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In the time allotted to me to launch this session, I will touch briefly on three topics:

- when and why I first entered the valley of darkness we call Moral Injury
 - where that road led me
 - what I have come to understand about Moral Injury, its causes, and its treatment
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As a child born during World War 2 — the “good war” as it has been called — I grew up in a working-class Chicago neighborhood brimful with combat veterans, war refugees, and the most concentrated population of Holocaust survivors in North America. Day in day out, I witnessed, in the eyes of relatives, neighbors, and families I was close to, the painful truth of HC Palmer’s poem, *After War: A Six-Word Story*: “I’M HOME ALIVE. Well, not really.”

In my experience, the invisible wounds of my parents’ reputedly silent generation were far from hidden or silent. My most vivid war-related childhood memory was of an incident when my 6-year-old friends and I were playing war, armed and outfitted from a local war surplus store, quarreling over who was dead and who wasn’t. Our war-game was cut short when my childhood hero, a decorated Army Ranger no more than twenty-one or two, screamed at us. He said he had something important to teach us. We sat on the sidewalk around him as he told us what real war was like, what he had done in the war, in his case killing kids a few years younger than himself, silently, with a knife. After a few minutes he began shaking, then sobbing, until he collapsed and his young pregnant wife came out to take him inside, wrapped in her arms, but not before he had made us all promise never to go to war.

So far as I know, none of us ever did. I say that not proudly, but gratefully. I eluded conscription in the 1960’s since when my draft number came up I was living under religious vows in a Catholic seminary. My brother was not so fortunate. Drafted in his late twenties, he found himself on a chartered PanAm flight to Saigon, to serve his country as an infantry soldier with the 1st Cavalry in the Central Highlands of South Vietnam. As was the case with so many of his fellow veterans, he came home *alive, but not really*. He was not the same, in so many ways. While the flight time from Saigon to the U.S. was 17 hours, his true homecoming took years, decades in fact, and called for more courage, faith, and endurance than anything he had faced in war.

I understood none of this. All I knew was the sense that I had lost a brother to the war. In search of understanding, I poured through post-war Congressional Records, veterans' testimonies and memoirs. My brother was silent, his war sealed tight within him, but more and more veterans started to tell their stories. I listened, as my only way to learn, my only way to help. Like any civilian innocent of war, I was told that "if you didn't go, you don't know"—something I already knew. I imagined and hoped, however, that if I were to listen long enough and hard enough, I might understand something and be able to offer some support.

My engagement with veterans intensified in 2004 when the first wave of combat veterans from the Iraq War began to return home. It was all too clear that the country was not remotely prepared to address their needs—physical, psychological, or spiritual. Admittedly, their welcome was not hostile or condemning as it had been for many Vietnam vets. Instead, it was indifferent. Their homecomings represented, on the national level, a non-event, except for the veterans themselves, their families, and their federal caregivers in an understaffed, underfunded, antiquated VA (Veterans Administration) that hadn't confronted waves of fresh combat veterans for forty years. For my part, I began to work with a number of veterans groups, most closely with an inspiring organization called The Veterans Education Project, whose aim was twofold: to educate young people on the realities of war, and to heal themselves by telling their stories, a process my close friend of over thirty years, Jonathan Shay, has called "communalization." Dr. Shay, you likely know, is the pioneering Boston VA psychiatrist who brought new understanding and gave a new name—"Moral Injury"—to the wounds driving thousands of veterans and active duty military to take their own lives: Moral Injury. Suicides in both groups far exceed the U.S. combatant lives lost in any of our contemporary wars, with no sign yet of diminishing.

Moral injury, like taxes, is unavoidable, part of war's inevitable price tag. What's more, it is apparently contagious, across generations. We would know this more clearly if an accurate count were kept of the suicides and painful human wreckage among combatant's spouses and children. The dark truth is that, when the guns grow silent, warriors bring their war home with them. "I know," confessed Iraq war veteran and poet Brian Turner,

that, when I leave the tent, tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions of dead people will begin leaving the tent and following us home. And the wounded, and the maimed, and the traumatized, and the frightened, and the shattered, and the shivering, and the bruised, and the broken. The ruined world will call its home inside of me. And all of them will follow us to our planes and board with us. They'll walk through the streets of America, through my hometown, standing in my backyard late at night, sometimes, sitting at the foot of the bed to witness my wife and me curled together in a dream.

