

Healing the Moral Injury of our Nation
A Talk by Rita Nakashima Brock on July 11, 2017
For the Disciples Seminary Foundation Luncheon at General Assembly

Three weeks ago, I attended the graduation of 807 Navy recruits at the invitation of the Great Lakes Naval Base command chaplain, Commander Beth Stallinga. The Navy graduates 37,000 every year, so the graduation happens almost weekly. The ceremony, with its parade of 50 state flags, crisp marching band, procession of officers, rifle corps, acapella choir, all in dazzling dress whites, and their jubilant families, is more elaborate and formal—and just as moving—as a university graduation.

My work for the past five years has been the at other end of their military story, the time when they depart the military and try to come home. We don't make it easy for them. After learning to work with strangers on a team so close that they would die for each other, they are thrown into a celebrity-and-wealth-obsessed consumer society with the paltry aspirations of personal success. If anyone thinks about them as military veterans, it's mostly to offer a perfunctory piety of thanking them and, if we feel sorry for them, complaining that the VA doesn't do enough for them.

What we do not do as a society is accept responsibility for what they are asked to do on our behalf, and we fail to address what it takes to bring them home. We have a constitutionally mandated civilian-controlled military, and we may hate war, which many military veterans do, but I do not believe we have faced our responsibility as citizens to address its cost to those we send to fight. That cost is measured in the suicides, substance abuse, homelessness, and relationship losses of those aspirational, idealistic young people who return after service but whose souls cannot come home. Their suffering is captured in the term moral injury:

Moral Injury is the destruction of a person's core ethical foundations and sense of meaning. It is a consequence of witnessing, failing to prevent, or committing acts that challenge core moral values under high stakes situations. It can occur from killing or inflicting harm, being betrayed by those in positions of authority, witnessing depraved and/or corrupt activities that defy accepted codes of behavior or failing to prevent such acts or events.

It results in guilt, shame, remorse, outrage, and sorrow. A reflective, inner struggle with core identity issues, moral injury may be elided or hidden through relentless activity, such as overwork or achievement, stoicism, and avoidance of intimacy, but at some point, its pain surfaces, with devastating consequences.

Just before Memorial Day, you may have heard Disciples minister Michael Yandell on NPR's Story Corps talk about his experience in Iraq. He enlisted after 9/11 at the age of 17 and was trained in special operations work as an ordinance disposal specialist. In that work, he was only one of two people in the U.S. military ever to survive exposure to sarin gas. But Michael was not on NPR to talk about his moral injury. He told his story on behalf of people in Syria, who experienced the use of sarin gas.

Michael is now a theology doctoral student at Emory writing on moral injury. Here is what he said about it in 2014:

I know plenty of people who feel terrible about our involvement in these long wars. However, the veteran, or at least I, cannot quite clearly distinguish the war as something “out there” or in the past – it is like something I own personally. Sometimes I feel that it is not only by my own actions, but by the war as a whole with which I am condemned. And I do not mean I am condemned in some cosmic sense – I mean that I condemn *myself*.

It is the paradox of having the war as such a formative experience in my adult life *and* my refusal to acknowledge that the war can be a part of my self that morally injures me. Of course the war is a part of me. I cannot avoid it. I cannot escape my experience. And yet *who I am* rejects what war is – and what I was in the war. This creates the most surreal experience of being uncomfortable in my own skin.

It is important that I reemphasize what exactly it is about war that I categorically reject. It is this unleashing of “good” and “evil” as fundamental ways of understanding human beings. It is the notion that we can place ourselves on a moral high ground, and having done so, completely disregard any moral obligation to avoid violence and death dealing. It is the laying flat of all the ways of valuing life that we hold dear with the expectation that we will be able to rebuild those values later.

The fact is, it is nearly impossible to rebuild and reclaim all that is lost in war. ...there are as many meanings for the name veteran and the experience of moral injury as there are veterans who experience it. I cannot speak or write for those who are silent; no one can. However, I can I encourage you—every once in a while—to let the news networks lie dormant. Take a moment to separate yourself from all the meanings that are thrust onto us from so many sources. Let your mind wander; let your eyes and ears drift back over the past thirteen years or so and over all that has transpired. What was there before, and what remains?

What was there before for me, before Vietnam, was my father, a veteran who fought in the first Army infantry at Normandy and served two tours as a medic in Vietnam. What remained for me after Vietnam was a cold, controlling father I no longer recognized as the father I loved.

What was there before was clear evidence that the government lied and launched a war that we should never have entered. What remains is a Secretary of Defense who, twenty years too late, admitted the war was a huge mistake, after we left three million Vietnamese dead and over 58,000 Americans came home in body bags. What remains are “the ceaseless whispers of those poor boys in the infantry, dying in the tall grass, platoon by platoon, for no purpose,” as the NYTimes noted in their 1995 Pulitzer Prize opinion piece.

Religion scholar and Congressman Walter Kapps in his 1982 book, *The Unfinished War: Vietnam and the American Conscience*, suggested that one of the lingering legacies of Vietnam would be cynicism and mistrust of public institutions, a loss of civic engagement, and a turn to personal, individual pursuits and solutions to life. And he foretold the truth.

