The Agency of Guilt

Returning Warriors to our Communities

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Between 2015 and 2016, the number of veterans of the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan who died by suicide rose 10 %, according to the most recent findings of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.¹ The report indicates that, while the overall rate of deaths by suicide per day in the veteran popular has not increased since 2015, among veterans between the ages of 18 and 34, the rate has risen from 40 per 100,000 veterans in 2015 to 45 per 100,000 veterans in 2016. In the words of AMVETS (American Veterans) National Executive Director Joe Chenelly, »This isn't just alarming. It's a national emergency that requires immediate action. We've spent the last decade trying to improve the transitioning process for our veterans, but we're clearly failing, and people are dying«.²

I. Moral Injury

The high rate of death by suicide among veterans who have served in the recent wars is linked to what has become known as the signature wound of these wars: moral injury. Moral injury is a result of inflicting violence upon others. It has been described as the result of »perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing

witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations. Service members who have participated in or witnessed actions they cannot reconcile with their moral codes have reported suffering terribly under the weight of their shame and guilt.

Theoretical formulations of moral injury emphasize that the individual is the cause and effect of the injury. The conflict that arises between a soldier's value system and his actions lies at the heart of the malady. The morally-injured soldier feels he has betrayed the ethical foundations that give his life meaning and value. The combat zones of Iraq and Afghanistan, where it was often impossible to distinguish between insurgents and the rest of the population, provided the optimal conditions for the occurrence of moral injury. As clinical psychologist Brett Litz notes,

These types of wars involve unconventional features (e.g., an unmarked enemy, civilian threats, improvised explosive devices) that produce greater uncertainty, greater danger for noncombat troops, and generally greater risk of harm among noncombatants. [...] Guerilla wars also expose service members to unpredicted and non-contingent violence and the aftermath of violence; experiences that fail to conform to schematic beliefs about warfare and roles for service members.

Marine Veteran Michael Pitre recalls the vulnerability these conditions created:

I suppose it would've been easier in Iraq had the enemy worn a uniform. I watch news footage of ISIS pick-up trucks bouncing through the desert, and my hands tingle. They're waving their flags, showing off their rusted machine guns. Finally, a clear target.

Instead, my enemies were potholes covered in loose dirt, dog carcasses placed suspiciously in the middle of the road, and the occasional mortar launched by unseen men. When there's no way to protect yourself, when the dangers can come from anywhere and anyone, the real hazards of war become moral rather than physical. You were always trying to avoid becoming party to an atrocity.

Trapped within a loop of psychological self-wounding, the morally injured soldier experiences himself as the agent of his own injury. That moral injury can result

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6 The Words After War. Interview With Michael Pitre by Bryan Doerries. In: The Huffington Post, 2 November 2015; https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-words-after-war-inter_5_b_8434022 (last access 13 October 2019).
not only from perpetrating violence, but also from witnessing harm done to others, makes the self-enclosed nature of the aggression that much more salient.

The researchers who understand moral injury as resulting from the individual’s violation of his or her personal moral code recommend treatments that align with the use of confession to absolve a penitent of sin. Litz explains, »We want to promote – to a degree – a confession-like experience. […] We do this in a highly evocative, highly emotionally charged way.« Since, through self-betrayal, morally injured service members have caused their own pain, at least potentially, they can become agents of change, and therefore, of their healing, as well. According to Litz, the morally injured service member must be encouraged to take responsibility for the past by »making amends […] drawing a line between past and present and in some way changing one's approach to how he or she behaves and acts so that one moves towards the positive, towards better living.«

Notwithstanding this new characterization of the invisible wounds of war, the recently released statistics on veteran deaths by suicide indicate that we are far from developing effective interventions against the lethal effects of the guilt veterans carry home from war. In point of fact, some researchers and therapists looking for ways to heal moral injury question whether it is a mental health issue at all. For example, former Navy psychiatrist William P. Nash, notes, »[Combat veterans suffering from psychological trauma; S.D.] need mental health intervention to get them to sleep, to reduce the arousal level, manage suicide risk. But if you ask my totally shoot-from-the-hip opinion, I don’t think psychotherapists will ever be the solution for moral injury.«