Sadly, in our age of “forever war,” the victims of war—combatant and non-combatant—have multiplied year after year and by now are numberless. In warlike nations like my own, armed to the teeth, bristling with nuclear weapons, the Moral Injury of war is arguably endemic. We are all “veterans”—the word comes from the Latin *vetus*: aged, old, literally old or just old before one’s time, experienced beyond one’s years, worn, worn out. We are all suffering Moral Injury. War, domestic or foreign, mortgages the future. It is a debt that across time must be paid off with interest, compounded daily until not only peace but reconciliation and justice are achieved. Summing up his own war and his own country, Brian Turner confessed that “America, vast and laid out from one ocean to another, is not a large enough space to contain the war each soldier brings home. And even if it could, it doesn't want to.” After all the conflict and division that South Africa has been through, perhaps something of the same might be said of your country, which I suspect is why we are gathering together today in this conversation.

Decades before Covid-19, Moral Injury was already a lethal plague in our midst. Albert Camus, until his death in 1960, warned us of a devastating moral pestilence placing not only our lives but our humanity in grave peril. “Mankind,” he stated in a 1948 interview, “has probably been given its last chance.” “Yes,” he explained, “there is a human crisis because in today’s world we can contemplate the death or the torture of a human being with a feeling of indifference, friendly concern, scientific interest, or simple passivity.” It is no less true of our generation than of his that “The years we have lived through have killed something in us. And that something is simply the old confidence that humanity had in itself, which led us to believe that we could always elicit human reactions from each other if we spoke in the language of a common humanity.”

The language of a common humanity. How naive and simplistic that sounds to so many in our world today! No longer our first language, it is an all but lost tongue in most places. What, we may ask, does it even mean? In South Africa, unlike the United States, there is at least the homegrown African tradition of Ubuntu, a precious humanistic legacy and natural resource, however tattered and endangered it may be at this point.

I have so far used the term “Moral Injury” without yet explaining what I mean. So what is it? The first thing that needs to be said is that Moral Injury is not PTSD and that Moral Injury is the far deeper, more devastating, more intractable wound of the two, although they frequently accompany and reinforce each other. Although I was not armed with the term Moral Injury until I first read and met Jonathan Shay, I was convinced very early that PTSD was a coat that didn’t fit the men I was listening to. On some level I knew this at the age of six when I sat and watched my war hero unravel beside me. Later, the Vietnam veterans I came to know well convinced me of this. I remember the rage of one of them when he told me that his VA psychiatrist just didn’t get it. Although he had endured heart-breaking loss, blind terror, and serious wounds, they were not the source of his agony after two decades; but every time he tried to bring up what still haunted him his therapist warned him that if he went any further anything he said would be reported and could be used against him in a court of law. I knew his story and he was no war criminal. His point was that war itself is a crime, and he had waged war. The men I listened to and came to know through Wilhelm in Northern Ireland—an assassins, a car-bombers, a Royal Ulster Constable, a British infantry officer—were eloquent in their conviction that it was their “souls” that were wounded, and that as a consequence they lived in “impenetrable darkness.” These were *their* words. Their souls were dead or perishing. They had gone dark in life without going dark in death.

Moral Injury is a *moral* injury, not essentially a psychological injury, much less a neurological one. It is a wound to the conscience and thus to our core identity. In *The Descent of Man*, Charles Darwin concludes that “of all the differences between man and the lower animals the moral sense or conscience is by far the most important.” Michael Tomasello of the Max Planck Institute concurs, arguing that “it is our morality that defines us as a species,” and Harvard Psychologist Steven Pinker adds that our “morality is...close to our conception of the meaning of

life. Moral goodness is what gives each of us the sense that we are worthy human beings.” Martha Nussbaum has spoken eloquently of the “fragility of goodness” and perhaps nowhere is “goodness” more fragile than in war. Lastly, Gitta Sereny, author of *Into That Darkness* concludes that “If morality is extinguished there is no human being left.” Navy Commander and Orthodox chaplain David Alexander has described the extreme extinction of humanity as a “transition from being *obliged* to kill to a feeling of excited anticipation towards killing,” echoing WW2 veteran J. Glenn Gray’s reflections on the critical difference between *men who had killed* and *men who had become killers*.

So what exactly do we mean by “conscience”? I suggest that we begin with the assertion of the 1st century Jewish philosopher Philo Judaeus to the effect that “Native and indwelling in every soul is a cross-examiner... which is our accuser and our judge.” We may know this voice by different names, and it may say one thing to you and another to me; but I suspect that none or very few of us have never heard it. The experience of “conscience”—regardless of whose voice we believe it to be and regardless of what it says to us—is a common one and is aptly described in the generic word we use to designate it. “Con-science,” from the Latin words for “with” and “knowledge,” suggests communal, rather than private, idiosyncratic understanding, what in Greek is known as *syneidesis*, “mutual awareness, communication, being, as it were, on the same page.”

