

Response to Moral Injury - 24 March 2022

Trigger Warning

I might use some crude language and will also recount some racist and politically incorrect remarks that might be painful to hear.

The Audio Memorial Format

Why would a woman in her thirties with no background in journalism or history quite suddenly become so interested in speaking to a bunch of crazy, racist, bosbep*kte old men? I ask myself the same question sometimes. Like most recent art projects, diensplig is a product of lockdown boredom and frustration. At the height of the pandemic, I was unable to travel to my home country, South Africa. When travel restrictions kicked in, I was shocked by how untethered I felt in my new adopted home in Germany.

Even with all the elements white people back home dream of - safety, job security, being surrounded by mostly white people - I did not see a future for myself anywhere else but in South Africa. When my grandfather passed away during the pandemic and a funeral was impossible, I searched for rituals that could help me grieve not only the loss of our patriarch, but the loss of community that help us make sense of loss. I was grieving the loss of a family member, but I was also culturally bereft. In lieu of a physical gathering, I collected spoken word eulogies in the form of voice notes and compiled these into a well-rounded private family podcast.

After hearing of other migrant families who were unable to say goodbye to their loved ones, I decided to launch this as a business. Through my audio memorial business, herklink.co.za, I met someone who identified himself as an “army man”, or how he put it, “Ek is mos ‘n army man.”

He mentioned how the audio memorial we crafted for his mother, where the audio format is a protective veil against judgement and fear, was similar to when veterans start talking about their trauma around the campfire, or “braaivleisvuur”. We got talking, and he told me people might be willing to talk to me if I was willing to listen. By referring me to other veterans, and through social media, I started collecting stories through interviews.

ANELIA HEESE
+4915124831025
www.herklink.co.za
Nürnberg, Germany



Diensplig.org

I launched diensplig.org as a repository for stories of all angles, and when I got a lot of pushback from the media, that really got me going.

There's a famous Fidel Castro quote about the Border War where he says: "It's a nice story, what a shame nobody has written about it fully."

That doesn't necessarily ring true today. There is a recent wave of Border literature in South Africa - a range of history books written from below. Robert briefly mentioned the safe space where veterans can embrace each others' pain, and I'm grateful for that. But my army man was the first person I met who was willing to talk about his experience so openly.

55 interviews later and I realised that unbeknownst to me, I grew up in a community of veterans. I was born in 1991, one year after Namibia gained independence, yet I was completely oblivious to the fact that every white male I ever encountered, had a military background. To me, they were never excombatants, or soldiers, just teachers, coaches, managers, church leaders, my father.

There has always been a strong aversion to talk about the past, its roots being that all conscripts had to sign a secrecy declaration in line with the Defence Force Act. Yet, given that all conscripts had to pass a psychiatric assessment before they could re-enter civil society, not admitting to pain and moral injury was the only way one could carry on with one's life.

Only through listening to their stories, I realised how much their moral injuries have shaped my upbringing, both good and bad. It manifests itself not in typical PTSD symptoms, but rather in militarised sport coaching, homophobia, a banal hatred towards black men, a deep shame towards black women, and an aversion to talk about mental health. But also, a deep appreciation for nature, resilience as a virtue, and a sense of duty towards my country.

Maybe that's where my own version of patriotism comes from.
Diensplig: duty to serve.

Basic training - a passage to hell

There is almost always disagreement amongst exconscripts who is entitled to trauma: those who fought experienced military professionals from Russia or Cuba in Angola, those who did township duty, queer people who had a hard time adjusting to this artificial military environment. This is why I don't focus on the technicalities or morality of the Border War, but

on diensplig as the common denominator of a generation. And diensplig starts with basic training. (When Robert recounted the moving story of the primary school teacher trained to run children over, this highlights why military training is so harmful.)

Even those who enjoyed their time in the army (“the best time in my life that I never want to relive”) would tell me that basic training (“basies”) is absolute hell. Sean Livine describes war as hell, and the 12 weeks of basic training aims to simulate war. Rituals in this passage to hell include receiving your force number, shaving your hair, putting on a uniform, and a series of senseless exercises that aim to break you down to build you back up again.

When I asked a captain what the outcome of basic training should be he explained it this way: “At the end of 12 weeks, someone who has gone through basic training should be a soldier. A soldier is a person who is not only able, but also willing to direct a weapon on a person or object and shoot when ordered to do so.”

When I heard this, it hurt me somehow. Even my most loving, gentle father, for whom objection to conscription was not a viable option, was reduced to a soldier at one point in his life. When I asked him about diensplig, he bluntly answered: “It was stupid.”

Our (white) South African dilemma

Yet by not talking about the past, the present becomes increasingly painful. As one ex-conscript noted when he heard about this symposium: “This American ideology of moral injury is irrelevant. It would be much more helpful if the church equipped us with ways to deal with the incompetence of the current ANC government.”

Yet the past frames our future. One of the questions I ask exconscripts is to recall the day they received their force numbers when they turned sixteen. Instead of telling me how it was a celebratory ritual of manhood, one respondent put it like this: “Well, in those days, the postal service was still functional, so I received my force number in the mail.”

Another question I ask excombatants is whether there is anything that sometimes trigger a stress response today. “The smell of diesel. So whenever there is a power outage because of load shedding, I am back at the base in Oshakati, Namibia. And I’m also instinctively reminded of the smell of decomposing human flesh.”

I also ask excombatants to explain who the enemy was. Here the answers get extremely muddled, and is testament of the fact that many were too young to vote, but old enough to hold a gun. It was the Russians, the Cubans, but when they think about it, the original enemy was the ANC. They admit to have deep respect Russian and Cuban veterans, but to them, the ANC remains a terrorist organisation. This obviously hampers their willingness and ability to be contributing members of society and leaves them frustrated and irrelevant.

The New South Africa: A valid ground for the original mandate?

With each failure of the state, this idea is reinforced, and with that also the original mandate with which the Apartheid state sent these young men to war. As one excombatant puts it, and I apologise in advance for the language here: “I was called a kafferboetie at school because I was against racial segregation, but when I look at how they run the country now, I wonder to myself if I should have fought a bit longer and tried a bit harder. We’re dying out now, so who is going to fund all their socialist ideals?”

What this excombatant is trying to do is to grieve for something that he has professed a sin, and to me, it is at that exact point where transitional justice and healing can take place. As someone who grew up in the New South Africa, Apartheid was always morally indefensible, but we forget that our parents and those we love were merely trying their best to be good people, they’re just injured.

Transitional Justice through storytelling

When Prof Meagher proposes rituals in which veterans can be safely absorbed back into civil society, my recommendation would be to create space where young people can ask their elders what it was like, what happened, and how they feel about it today. My podcast is one such a ritual. It is not intended for a black South African audience, but rather a space for intra-racial reconciliation. In these stories that must be heard, there lies an indistinguishable hope for a South Africa that can flourish: admitting how injured we are and that it is time to intentionally grieve for this past that gave us so much, but also robbed us of so much.

I believe intergenerational storytelling can pave the way for this. As one excombatant said as we wrapped up our interview: “There isn’t as much blood as there are stories in this war.”