II. Moral Defense and ›Bad Objects‹

Of course, the challenge of managing incapacitating feelings of guilt in soldiers predates the development of today’s concept of moral injury. The earlier work of W.R.D. Fairbairn is exemplary in this regard. Fairbairn approached soldiers’ guilt differently than the researchers whose work I have discussed above. Unlike them, he did not assume that the self-condemning feelings soldiers carry are the bedrock of their psychic reality. Rather, he understood those feelings as themselves symptomatic of unconscious resistance soldiers had developed to recognizing the presence of other, more threatening, emotions: »The phenomena of guilt must be regarded (from a strictly psychopathological standpoint,
of course) as partaking of the nature of a defense. In a word, guilt operates as a resistance in psychotherapy.\textsuperscript{11} According to Fairbairn, a soldier’s guilt is a form of resistance that serves to repress recognition of a situation that, were it to become conscious, would be even more intolerable than guilt itself. Considered the founder of the object relations school of psychotherapy, Fairbairn anchors his understanding of soldiers’ incapacitating guilt in a developmental narrative that emphasizes the significance of human attachment in the genesis of the self. Object relations theorists underscore the importance of the human being’s dependence, from earliest infancy, upon others. Those others in the life of a child are the caregivers upon whom the child’s survival depends. Attachment to these earliest others, which plays a formative role in the development of the child’s identity, develops through the mechanism of identification, whereby the child »assimilates an aspect, property or attribute of the other and is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model the other provides«.\textsuperscript{12}

When a caregiver fails to protect a child from exposure to situations that create a level of anxiety too high for the child to withstand, the child internalizes, and identifies with, that other as a ›bad object‹. Were it possible, the child would reject such bad objects, but he cannot, because of his dependency upon them. Fairbairn writes, »If a child’s parents are bad objects, he cannot reject them, even if they do not force themselves upon him; for he cannot do without them. Even if they neglect him, he cannot reject them; for if they neglect him, his need for them is increased«.\textsuperscript{13}

The internalization of bad objects is life-sustaining, because it enables the child to preserve the external world that it depends upon for its survival, albeit with a cost. By internalizing the badness of the object along with the object’s goodness, the child creates an internal world in which the good objects assume a super-ego role that can punish the child for his identification with the bad internalized objects. The child becomes the bad object as well as the agency that can control that badness through self-modification; or at least this arrangement enables the child to believe in the possibility of having such control. Psychoanalyst Thomas Helscher (who, as we will see, offers an understanding of moral injury that is not aligned with Litz’s approach) describes what happens when these bad objects live inside the child:

The existential and external threat of one’s survival being dependent upon an unreliable and ›libidinally‹ bad (i.e., frustrating and pain-inducing) object is mitigated by this identification and internalization. The identification – the bad object is me – creates an illusion of omnipotent control – if I’m the bad object, then I can do something

\textsuperscript{11} William Ronalds Dodds Fairbairn, The Repression and the Return of Bad Objects (with Special Reference to the »War Neuroses«). In: W.R.D. F., Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality. London 1952, pp. 59–81; here p. 69.


\textsuperscript{13} Fairbairn (note 11), p. 67.
about the badness by modifying myself. As Fairbairn describes it, the unconditional
badness of the pain of reality that one can’t control, is transformed into the conditional
badness of morality – I’m bad because I do bad things, and if it’s my agency that
creates badness, then I can change that by doing good things instead. By this sleight
of the hand, the infant turns a situation of intolerable helplessness which could lead
to profound and crippling despair, or worse yet, organismic panic in the face of the
threat of annihilation by forces vastly larger than oneself, into a seemingly manage-
able moral dilemma – I got myself into this, and I can somehow get myself out of it.14

The state in which the child sees itself as conditionally bad is what Fairbairn
identifies as the moral defense, and it enables the child to remake the world,
which it depends upon for its survival, into a safe place. Through the moral
defense the child creates an illusion of control that, however self-condemning,
allows him to regard the world as intact and enables him to avoid descending
into paralyzing despair.

As if in proleptic anticipation of current approaches to moral injury, Fairbairn
cautions psychoanalysts against reinforcing feelings of guilt in their patients,
noting that »interpretations in terms of guilt may thus actually play into the
hands of the patient’s resistance […] a coercive and moralizing psychotherapist
inevitably becomes either a bad object or a super-ego figure to his patient«.15

Drawing upon Fairbairn’s analysis of moral defense, and in distinction to
Litz, Helscher understands the guilt veterans feel as a version of this self- and
world-protecting mechanism that serves to shield against the painful realiza-
tion that a crucial sense of connectedness to a reliable, good world has been
destroyed. Hence Helscher’s characterization of moral injury as an »environ-
mental failure«, by which he means a failure of the external world to meet a
veteran’s fundamental needs.16

