As most of you know, I served nearly 40 months on active duty at sea in the Navy during the Vietnam War. During those years, I was an engineering officer on destroyers. Later, I became a Navy Chaplain in the Ready Reserve, and had accumulated 14 years toward retirement from the military when I turned in my ID card.

Although the nature of my engineering work was dangerous every day, I was never in combat. We did a lot of practice shooting, but no one was ever shooting at us/me.

Since Viet Nam . . . and Iraq . . . and Afghanistan, most of us have heard of Post-Traumatic-Stress Disorder, or **PTSD**, which is the result of having experienced horrible things or having had horrible things done to us (and this doesn't have to happen in the military). More recently, we've become aware of something even darker. This Darkness has come to be called "**Moral Injury**," which is the result of having done or having failed to prevent horrible things (also not limited to the military). **Moral Injury "comes from having transgressed one's basic moral identity and violated core moral beliefs."**

I was involved with Moral Injury a little as a Reserve Chaplain, but this discipline really took shape after my retirement.[1] My good friend and colleague, Dr. Brian Miller, has specialized in Moral Injury in his work as a Chaplain and Therapist in the Veterans' Administration Hospital System, and he has increased my interest in this area of concern.

Brian told me that the "guru" of Moral Injury is Dr. Rita Nakashima Brock, who is a Research Professor and Codirector of the Soul Repair Center at Brite Divinity School in Ft. Worth, Texas. I've recently read Dr. Brock's groundbreaking book, *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury after War*, and I want to share some things from that book in this *Laptop*. The more aware we all are of Moral Injury, the more helpful and compassionate we may be in relating to the young men and women we send abroad to do our "dirty work."

The remainder of this *Laptop* will be excerpts from the five sections of her book . . . .

PROLOGUE

The suffering of moral injury is grounded in the basic humanity of warriors. The consequences of violating one's conscience, even if the act was unavoidable or seemed right at the time, can be devastating. Responses include overwhelming depression, guilt, and self-medication through alcohol or drugs. Moral injury can lead veterans to feelings of

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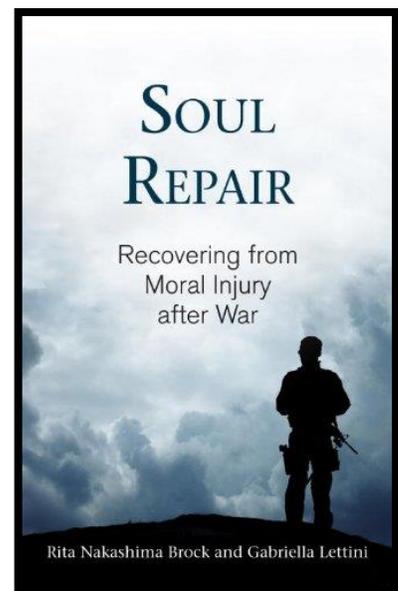
[1] My retirement certificate is dated 1 April 1991. I thought April Fools' Day was somehow appropriate 😉. While I'm officially "retired" from the military, I didn't serve long enough for any money to be attached ☹.

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worthlessness, remorse, and despair; they may feel as if they lost their souls in combat and are no longer who they were. Connecting emotionally to others becomes impossible for those trapped inside the walls of such feelings. When the consequences become overwhelming, the only relief may seem to be to leave this life behind (suicide).

I BECAME A SOLDIER

People who undertake military service share the same life aspirations that many of us do: they want to be a part of something larger than their individual lives, they want to be of service to others, they want to do the right thing, and they want to have a better life. But no amount of commitment, patriotic fervor, or physical and mental training can prepare a moral human being for the actual experience of war or for loving someone who returns from war . . . which is what makes war so devastating.

The military, which trains people to kill, also teaches moral values to all who serve. Few major social institutions teach moral integrity, courage, personal discipline, humility, a sense of purpose and responsibility, and commitment to the lives of others better than the armed services. And none work so thoroughly to compromise, deny, dismantle, and destroy the very values they teach.