Conscience is Janus-faced, looking both inward and outward, a mirror of the soul that at the same time reflects a community, with which the soul is either in harmony or at odds. Conscience exposes us to the approval or disapproval of eyes and ears from which there is ultimately nowhere to hide, because to hide from our conscience is to hide from ourselves. The Roman statesman and philosopher Cicero once called conscience the *theatrum virtuti*, the “theater of virtue,” where our deeds are manifest, exposed, to others, a stage without dark corners, with no opportunity for concealment. Even in what Cicero referred to as the *animi conscientia*, the “conscience of the soul,” the court of innermost appeal, we find ourselves standing before a judge, a jury of our peers, or a mirror. For the Christian tradition there is finally but one judge before whom we have no choice but to stand, *dominus deus*, the Lord God, whom Augustine in his *Confessions* addressed as *arbiter conscientiae meae*, “arbiter of my conscience.”

Whether welcome or unwelcome, approving or reproachful, the voice of conscience makes itself heard, warning us we are about to cross a line we oughtn't, rebuking us for already having done so, rewarding us with peace of mind for having watched our step. It is the voice of caution, guilt, shame, and well-being.

Conscience, I would suggest, is a compass. It helps us find our way. It keeps us on track, alerting us when we are about to go astray or when we are already lost. For most everyone, war is another world, an alien planet, where we must reset our inner compass, recalibrate our conscience, if we are to serve the cause that brought us there and survive. But what happens to us when our war ends and we find that we have survived? Can we reset our compass again, return to the world we knew, and find peace? Returning warriors inevitably put this question somewhere, to someone, if only to themselves. It is enough to keep anyone up at night, and often does. For one, Michael Yandell, a former Army explosive ordinance specialist, says it allowed him very little sleep when he came home from war. He writes of his “disillusionment,” of the “erosion” of his “sense of place in the world”:

The spiritual and emotional foundations of the world disappeared and made it impossible for me to sleep the sleep of the just.... What began to erode for me in Iraq in 2004 was my perception of good and evil. What I lost was a world that makes moral sense.... I was 19 when I left for war. I did not know I was leaving a world that made sense—a world where people respected one another's lives and dignity, a world where violence and murder were understood to be wrong and punished by laws—and entering a world where all bets were off.

Yandell, now a minister in Greensboro, North Carolina, has come to understand and accept that, while he can try to restore his moral compass to its peacetime settings, there is no turning back the clock and reversing time. “Of course the war is a part of me. I cannot avoid it. I cannot escape my experience.” He describes his Moral Injury as “a chronic illness... something like the pain of arthritis or an old, bad knee that someone complains about when it rains.” In this he is one of the lucky ones, unlike his less fortunate, more gravely wounded comrades-in-arms who at an alarming rate find their pain insufferable and life itself a burden they no longer can bear.

The truth is that the rules of war are not the rules of peace. War has always required a radical recalibration of conscience, of our shared understanding of good and evil, of right and wrong, the crossing of a line that something deep, profoundly deep in us, warns us not to cross. “War,” after all, is a euphemism. As such it is an evasion. War is about killing. “The soldier,” writes former Marine Capt. and Iraq war veteran Tyler Boudreau, “kills for a living—it is his reason for being. Killing is not a by-product or some shitty collateral duty like peeling potatoes or scrubbing the latrine. It is the institutional point.” Retired LTC Pete Kilner made the same point for years in his West Point class on the morality of killing:

there is one absolutely unique and defining characteristic of our profession—we are organized, equipped and trained to kill people. As company-level leaders, we recruit patriotic young Americans to kill; equip them to kill; train them to kill; develop and issue orders for them to kill; issue fire commands for them to kill; and commend them for killing enemies of our country.

Even as part of a larger mission, says Lt. Col. Pete Kilner, the former director of the Center for the Advancement of Leader Development and Organizational Learning at West Point, killing is still “the biggest moral decision” one can make and “the biggest moral taboo” one can break. World War II veteran and philosopher J. Glenn Gray, author of *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle*, argues further that the guilt and violation involved in killing, rather than rooted in the moral order, are metaphysical.

