Finding Faith After Moral Injuries

Rev. Kerry M. Wentworth, M.Div., MBA, BCC
Chaplain Major, KYANG

Introduction

- Chaplain—28 years ministry
- Presentation of others’ research
- My attempt to understand wars’ effect on the human spirit and healing
- Definitions and Terms
- Perspectives on Moral Injury.
- Interactive exploration of spiritual interventions that could begin to heal damaged faith.

Regardless of popular opinion or its lack, however, a war does not end when the troops return. It simply comes home and embeds itself in civilian life.
—Brock & Lettini
Definitions

- PTSD = (posttraumatic stress disorder) is a mental health problem that some people develop after experiencing or witnessing a life-threatening event... It's normal to have upsetting memories, feel on edge, or have trouble sleeping after this type of event... But most people start to feel better after a few weeks or months... If it's been longer than a few months... you may have PTSD. (VA)

- PTS = Note definition above without the “disorder.”

- Moral Injury = The damage done to one's conscience or moral compass when that person perpetrates, witnesses, or fails to prevent acts that transgress their own moral and ethical values or codes of conduct. VA

Moral Injury

- Disruption in an individual's confidence and expectations about one's own or others' motivation or capacity to behave in a just and ethical manner—Drescher
- The inability to contextualize or justify personal actions or the actions of others and the unsuccessful accommodation of these... experiences into pre-existing moral schemas—Litz
- A deep soul wound that pierces a person’s identity, sense of morality and relationship to society—Silver
- Shame, estrangement from God and fellow human beings.—Meador, Cantrell & Nieuwsma

Examples

- Using deadly force in combat and causing the harm or death of civilians, knowingly but without alternatives, or accidentally
- Giving orders in combat that result in the injury or death of a fellow service member
- Failing to provide medical aid to an injured civilian or service member
- Returning home from deployment and hearing of the executions of cooperating local nationals
- Failing to report knowledge of a sexual assault or rape committed against oneself, a fellow service member, or civilians
- Following orders that were illegal, immoral, and/or against the Rules of Engagement (ROE) or Geneva Convention
- A change in belief about the necessity or justification for war, during or after one’s service

Syracuse University - The Moral Injury Project
Humans desire predictability; we need controllable outcomes

Science and Religion both attempt to produce expected outcomes
- EX. Science: diet and exercise and you will be healthier
- EX. Religion: follow specific moral guidelines and you will be spiritually healthier

We subscribe to “worldviews” that help provide predictability

Worldviews develop over time as we incorporate experiences, values, etc. to give us a navigation device, i.e., moral compass

That may be a religion, spiritual discipline, philosophy etc., which attempts to make meaning of life events

What happens when the moral compass is broken, our worldview fails to provide order, meaning or predictability?

We have a moral injury or spiritual crisis!

We do not know where we are or where we’re going!
Moral Injury

- Moral injury often involves these sorts of nagging doubts, she (Sherman) says. The term was popularized by psychiatrist Jonathan Shay in his landmark 1994 book, "Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character." In his work with Vietnam veterans, Dr. Shay argued that most veterans can recover from "horror, fear, and grief" once they return to civilian life, so long as their sense of "what's right" has not been violated.—Anna Mulrine

- "Young military service members are especially prone to this injury, in part because they hold themselves to lofty ideals that they can’t perfectly fulfill. And they often think of morality in black and white terms, yet war is filled with moral gray.”—Sherman

Veterans who struggle with their emotions and ask moral questions after war are stigmatized as having a personal weakness that needs “fixing” to achieve greater spiritual fitness. We, on the other hand, cannot imagine spiritual “fitness” without moral conscience. In religious and moral traditions, moral conscience defines soul, not just for the individual but for the whole community. Such conscience is grounded in empathy and compassion for others and the capacity to recognize what is good and to know when something is profoundly wrong. That so many veterans manage to hold on to moral conscience in the face of so much pressure to suppress it, and suffer to the point of suicide rather than abandon their souls, is testimony to the resilience of conscience and to their basic goodness. — Brock & Lettini

Emotional Response to Moral Injury

- Betrayal— by commander or the nation
- Guilt— coping skill to explain or regain control
  -- Know I’m not guilty but I feel guilty
  -- Not sure I’m not guilty
- Shame— “being caught without the fig leaf”.Sherman
- Resentment— Potential for significant moral injury if hard fought territory or liberations are lost; then the human sacrifice seems wasted or unjustified, i.e. Iraq
Behavioral Manifestations

• Alienation, Purposelessness, and/or Social Instability caused by a breakdown in standards and values
• Withdrawal and Self-condemnation
• Self-harming (for example suicidal ideation or attempts)
• Self-handicapping behaviors (EX. alcohol or drug use, self-sabotaging relationships, etc.)

Spiritual Manifestations

• Shop for new spiritual experience
• Abandon spiritual connections completely
• Hyper-religious

Spiritual Interventions

• Trust—
• Forgiveness—
• Redemption—
• Love—
• Hope—
• Creating a “Place of Grace”—Brock & Lettini
• Self Empathy—Sherman
  — I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.—Psalm 139:14
Maybe we can experience moral healing when we can primarily see ourselves through a reflective lens of Grace.

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