Moral injury and a new way of making peace

Jason Boone

Jesus told the crowds following him: "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.' Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Won't he first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand?" (Luke 14:28–31; NIV).

But we can never fully calculate the cost of war. The economic costs reach to so many sectors of government and society that a realistic, comprehensive accounting of total expenditure and lost opportunity is at best a matter of guesswork. Our most primal and most tangible cost in war we measure in bodies. The bottom line is the body count: How many died? How many were wounded?

The spiritual wounds that are forcing us to reassess the cost of war have been around as long as war itself. From ancient times they've been written into myths, stories, poetry, and song. Science has been slowly catching up to art in recognizing these wounds.

And what about the soldiers who return alive and seem to be intact physically? In the past, when people came back from combat uninjured, they were not counted among the costs of war. Leaving them out of the calculus was beneficial for those who made and prosecuted war: the fewer the bodies lost or mangled, the better the war.

The longer a war goes on, the more difficult it is to reduce the cost to numbers of dead and wounded. Veterans who return home physically whole may be psychically scarred; they carry emotional, psychological, and spiritual scars. Spiritual wounds that don't show up on the balance sheets of war are nonetheless real and enormously costly.

Moral injury

After the armistice that ended World War 1, the philosopher George Santayana wrote, "Only the dead are safe; only the dead have seen the end of war."[1] The spiritual wounds that are forcing us to reassess the cost of war have been around as long as war itself. From ancient times they've been written into myths, stories, poetry, and song. Science has slowly been catching up to art in recognizing these wounds. The term given them during World War I was *shell shock*. In World War II it was called *battle fatigue*. In 1980, the term *posttraumatic stress disorder* (PTSD) became an official diagnosis growing out of research on Vietnam veterans who returned from war but had trouble adjusting to life back home.

During the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, alarming patterns—including a high rate of suicide—among vets returning from tours of duty have defied traditional diagnosis and treatment, even that of PTSD. The shame, guilt, and despair some vets wrestle with doesn't align with a PTSD diagnosis. The search has continued among mental health professionals and military chaplains to explain why some returning vets suffer in these profound ways.

The term *moral injury* was first used in 2009 to describe extreme distress resulting from "perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations."[2] Moral injury occurs when soldiers engage in or witness acts of violence that violate their understandings of right and wrong.

> *Moral injury is different from PTSD. Post Traumatic Stress is a fear-victim reaction to danger and has identifiable trauma symptoms such as flashbacks, nightmares, hyper-vigilance and dissociation. Moral injury is an inner conflict based on a moral evaluation of having inflicted harm, a judgment grounded in a sense of personal agency. It results from a capacity for both empathy and self-reflection. Judgments pertain not only to active behavior, such as killing, but also to passive behavior, such as failing to prevent harm or witnessing a close friend being slain. Moral injury can also involve feeling betrayed by persons in authority. Even when an action may have*

saved someone's life or felt right at the time, a veteran may come to feel remorse or guilt for having had to inflict harm that violates his or her inner values.[3]

The effects of moral injury can be devastating. Not only does moral injury make coming home from war difficult; it can destroy a veteran's will to live.

These deep wounds drive risky behaviors and harm to self to confounding levels. And these are just immediate effects on veterans themselves. What happens to families, to children, when a loved one returns from war with moral injuries? Sadly, we can predict sustained high suicide rates, increased homelessness, and domestic violence, among other outcomes.

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Where do we go with this knowledge? What does healing look like for veterans with moral injury? There is not yet a formula or pattern for facilitating healing of moral injury. But a basic element of healing is long-term ties with a caring community. Veterans with moral injuries need to be involved in communities where their stories can be told and held. A moral authority needs to be present in the community. Most urgently, veterans need a place to seek forgiveness.

These needs are not met by the traditional models for healing we have come to rely on. Healing from moral injury doesn't seem to depend primarily on the professional expertise of a psychologist or counselor. Rather, a healthy relationship with a community of committed, loving people is needed. Certainly professional counseling and therapy will have a role to play in the holistic healing of returning vets, but it appears that healing community is a central aspect that cannot be replaced: "Healing requires access to a caring, non-judgmental moral authority and welcoming communities that can receive the testimony of veterans, provide means for making restitution, offer forgiveness and sustain their long-term community service and ties."[4]

What types of communities can offer the resources needed for healing by veterans living with moral injuries? Today, aided by technology, communities can form broadly and over distances

that used to be barriers to connection. Person-to-person communities or networks can form around almost any interest or specialization. But what communities are equipped to offer long-term relationship, walking with people through a valley of guilt, shame, and pain, and offering them forgiveness?

Healing peace

The apostle Paul reminds us that "though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses" (2 Cor. 10:3–4). Church communities are uniquely suited to providing space and relationships where veterans with moral injuries can find healing. Mennonites in particular have long practiced walking with people through the dark valleys, listening to their stories, offering forgiveness. As a peace church, Mennonites understand the destructive power of violence and believe in the restorative power of forgiving love. The question now is, can we use these convictions and practices in service of veterans with moral injuries? Will we do so?

It's complicated, especially for a peace church. There's no getting around the fact that soldiers are the most tangible—embodied—expression of military power and war in our communities. To actively embrace veterans may seem like a betrayal of pacifists' convictions. And this engagement wouldn't be on a superficial, programmatic level. It would involve the long-term work of building intimate spiritual connections.

And there are barriers from the other side. Returning veterans may be uncomfortable in a peace church. If they feel shame and self-loathing, why would they hope to find welcome with a group of people opposed to actions they did as soldiers?