To suffer from Moral Injury, a person must possess a living conscience (an active ethical immune system, as it were) a personal code of honor. Moral injury, therefore, is both an indictment and a confirmation of character, even a character in ruins. In war, few of those suffering from Moral Injury are war criminals. They are men and women painfully shattered by the essential criminality of war. It is often the finest soldiers who suffer most from Moral Injury. Moral injury is a sign of strength, not weakness. The morally injured are not lacking in grit, resilience, courage or commitment. They are broken, not defective; darkened, not demonic. They have done their duty as defined by the law of their land and sanctioned or even blessed, in nearly every case, by their Church. They have observed the code of military conduct and the rules of engagement laid out for them. None of this alters, however, the truth that they have violated their humanity. “War makes us killers,” wrote Marine Captain Timothy Kudo. “We must confront this horror directly if we’re honest about the true costs of war.... I’m no longer the ‘good’ person I

once thought I was. There's nothing that can change that; it's impossible to forget what happened, and the only people who can forgive me are dead." "We need to stop telling our warriors they have nothing to be ashamed of," urges Army Major and Orthodox priest Sean Levine, "and start listening to their shame, their guilt, their loss, their inner emptiness." After multiple combat deployments, Chaplain Levine speaks from experience when he asserts unequivocally that "war hurts the human soul because war is evil." "Killing, in any circumstance," he explains, "violates a deep moral sensibility situated in the human heart, and this 'heart alarm' sounds because war and killing represent profound evils that wound, fragment, and dissipate the very core of the human person." For many veterans, what they have seen, what they have done, what they have been a part of... is too much to leave behind. Contrary to Freud's conviction that "modern men" know better "than to allow the past to haunt them," men and women are haunted by the lives they have taken, by the destruction they have wrought, by the violence they have brought down on others. To sense their pain we need only hear the last words of Noah Pierce who, after two deployments in Iraq, wrote these final words in 2007 before putting a gun to his head: "Time's finally up. I am not a good person, I have done bad things. I have taken lives, now it's time to take mine." "My son," explained his grieving mother, "(he) couldn't forgive himself for some of the things he did. He thought of himself as a murderer, and a bad person, because he still had the urge to hurt people, kill people.... The United States Army turned my son into a killer. They trained him to kill to protect others. They forgot to un-train him, to take that urge to kill away from him."

Noah Pierce's mother, in her grief and rage, uttered a dark truth that needs to be pondered: the Army turned her son into a killer... trained him to kill. They flipped the "kill switch" in her son, as they have learned to do so effectively. Some, like retired Army psychologist LTC Dave Grossman, have studied this training in critical depth; but most take it for granted as what happens (setting aside the realities of a mixed gender military) when you set out to turn boys into men and civilians into warriors. Mrs. Pierce's darker assessment, however, is more to the point and may help explain why some enlistees take their lives during basic training and many others trace their Moral Injury to their training and not their first firefight. Stepping aside from the statistics, I can anecdotally report that a student of mine who was also an active duty Army officer told me how he himself, in basic training, had attempted suicide in his barracks and was

stopped by a fellow trainee. Another of his fellows, however, had already completed the act, to which their Drill Sergeant only commented “good riddance.”

What is seldom acknowledged and rarely noted, however, is the fact that many of those who only train for combat and never put that training into practice nevertheless suffer from Moral Injury; and some of these “innocents” even take their own lives. A startling official 2011 report on military suicide stated that roughly half of those who took their lives had no history of deployment in either Iraq or Afghanistan, and 85% had no direct combat history. What can this possibly mean? If Moral Injury represents a wound inflicted by personal involvement in war, killing, and destruction, what sense does it make for those who never took part, nor ever witnessed it, to suffer from Moral Injury? I have only a tentative suggestion to offer here, one formed after talking with a number of active-duty servicemen-and-women who have made this same claim. It may have to do with the “kill switch” that the military knows all too well how to turn on in its ranks. To be primed to kill, convinced of one’s capacity and willingness to take life, and to have rehearsed the act until it is so engrained as to become an autonomic response, may be in some real if elusive way to have already done the act and to have become a killer—a killer with clean hands and a blood-stained soul.

This is precisely what a young woman whom I will call Sally has painfully reported. Deployed to Iraq, Sally was trained as a convoy driver and was conditioned to run over anyone in her path. What profoundly troubled her was the fact that this included children, known to have been used by insurgents to slow down or stop military convoys and thus render them prey to ambush and massacre. “I had to convince myself and my superiors,” said Sally, “that I could or rather that I would—without any hesitation—accelerate and drive straight over a child in such a situation.” She practiced just this in active simulation, rehearsing it in her imagination and even in her dreams, until she was ready. As it happened the situation never occurred; so Sally never actually killed a child. Even so, she returned from Iraq desperately traumatized and consumed with shame. To help others further understand her inner pain, the depth of her soul wound, she explained that, before her National Guard unit was deployed to Iraq, she had been a pre-school teacher. It was what she wanted to do for the rest of her life. But how can a trained killer of children do that? It’s her question, not mine. If we consider her confused, suffering from

unreasonable guilt and shame, then it is we who are confused and who need to listen long and hard to the men and women whom we have trained and sent off to wage our wars.