Veteran Brian Mockenhaupt, who served two tours as an infantryman in
Iraq, wrote about how the war deprived him of this sense of connectedness to
a reliable world, dislocating the moral landmarks by which he navigated his life.
To illustrate the circumstances that gave rise to such moral ambiguity he recalls,

I’ve spent hours taking in the world through a rifle scope, watching life unfold. Women
hanging laundry on a rooftop. Men haggling over a hindquarter of lamb in the market.
Children walking to school. I’ve watched this and hoped that someday I would see
that my presence had made their lives better, a redemption of sorts. But I also peered
through the scope waiting for someone to do something wrong, so I could shoot him.
When you pick up a weapon with the intent of killing, you step onto a very strange

14 Thomas P. Helscher, Moral Injury, the Moral Defense, and the Collapse of Emotional
Containment: An Intersubjective Alternative to the Treatment of PTSD in the Treatment
of Wartime Trauma. In: Terrence McBride/Maureen Murphy (eds.), Trauma and the
Destructive-Transformative Struggle: Clinical Perspectives. Oxfordshire, New York 2018,
pp. 170–84; here p. 179.
15 Fairbairn (note 11), p. 69.
16 Helscher (note 14), p. 173.
and serious playing field. Every morning someone wakes wanting to kill you. When you walk down the street, they are waiting, and you want to kill them, too. That's not bloodthirsty; that's just the trade you've learned. And as an American soldier, you have a very impressive toolbox. You can fire your rifle or lob a grenade, and if that's not enough, call in the tanks, or helicopters, or jets. The insurgents have their skill sets, too, turning mornings at the market into chaos, crowds into scattered flesh, Humvees into charred scrap. You're all part of the terrible magic show, both powerful and helpless.\(^{17}\)

Whereas the Litz’s research into moral injury hones in on the soldier’s power – to betray himself, to redeem himself – Fairbairn’s and Helscher’s approaches, by contrast, call attention to the soldier’s helplessness. Fairbairn understands military trauma to be the revival, during war, of earlier situations in a soldier’s history that, when they first occurred, had caused the spontaneous release of internalized bad objects. Soldiers are susceptible to the release – or rerelease – of internalized bad objects because the military, to function, by necessity creates a situation of dependency in its soldiers, who must surrender their individual egos to the authority of their commanders and to the group, in order to operate as part of a larger unit. Mockenhaupt’s experience demonstrates how, in this dependent state, soldiers exposed to the moral chaos that warfare unleashes may experience the revival of their traumatic dependence upon bad objects. When this happens, the soldier individualizes and personalizes the badness of the environmental situation, taking responsibility for it upon himself, in order to preserve the goodness of the world. This is what Fairbairn means by the moral defense, and it enables us to recognize that the internal conflicts today’s morally injured veterans feel – between their moral sensibility and the immorality of their actions – are also individual responses to environmentally intolerable situations.

The incidence of moral injury indicates that veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan who are experiencing trauma are attempting to manage their guilt by constructing narratives in which they are the source of wrongdoing and hence the responsible agents. Accounts such as Mockenhaupt’s enable us to recognize the moral precarity of counter-insurgency warfare that lends itself to the release of bad objects and the subsequent construction of these narratives of self-blame. At the same time, we must also ask ourselves why, in response to the recent wars, has this particular narrative become prevalent. Are there conditions that are exacerbating moral injury, not only during service, but afterward? I would argue that today’s veterans are returning to a society that views them as sole agents of aggression, and that in this social climate, their only recourse is to take the guilt of war upon themselves, if they are going to be accepted back into society. Considered in social context, then, moral injury must be understood as symptomatic less of an individual’s moral transgression (Litz) than of the absence of shared societal responsibility for the moral hazards of war. Its indi-

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Individuating narrative of self-blame is efficacious, insofar as it enables veterans to preserve their belief in the goodness of the very society that is abandoning its responsibilities toward them, albeit at the price of identifying themselves as the toxic source of moral transgression. In Helscher’s terms, we could say that the unacknowledged environmental failure at the heart of moral injury is society’s resistance to claiming the burden of guilt that rightfully belongs to it. Because this is not happening, veterans, in order to be accepted back into society, are shouldering that burden alone.