Soldiers are instructed in the principles of just war and the legal and ethical conduct of war, including the need to protect noncombatants and to refrain from torturing prisoners. But as every veteran of combat knows, the ideal of war service, the glamour of its heroics, and the training for killing failed to prepare warriors for its true horrors and moral atrocities.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, especially, present terrible moral dilemmas for engagement because the lines between civilians and combatants are invisible and because the absence of clear battle lines makes every situation potentially lethal. In addition, many soldiers experience repeated exposure to these morally compromising situations through multiple deployments.[2]

"My father, who fought in World War II, tried to tell me, 'War is not as glamorous as they make it out to be.' But I was too stubborn and bull-headed to listen. When you are young, you want to get that experience for yourself . . . and boy, I asked for it. . . . [I found out that] we were in the area of Iraq that was supposed to be the Garden of Eden, the cradle of civilization where mankind began. I had to ask myself, 'Why am I carrying around an M16 in the Garden of Eden?'"

KILLING CHANGES YOU

In World War II, almost 75% of combat soldiers did not fire directly at the enemy, even when their own lives were at risk. In his landmark 1947 study, the official U.S. Army historian Brig. Gen. L. S. A. Marshall revealed that despite training, propaganda, and social sanctions, soldiers retained a deep inhibition when it came to taking human life.

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[2] The end of the draft in 1974 created a perception that military service is totally voluntary, but the term "voluntary" needs interrogation. It oversimplifies why people join the military. A study in 2007 found that troops who died in Iraq were disproportionately poorer than the rest of Americans, what some people have chosen to call "poverty draft." Military recruiters, driven by quotas, work in offices in poor areas of cities, and new Army recruits come primarily from lower to middle class communities, southern states, and black, Hispanic, and Asian communities.

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One veteran pointed out that his Marine Corps training taught him how to kill but it did not prepare him for the deeper emotional and spiritual consequences of doing it. Killing resulted in the shattering of his moral universe.

Most soldiers do not feel prepared for how war changes them. And when they come back from war, they find it hard to articulate and discuss. There is a boot camp to prepare for war, but there is no boot camp to reintegrate veterans to civilian life. They were taught reflexive-fire shooting, but not how to recover a shredded moral identity.

The Afghanistan and Iraq campaigns are not wars between two countries with armies. In fact, the Army calls them "counterinsurgency operations." In such conflicts, the traditional boundaries between enemy combatants and civilians are almost completely absent, and there are no front lines or safe rears.

Joshua was disturbed to find that prisoners were being referred to as "detainees," which stripped them of their rights under the Geneva conventions. One interrogation with an enemy combatant crystallized Joshua's understanding that if he was going to follow Jesus, he had to take off the uniform. When he got home, he applied for and received Conscientious Objector status.

When Kevin got home in September 2003, he began to rethink everything he had ever thought about war. "I have learned from first-hand experience that war is the destroyer of everything that is good in the world. It turns our young into soulless killers, and we tell them that they are heroes when they master the 'art' of killing. That is deranged."

Camillo came to increasingly distrust his commanders. He realized that they were more concerned about advancing their careers and receiving medals than protecting their men or avoiding the senseless killing and maiming of innocent civilians. His feelings were common, and, for Camillo, they led to a deep sense of betrayal.

Camillo stresses adamantly that his PTSD is a breach of trust with the world. Moral injury, however, is the violation of the moral agreement he had with his own internal world, his moral identity. Camillo broke that inner agreement in Iraq by violating his most deeply held moral beliefs. He fought a war that he deemed to be illegal and immoral. He allowed prisoners of war to be tortured, and he killed unarmed civilians.

"As I observed the young man through the sight of my rifle, when he was still alive, there was something inside of me, a voice one might say, that was telling me not to squeeze the trigger. And I knew, without a shred of doubt, that I should not disobey that voice, and that if I did, there would be serious consequences to face.

"When I did squeeze the trigger, I violated that law and desecrated the most sacred sanctuary of my being. As I observed that young man through the sight of my rifle, I was staring at a point of no return, the very Rubicon of my life, and I crossed it. My moral injury is the pain I inflicted upon the very core of my being when I took something I could never get back.

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“I believe that those of us who have lived through war have a moral obligation to educate the public about what is being done in their name. But first we must recognize the fact that we have injured our own moral being and core, and that repairing that damage within ourselves will require a lifelong commitment to atone for the wrongs we have committed against others.”

Patriotic hymns and anthems quickly fade amid the screams of the mutilated and the dying:

“Nothing ever prepares you for the unmeasured killing of civilians. Nothing ever prepares you for what it does to you as a human being to kill an innocent person.”