During the war, many religious judicatories and congregations eventually turned against the war, but not before many of my generation sought out drugs or other spiritual options such as Hari Krishna, Transcendental meditation and Buddhism, Yoga, and other spiritual traditions as a way of being different from the religions that supported Washington’s anti-communist crusade. What remained were idolatrous phrases like “one nation under God” and “God Bless America” which entered our civic discourse during that time.

Western Christian culture needs strong narrative arcs that have an eschaton, an end point where all our fighting and striving will overcome everything and give us justice and peace. Our three long wars in the past half-century have failed to give us that narrative arc. Like veterans of the Vietnam War, post 9/11 veterans see chaotic stalemates while we face ever-erupting unpredictable hornet nests of violence around the globe as the U.S. endures corrupt, incompetent leadership.

But our leaders are not the only problem. War is not possible without civilian demonization of the enemy. We must consider what it means to be raised in families and communities and to believe that because we are beloved of God, our good intentions make it possible to inflict violence and destruction on other human beings we define as evil. Once we make others evil, it is no easy matter to erase hatred and enmity—after all, the very long legacy of the American Civil War still afflicts us.

Understanding how war belongs to us all and is our responsibility is a counterintuitive move in a society that teaches us that the highest good is personal ambition, that service is one more achievement to attach to a resume for admission to a top university, that what we earn is the measure of our success or failure, and that where we go in life is up to us with the sky as the limit. A society with these values gets the leaders it deserves and hands its young the sad mess of pottage called personal success. Are we surprised depression is an epidemic, suicide rates are rising, and opium addiction is killing so many? We are not meant to be alone and lonely.

We are in fact, social animals, made by God for love: fierce, deep, difficult—and utterly necessary—love. We are made to be connected to all creation from which we have been made. Our society's placing of liberty above responsibility, of achievement above compassion, and of self above institutions makes us unwise and brittle because so many of us live by suspicion of each other instead of by curiosity and appreciation about each other. We are in our solitary freedom, the loneliest human beings in the history of our species.

We have, however, been handed a miraculous gift. In September, we will receive a national gift that gives us a chance to heal the legacy of polarization, mistrust, and deep anger that lingers from Vietnam and relives itself in the polarized politics of our time. On September 17, PBS will begin airing 18 hours in ten segments of the Ken Burns-Lynn Novick documentary called "The Vietnam War." In moving and powerful ways, they look at all sides and interview the survivors. This is our last chance to heal the moral injuries and lingering suffering of that war, not only in survivors but in all of us who are the children of that war. We threw an entire generation of veterans away after Vietnam. Two-thirds of veterans have died, so we will not have this chance again.

We, the churches, we must make sure no one has to watch this series alone. We must open our doors and invite in our Vietnamese, Hmong, and Cambodian neighbors, our whole communities, and host community watch events that offer a chance to listen deeply to the suffering so many carry. We must learn about each other and share the burdens. This is not a time for political arguments and opinions and judgments, it is a miraculous chance for our nation to face what we have carried for too long: profound moral injury and suffering. We must relearn how to listen when we don't agree or share the same experiences. I promise you that if you take up this chance and guide people through the kind of sharing and listening that healing moral injury requires, we will all be changed.

I promise you this because I, as a feminist, anti-war activist, have been deeply and unexpectedly changed by my work on moral injury the past five years. I have found myself listening to people I never imagined ever speaking to, like Generals and Admirals in the

Pentagon, and Marines and military chaplains, and veterans who killed people or spent their deployments processing dead bodies. I had to understand, after all the horrors they might have experienced, how they could still miss their comrades and military life. And I could see in their moral injury, the deeply moral people, the deeply loving people they were.

I who once vehemently opposed the draft now believe we need a national service draft. I never thought I'd ever say that. But I have learned that, while it may be politically conservative, the military is a socially progressive institution. It integrated racially in 1948; it has opened every job to women and bases promotion on performance and merit; it embraced marriage equality as soon as don't ask don't tell ended and before the Supreme Court ruled on marriage; it will do the surgery for trans people; it has free health care; and it teaches its recruits to love each other no matter what. We have no social institution that compels all these things and makes them happen. Instead, we have a society that lives in lifestyle silos and abandons the poor to fend for themselves.

At the Navy graduation that I attended as a guest of honor, it was my responsibility to congratulate the seven honors recipients who graduated at the top of the 807. FIVE of the seven were women, and one was Vietnamese, one was Chinese, one was Black, one was Hispanic, and one was white. I also had dinner with the recruits and sat across the table from a lively, charming F to M trans recruit, a Puerto Rican from New York who was a squad leader and sang in the recruit choir.

We have a chance now, this very fall, to try to help our nation be worthy of the idealistic, aspirational young people who enlist to serve. So I challenge you today to organize community watch events. As my part in this, I will prepare a set of tips and guidelines for how to create moral injury conversations, and I ask you, if you can, to send one member, perhaps a veteran, from your community to a three-day training that we are holding in Princeton the week before the series premieres. If you can do that, you will have one member of your community who will be able to help you organize successful conversations.

If you seize this chance, you will be able to offer a gift of what the church knows deeply in our bones. We know what it means to fail our deepest moral values—we used to call it mortal sin, but that term has become poisonous, so let's call it moral injury. We know what grief and guilt and shame and remorse can do to a life, and we know how to bring people back. So let's get ready, let's get serious about what we know, and let's offer that as a gift to all. If we do, I believe we can make a better future for ourselves and our nation, a way out of these disheartening, poisonous times.