Moral Injury may be universal, since instruction in moral behavior toward each other is at the foundation of the world's major religions. In which case, to participate in war and to take life at all constitutes moral

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wrongdoing and causes suffering to the actor as well as to the victim. In his foundational and prophetic book, *Out of the Night*, Chaplain Mahedy was correct: No matter how we justify our wars, our warriors are at once witnesses, perpetrators, and victims of the inherent sinfulness of war-making. And we must admit the truth of this together.

Whenever killing occurs Moral Injury is to some degree inevitable. And it is especially so under our modern conditions of war-making that include impersonal and long-distance killing; killing without being in danger ourselves; fighting in civilian sectors, the majority of casualties among civilians; destruction of infrastructures and environments; inadequate training in the impact of killing; sexual and other dangers from comrades; conditioned dehumanization of the foe; controversial wars without conclusions; lack of civilian support or involvement; neglect upon homecoming; and a host of other factors.

### **Moral Injury and Spiritual Wounding**

When we honor the soul as that droplet of divinity planted in each of us, and observe the demands of military service and combat upon the soul, we are forced to conclude not only that Moral Injury is inevitable and especially so under contemporary conditions, but also that it is the tip of the iceberg of spiritual wounding. Not only may we be invisibly wounded in our moral frame and collapse in despair or dysfunction, but we may also suffer other dimensions of wounding that are registered in our deepest and most influential places, in the core of the self that shapes how it will function, or refuse to function, in our world.

Thus we must consider all dimensions of spiritual wounding. Troops endlessly express these in their confessions, counseling, and therapy, discussions with each other, public protests, and in their breakdowns and symptoms that are actually disguised and indirect communications. We must not just try to squash the symptom but always ask, "What is the symptom trying to say?"

We can declare these additional dimensions of spiritual wounding to warriors. All are possible. All can result from participation in warfare and acts of destruction. All are rendered far worse by neglect, ignorance, and bombardment by medications that cannot heal such pain. All can have disastrous consequences when veterans try to take their place in society. Warriors may feel soiled, polluted, unworthy of participation among the rest of us. They may feel that society and leadership has so misled, abandoned, and betrayed them that they choose not to be part of it—even unto choosing



suicide. As Army veteran Nate Bethea recently wrote, "The common thread [among veterans] was not a tendency toward violence but rather toward self-hate . . . a fear of being permanently broken."<sup>13</sup>

Here are aspects of spiritual wounding to which I have heard our warriors testify and we have labored to heal. Each of these should be considered in the arena of invisible spiritual wounding:

- \* Broken faith
- \* Shattered trust
- \* Fall from grace
- \* Denied honor
- \* Unjust sacrifice
- \* Lost hope
- \* Lost innocence
- \* Shattered belief system
- \* Broken unity—with self, family, others, civilians, nation, life
- \* Nostalgia—the painful loss of the soul's true home
- \* Anesthesia—inability to appreciate beauty
- \* Amythos—the loss of a cosmological, universalistic, mythological, and historical vision and context into which to fit one's personal story.

All of these traits are ideally strong, well, and part of the healthy warrior identity. All these aspects of spiritual wounding constitute abandonment, harm to, and betrayal of the individual soul and its spiritual warrior archetype. All, and not just Moral Injury, must be treated with a transcendent spiritual vision and profound resolve. Or else.

### Conclusions

If we are honest, listen to the testimonies of our warriors without diagnosis, spin, or obfuscation, practice empathy so that we feel with them what is torturing them inside, then we see that Moral Injury even occurs to those who do right. Ben, whose story opened this discussion, was severely wounded in heart and spirit. He functioned and held a job, but he retreated into isolation and alcohol abuse and did not believe he could ever again be a member of a caring community. And he kept his story to himself for over forty years

13. Bethea, "Sarah Palin."

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because he did not want to cause pain or shame to his old military comrades. Finally he said, "I wanted to stop the execution but I couldn't. The most moral act I could perform was to refuse and walk away." Similarly Tommy, who stopped three atrocities in Vietnam; Michael, who saved children his squad was ready to kill in Afghanistan; Joe, who killed unarmed prisoners in Iraq when he discovered that they had committed atrocities—all testified to dimensions of suffering that was of the heart and soul and for which medication and conventional counseling were useless. Only by fully tending to the spiritual dimensions of their invisible wounding were they able to purify, reconcile, heal, and rejoin society.

These good warriors' stories demonstrate that it is possible for a soldier to do right and resist Moral Injury even in the combat zone. Very many do. Yet that does not necessarily protect troops from Moral Injury. He or she may feel sad, bad, wrong about the entire war, comrades' actions, leaderships' spin, or society's abdication of responsibility. Resist Moral Injury in the modern combat zone and it may still hurt and haunt. Moral courage may be the right choice but it may get you killed. It hurts when comrades betray what's right, and it is a deep invisible wound when one's courage goes unrecognized. Though Ben, Tommy, and Michael all did right and preserved innocent lives, each felt banished from society, because they judged society to be immoral in what it had asked of them and what some of its warriors did. Each felt they had to keep their stories secret in order to protect their comrades and also themselves from being judged for "unsoldierly" behavior.

We can take radical steps to alleviate the suffering caused by Moral Injury.

Troops could be recognized for moral courage, for doing the right thing under difficult and life-threatening conditions. We could award a Medal for Moral Courage just as we do for combat valor. We could give our warriors more incentive to make moral choices, to struggle with themselves as Ben did at the decision point, to take moral stands that may be contrary to contemporary rules of engagement but consistent with the highest spiritual, religious, and moral tenets of humanity. But as Ben said, "All I could do was turn my back and walk away." He has been walking away and grieving it for over forty years.

Finally, chaplains can and should play a special role in the recognition, evaluation, treatment, and response to Moral Injury. Just as we have medical and psychological evaluations for wounded warriors performed by specialists in those fields, we could have spiritual evaluations. Chaplains may be best, and can certainly be trained and prepared, for recognizing and addressing issues such as those listed above that are in essence moral and

spiritual wounds, wounds and disorders to our souls, our cores, our deepest selves. Only in this way can we hope to offer our warriors holistic healing and a vision and practice that can indeed bring them home in body and soul.

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