III. Collectivity, Guilt, and Individuation

While much has been written about the attenuated relationship that exists between veterans and the American public – the divide separating the military and the civilian worlds – little has been said about the impact of that divide upon veterans themselves. My contention is that insofar as the theory of moral injury conceptualizes the guilt veterans feel as a problem that is theirs alone, it inadvertently serves to reinforce that divide. If veterans are to reintegrate successfully into their communities, mental health professionals, veterans themselves, and civilian society as a whole must acknowledge that soldiers are not the sole agents of their deeds; they are representatives of their society and they act on its behalf. Therefore, the guilt they carry, born of wartime violence, is a burden that society must share with them, while the process of metabolizing that guilt must be approached as both an individual and a societal responsibility.

The question of understanding moral injury as a collective responsibility stands to benefit from J. Glen Gray’s discussion of the guilt, which is also grounded in the question of agency. Gray served in the United States Army as a combat soldier and a counter intelligence officer for four years during the Second World War. When the war was over, he became a professor of philosophy at Colorado College, and, fourteen years after his service ended, published *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* (1959).

Gray begins his analysis of battle by establishing the importance of the group, the unit that defines military life. Referring to the experience of soldiers in a group, Gray writes, »With the boundaries of the self expanded, they sense a kinship never known before. Their ›I‹ passes insensibly into a ›we‹, ›my‹ becomes ›our‹, and individual fate loses its central importance«.18 The bonds among individuals in a group produce a collectivity whose power to protect and destroy is greater than that of any single individual and which overrides the values, prejudices and antipathies of soldiers who partake of the identity of the group. Lawrence J. Brown notes that British Psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion, who had been a tank commander during the first World War, also recognized that

belonging to a group during war was of »primary interpersonal importance« because it served »as a potential bulwark against becoming traumatized«.19

More recently, the protective power and chemistry of military group identity was evident during the debate that led to the repeal of the former official U.S. policy (1993–2011) regarding the service of homosexuals in the military. The policy directed »that military personnel ›don't ask, don't tell, don't pursue, and don't harass‹«.20 To aid in informed discussion of the repeal, the Rand Corporation conducted a study about sexual orientation and U.S. military policy. The study found that the repeal would have »little impact on recruiting and retention of military personnel and on unit cohesion and performance. Current research and the experience during World War II shows that cohesion of combat units comes from the common threat of the enemy, not from prior shared values and attitudes«.21 While these findings did not indicate an absence of homophobia in the military, they did reveal something that Iraq veteran Phil Klay described as »the most important element« of being part of a unit: the »shared commitment to a task«.22 What matters most is the »emphasis on unity – rather than divisions along gender and race – as well as on the importance of the mission, was the crucial factor«.23

At the same time, the bonds that unite warriors are only as powerful as their mission is active. Erich Maria Remarque's novel about World War I German soldiers returning from the trenches, The Road Back (Der Weg zurück, 1930–31), depicts the disorientation that Ernst, the main character, experiences when, upon attending a reunion of his platoon members shortly after coming home, he reflects, »We meet many others of our old pals, but it is strange – the old spirit is missing […] so many wedges have split us asunder; but certain it is, the old feeling of comradeship has gone«.24 Ernst recognizes the reason for this estrangement, stating, »The things that differentiate us from one another are too decisive. The common interest is no longer decisive. It has broken up already and given place to the interest of the individual«.25 In reference to the recent

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22 Phil Klay, Two Decades of War Have Eroded the Morale of America’s Troops. In: The Atlantic, May 2018; https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/05/left-behind/556844/ (last access 13 October 2019).
23 Ibid.
25 Ibid., p. 182.
wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, journalist Sebastian Junger has described »this tremendous depression that comes from going from a close-knit communal life to the alienated life of modern society«.\footnote{Adam Linehan/Sebastian Junger, Over-Valorizing Vets Does More Harm Than Good. In: Task & Purpose, 24 May 2016; https://taskandpurpose.com/sebastian-junger-we-need-to-stop-over-valorizing-veterans (last access 13 October 2019). See also Sebastian Junger, Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging. New York 2016.}

According to Gray’s analysis, feelings of loss over the dissolution of group membership give way to others that, while painful, are also valuable. It is through his dawning awareness of his guilt that the soldier separates from the group:

So long as the soldier thinks of himself as one among many and identifies himself with his unit, army and nation, his conscience is unlikely to waken and feel the need to respond. All awareness of guilt presupposes the capacity to respond as an individual to the call of conscience. […] We respond to conscience only when we can separate ourselves from others and become conscious, often painfully so, of our differentness.\footnote{Gray (note 18), p. 175.}

Gray’s point is not that conscience is the effect of differentiation, but the inverse: the call of conscience brings the soldier into consciousness of himself as an individual:

an important function of guiltiness is to make us aware of our selves […]. Conscience is thus in the first instance a form of self-consciousness. It is that form that gives to us an unmistakable sense of free individuality and separates for us the domains of the actual and the ideal. Herewith the life of reflection begins, and the inner history of the individual no longer corresponds to his outer fate.\footnote{Ibid., p. 176.}

Separation from the group inaugurates the process of individuation that is necessary for the soldier to return to society. Only by acknowledging his feelings of guilt can he evolve into a subject who is able to integrate into the civilian world with a consolidated sense of self.