And we must keep in mind that not all vets suffer from moral injury. It would be insulting to assume that they do. People enlist in the military as individuals; they have different experiences. We don't know how many veterans live with moral injury. What we know is that it is a painful condition, and that many suffer from it.

Clearly, a gulf separates peace churches from veterans experiencing moral injury, however suited to each other we may be. To bridge the gap will require developing a tolerance for discomfort and a willingness to do hard work. The question remains, is

becoming a community devoted to this kind of healing something in which Mennonites and other peace churches are called to invest prayer, thought, and energy?

I think we must. The pain from moral injury is too deep to ignore. A recent Associated Press story quotes a former US marine captain: "I can't forgive myself. . . . And the people who can forgive me are dead."[5] This kind of guilt propels the rage, the shame, the substance abuse that affect too many returning vets.

The church isn't called to address all wounds and symptoms that veterans experience. But if we contain in our communal DNA attributes that can help relieve their suffering, to refuse to engage for cultural or theoretical reasons is to miss an opportunity to participate in the peaceful reign of God that Jesus lived and taught. Mennonites have long taken the light of Christ to victims of violence in a variety of settings. Veterans who suffer from moral injuries are also victims of violence. The blood of the mortally wounded cries out from the ground. The pain of the morally injured is present among us in their tormented silence.

We have to see the suicides, the self-inflicted harm, and other problems for what they are: effects of the wars we protested against. This is the violence our nation shipped overseas, returned to sender.

Concerns about how reaching out to returning veterans will affect our peace witness are legitimate. Do we become accomplices of the machine that caused the damage when we help pick up the pieces? I think the opposite is true: helping returning vets find healing is another flowering of our stance against war.

When the towers fell on September 11, 2001, the road the United States would take in response was heartbreakingly obvious to many. Taking the violence *over there* was preferable to living with the violence *here*. Many of us went into action in the familiar ways, with marches, protests, prayer vigils, calls to our senators and representatives. Despite these efforts, violence was transported over there, and in time the voices of dissent grew weary.

We have to see the suicides, the self-inflicted harm, and other problems for what they are: effects of the wars we protested against. This is the violence our nation shipped overseas, returned to sender. Healing for veterans is one way of bringing an end to

the war, though not the way we had hoped for. To adopt this way is to live out our faith that, as Jesus taught us, the reign of God grows from mustard seeds; a little yeast leavens a big batch of dough. The part of the war that rages spiritually in returning veterans won't end with the stroke of a pen or an announcement from those in power. It ends where the restoring grace of forgiveness is found in a community that loves and accepts those burdened by wrong they have done.

In those ways, embracing returning veterans is not foreign for Mennonites. Helping to heal pain, nonviolently opposing violence—and doing so together, in communities of faith willing to confront our own participation in violence—this is who we are.

Embracing returning veterans who live with moral injury has another important effect: it becomes our response to the powers and principalities that foster and sustain the wars we find ourselves in. Helping returning vets find healing may be our way of standing against the powers that are disobedient to God. We can't fight these powers, and we seem to be unable to tame them using ordinary political means. So we follow Christ in carrying the burdens of those around us; we embrace returning veterans weighed down by intense spiritual suffering. We continue to work in the places available to us; we continue to pray. But we also face the powers squarely and offer compassion to the men and women damaged while in their control. We do not know what effect this action may have, but we stand firm in our belief in the power of nonviolent love in the face of war, oppression, and violence. As we learn to recognize the powers and principalities asserting themselves in ways previously obscured, our peace witness takes new forms.

Where does this road lead?

How Mennonites may become communities of healing for veterans returning with moral injuries is not altogether clear. Just as the understanding of moral injury is evolving, our sense of how we could move toward these vets is evolving. In Virginia, New York, Oklahoma, Illinois, and elsewhere, communities of faith are discerning how to make connections with vets.

Our attempts have to be rooted in relationships. The pain of moral injury seems to turn vets inward. In the safety of friendship,

healing may become possible. Mennonites who want to connect with returning veterans will have to find and create relational pathways in their communities. We have heard Jesus's invitation and we can extend it to others: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28–30).

One church's way of building relationships with returning veterans may not resemble another's. As Wallace Stevens has put it (poetically), "It was when the trees were leafless first in November / And their blackness became apparent, that one first / Knew the eccentric to be the base of design." Each group will have to find its own particular path.

This will be a prayerful journey, and the prayer may take new forms. Prayers of petition have a place in all we do. But contemplative prayer may also be needed now, especially in these uncertain early stages. In contemplation we reach to God with our hearts. We grope in the dark for understanding, in a place where our symbols lose meaning. In that darkness, we may meet brothers and sisters suffering under the heavy burden of moral injury, groping for meaning of their own.

May Jesus guide our paths to such a meeting.

Notes

[1] George Santayana, "Tipperary," in *Soliloquies in England [1914–1918] and Later Soliloquies*, no. 25 (London: Constable and Company, 1922), 102.
[2] Brett Litz et al., "Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy," *Clinical Psychology Review* 29, no. 8 (2009): 695–706.
[3] Herm Keizer, "The Moral Injuries of War," *The Military Chaplain* 85, no. 2 (Summer 2012), 6.
[4] Ibid., 6–7.
[5] "'I Can't Forgive Myself': U.S. Veterans Suffering Alone in Guilt over Wartime Events"; online: http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-201_162-57570706/i-cant-forgive-myself-u.s-veterans-suffering-alone-in-guilt-over-wartime-events/.

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