So sensitive, it seems, are the consciences and so vulnerable the characters of men and women that being trained to kill, and thus being prepared and ready to kill, can suffice to darken their souls. Living with Moral Injury is, after all, what traditional Christian moral theology would call “living in sin.” In that tradition, sin lies in the will, in conscious intent. Put simply: in the heart, not in the act. To have been willing to kill is to have killed. Actions are one thing, and the intention or inward disposition that accompanies them is quite another. The former is what everyone sees, while the latter is what God alone sees, and it is what God sees that matters.

It is not surprising that all of the Armed Services in my country have found it a steep challenge to accept the concept of Moral Injury, much less the implications of such acceptance. After all, what this demands is to confess that the profession of arms imperils the souls of those in military service. Military service, after all, is supposed to build character, not destroy it. As I have heard from too many veterans, they were told from the start of their service that they could suffer the loss of an organ or limb or even their life, but they were never told that they might well lose their soul. What’s more, however difficult it has been for the armed forces to swallow the reality of Moral Injury, it has been every bit as difficult for the Catholic Church to question the traditional Just War doctrine rooted in the writings of Ambrose, Augustine, and Aquinas, upheld in the face of innumerable savage conflicts across millennia, and surviving intact into the age of thermonuclear arsenals. Just War Theory is embedded in the curriculum of every military academy in the United States and in nearly every Western nation. Admittedly, “just war” was from the beginning supposed to mean “limited war.” This was the explicit intent of its founding fathers and erstwhile advocates. But intentions, as we have seen, are for God’s eyes only. Everyone else is left to stare at and live with consequences. And in this case the consequences of Western Christianity’s long affair with the god of war have overstepped every limit imaginable, save human extinction, which we have risked and to which we have come perilously close more than once.

The truth is that in my country we are only in the early stages of recognizing and understanding Moral Injury. To date, the Pentagon and its minions have only gone as far as to admit the

existence of Moral Injury, because it is undeniable at this point. Still, for many this remains a leap, a road too far. The military's search for a cure may be described as desperate, whether in some form of preemptive inoculation or else retroactive treatment. Many millions of dollars and years of research have been squandered already, questing for the moral equivalent of a fountain of youth or a Men-in-Black Neuralyzer. The truth, quite obviously, is that non-violent conflict resolution and lasting peace are the only honest solution, as some ranking military officers have admitted to me off the record. That said, the armed forces and the defense industry wagging the dog cannot seem to stop themselves from dreaming of war without Moral Injury, business as usual with clear consciences for all. War without Moral Injury is for the rest of us, however, a nightmare from which we find ourselves powerless to awake.

In the meantime, treating the morally wounded is the mission at hand. The good and bad news here is that Moral Injury is as old as human conflict, and so we can fruitfully look to the past as well as to the future for help. Ancient wisdom, rediscovered, can and often does turn out to be cutting-edge. Most if not all traditional societies have developed and handed down their own rituals and therapies for reconciling enemies, cauterizing hatred, cleansing the pollution of fratricidal war, exorcising souls haunted by the souls of the dead, recovering lost humanity, and restoring the image of God in us. The theater of Dionysos in ancient Athens, the sanctuary of Asclepius at Epidauros, native American sweat lodges, and Roman Catholic confessionals are among the countless sacred spaces sought out by the morally injured in search of healing. Added to these are an expanding number of contemporary therapeutic options, including equine-assisted therapy, adaptive disclosure, psychoanalytic dream therapy, wilderness retreats, pilgrimages to former battlegrounds, communal remembrance and mourning, art, poetry, story-telling, drama, and acts of restitution. For those neither experienced in war nor trained in one or other therapeutic science or art, deep, empathic listening, without judgment, is a hand reached out in friendship and compassion. Jonathan Shay, a pioneer in understanding and treating Moral Injury and a legend among countless American veterans has emphasized one simple truth: veterans heal veterans—through communalization—listening to each other's stories, and embracing each other's pain and brokenness. I would add to this the conclusion of Marine combat veteran and therapist, Dr. David Alexander:

It would seem terrifyingly simplistic to say that “love is the answer” in aiding veterans... who have experienced a connection with or absorption of evil in combat that has contributed to such personal and relational devastation... and yet that love is the answer is my very suggestion, with the caveat that loving veterans will certainly mean co-suffering. In my experience, co-suffering is in fact a part of all our healing, as none of us can be healed from anything alone.