I fear I am no longer alien to this horror.
I am, I am, I am the horror.
I have lost my humanity and have embraced
*   the insanity of war.*
The monster and I are one.
The blood of innocents forever stains my soul!
The transformation is complete, and I can never return.
I am guilty, guilty, always and forever GUILTY.

Life amid the violence, death, horror, trauma, anxiety, and fatigue of war erodes moral being, undoes character, and reduces decent men and women to savages capable of incredible cruelty that would never have been possible before their lives were sacrificed to war.[3]

COMING HOME IS HELL

When they come home, veterans not only find themselves bereft of the intense camaraderie and sense of meaning that supported them in combat, but they also return to a society full of lonely, purposeless individuals, a declining, desperate middle-class, weak, conflicted communities, and insipid approaches to moral issues.

When he got back from Vietnam, Mac realized that America had little tolerance, interest, or understanding for its returning warriors: “I was called a drug addict and baby killer by many in the general public and ostracized even by fellow veterans from previous wars for being a loser, for lacking dedication and effort, for disgracing the uniform, ourselves, and the country by contributing to what was widely regarded as America’s first lost war. This realization that I was alienated and alone and that no one seemed to understand or care about what I was undergoing made me sad at first. But soon after that sadness turned into anger and resentment.”

When Dweylon came home from Iraq, he struggled with anger at the authorities who launched an illegal, unjust war and forced him to fight it, and he lived on edge, thinking about what he had done: “I know people were trying to show appreciation, but when you’re coming

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[3] On top of all this, the military’s masculine culture is often devastating for women. At its most extreme, military service subjects women into sexual violence at twice the civilian rate. 20% of women in the military have reported being raped, and it is estimated that 80% of rapes go unreported. Only 10% are prosecuted and only 2% convicted, with punishment being mild to nonexistent. Beyond this, victims have frequently been denied VA medical benefits for being injured and traumatized by rape.

home from where nothing good happened to you or to anyone else, there is nothing to clap about or smile about or celebrate. Nothing at all. This is war. Everybody thinks they are right in a war, but everyone still dies in the end. There's nothing good about it."

When we feel that what we did was wrong or unforgivable and that our lives and our meaning system no longer make sense or meaning, our reason for living is in tatters. This shattering of the soul challenges what holds life together, and the anguish of moral injury begins.

Camillo wondered "how could I ever teach my daughter right from wrong when I had done so wrong myself? What moral authority did I have left to be a good father?"

Tyler wrote, "They say war is hell, but I say it's the foyer to hell. I say coming home is hell, and hell ain't got no coordinates. You can't find it on the charts, because there are no charts. Hell is no place at all, so when you're there, you're nowhere – you're lost."

I WILL LIVE WITH MORAL INJURY
THE REST OF MY LIFE

U.S. Veterans commit suicide at the rate of one every 80 minutes,
an unprecedented 18 a day or 6,000 a year.
Veterans represent 20% of all U.S. suicides,
though veterans of all wars are only about 7% of the U.S. population.

Veterans are also disproportionately homeless, unemployed, poor, divorced, and imprisoned. These statistics, however, do not disclose the devastating impact of war on veterans' families and friends, on their communities, and on other veterans.

Soldiers push the humanity out of the enemy and out of themselves at the same time, becoming mere bodies of instinct and survival. What is often discovered only later, and sometimes too late, is that humanity can be quite difficult to recover once it has been evicted.

"Vietnam was the defining experience of my life. Though physical wounds may heal, the psychological, emotional, and moral injuries of war linger and fester. Vietnam forever pervades my existence, condemning me to continually relive and question the past. 'Did I do enough?' 'Could I have done better?' 'Did I make the right decisions?' These are the inevitable concerns of those who must take life and whose decisions cause others to die. Despite the urging of well-meaning friends and loved ones, I can never forget Vietnam or 'put it behind me.'
No one truly 'recovers' from war. No one is ever made whole again."

In the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, over half of those who have fought come from the reserves and National Guard, which means that they return, not to military bases or large cities, but to their civilian communities where there may be few, if any, fellow veterans. They may also be too far from any VA services to use those resources.

Bereft of their units and lacking other veterans who might understand their experience of war, they struggle to rebuild their lives in isolation as aliens to the world that was once their

own. In their communities, family or friends who want to understand and listen can mean the difference between a life restored and a life lost.

SOUL REPAIR

War does not end when the troops return home. It simply embeds itself in civilian life. Veterans return to a society obsessed with political posturing and polarized debates. The public has demonstrated scant willingness to fund veteran recovery, and discussions are few about our moral responsibility for sending others to fight wars in our name. Even fewer citizens have any interest in knowing about what war has done to our own people or to other countries.

Soldiers realize that for many of our contemporary wars, they have not been sent for our or for another nation's well-being or self-defense. They are sent into many war zones to protect the interests of the wealthy and powerful. The hypocrisy costs to our soldiers are bad enough, but it is truly tragic that the majority who suffer in wars we initiate are noncombatant women and children. They suffer the most. They are killed, raped, and impoverished. Their countries are wrecked, and their lives are destroyed.

When imperial powers wage war against opponents, they must first demonize their enemy, using racist stereotypes to stir up fear and hatred. These stereotypes are not images of real, complex human beings, but a slurry from which an army constructs its own power and authorization for violence. For a public to support such a war against an enemy, we, too, must accept the dehumanization of other nations and their people. Such demonization has serious consequences in the long, lingering aftermath of war.

When Kevin chose a career in the military, he swore to defend his country, not, as he has stated, "to invade another country, steal its resources, and destroy the lives of its people." Kevin believes that people are driven by fear to believe propaganda rather than to challenge the lies that sin people like himself to war. "I'd like to see demonstrations to demand prosecution of the people who launch the wars," he said.

The psychological and emotional effects of combat are often referred to as the "hidden wounds of war." But given veteran rates of suicide, homelessness, unemployment, divorce, depression, poverty, and imprisonment, how can such wounds really be invisible or hard to detect? Societies have many strategies for hiding the wounds of war: suppression of facts, avoidance, amnesia, and nostalgia, to name a few.
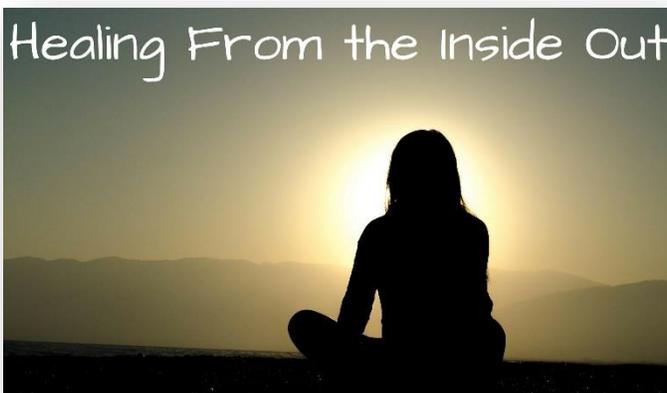
Yet we cannot ignore the fact that our Army has been at war for 20 years, that many members of our community have multiple combat deployments, and these deployments have taken a toll, not just on soldiers, but on family members, and the civilians who support them. Moral identity cannot be rebuilt in a society that refuses its responsibility for war.

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The fact that many veterans live in anguish because of moral injury while most of us sleep comfortably at night is not evidence of a collective clean conscience. It is evidence of a lack of awareness and accountability. We cannot uphold our own moral integrity by pleading ignorance of the facts, by claiming that a war is legal, or by distancing ourselves from the leaders who declare war.

To understand moral injury, we must face the costs of sending others to fight our wars and our failure to understand what it means to bring them home. Conversations about moral injury require deep listening. And we must be willing to take in what we hear as part of ourselves, to be moved, even by what is difficult or painful to hear, and to struggle to understand profound questions about moral conscience.

Societies that launch wars, believing that weapons of death and destruction are noble, good, and lifesaving, or that wars are "holy," do so dishonestly, without wisdom or the capacity to take moral responsibility for the harm they do, not just to their enemies, but to all they send into the maws of killing. We should not expect those who returned to have to face that Darkness alone.

People of faith who are willing to wade into the complex moral questions of war and social responsibility and discern the meaning of spiritual life after war can engage the conversations that matter deeply, and in doing so, save lives. It is not for us to forgive them but to help them find ways to forgive themselves, to experience God's forgiveness, and to let them know that their lives are important to us.