Gary writes that the awakening of guilt is gradual and can be hard won: »the achievement of clarity about duty to one’s country and duty to oneself [is] a matter of anguished doubt, sometimes lasting for months or years«.\footnote{Ibid., p. 186.} This is because, in war itself »the most potent quieters of conscience are evidently the presence of others who are doing the same things and the consciousness of acting under the orders of people ›higher up‹ who will answer for one’s deeds«.\footnote{Ibid., p. 175.}

The soldier whose conscience is no longer quieted, and who embarks on a life of reflection, becomes aware of three different sources of his guilt. The first is his individual actions, what he has actually seen and done while at war. The second is his membership in a group, be it his military unit, the armed forces as a whole, or his identity as a citizen in a country at war; this source of guilt is political or
social and it stems from the awareness that even the warrior whose individual conscience is clear »is a participant in a system and an enterprise whose very essence is violence and whose spirit is to win at whatever cost«.31 The third source of guilt is metaphysical; it stems from human nature itself, from »our failure as human beings to live in accordance with our potentialities and our vision of the good. […] As human beings, we are in a perpetual state of disequilibrium with the rest of creation, neither humble enough to recognize our dependence nor bold enough to actualize our powers«.32 Gray, drawing upon Karl Jaspers’ taxonomy of guilt, makes use of the first-person plural to indicate his recognition of guilt as a shared human condition. The soldier’s experience is only unique in that war reveals to him first-hand the consequences of that disequilibrium.

The recognition of the universal nature of metaphysical guilt does not bring with it ready resolution or reconciliation. Still, it can be empowering, helping the soldier gradually win a new relationship to his fellows and to the cosmos. […] Atonement will become for him not an act of faith or a deed, but a life, a life devoted to strengthening the bonds between men and between man and nature […] thus using guilt as a means to a firmer and more enduring hold on life.33

Gray does not identify a single source of conscience; it is irreducible, neither wholly belonging to the individual or the collective:

Though the call of conscience may seem to be an impersonal voice outside of one, the response is peculiarly within the individual self. Why did you do this? Why did you not do that? If we hear at all and if we attempt to answer, the response must begin with the first person singular pronoun. I must begin with myself as I was.34

The impersonal call of conscience reaches the soldier, who heeds it, specifically, as an individual subject, and who becomes a subject through the act of responding to it. Nonetheless, the voice of conscience is not intended for him alone. It is both specific and general, addressed to the individual soldier, but only insofar as he represents a larger whole. Gray’s analysis suggests that guilt can become productive when it delivers insight into the capacity that each and every person possesses to destroy and to create. War reveals these capacities and, in this sense, affords insight a shared human condition.

31 Ibid., p. 195.
32 Ibid., p. 206.
33 Ibid., p. 211 f.
34 Ibid., p. 175.
IV. Communal Guilt

Gray directly encountered the destructiveness of war and thereafter returned to a society that had itself been deeply impacted and absorbed by the war: the U.S. had sent 12% of its population to serve. While veterans did not widely share their stories with civilians, the war had affected the entire society, and veterans were received and reintegrated into their communities.

Today less than 0.5 percent of the U.S. population is in the armed forces. This means that the wars the U.S. engages in, and the men and women who fight them, exist only peripherally in the country’s collective consciousness. With war now normalized and turned over to a professional army, there is little societal ownership of, felt responsibility for, or first-hand experience with, military service members. The results of a Pew survey show that while 83% of all American adults recognize that military personnel and their families have had to sacrifice greatly since September 11, 2001, 70% of them consider those sacrifices not their burden, but rather part and parcel of being in the military. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that soldiers see themselves as solo agents of destruction and feel individually responsible for the guilt born of the hazardous moral situations they encountered in Iraq and Afghanistan. Karl Eikenberry, who was Commander of the Combined Forces Command in Afghanistan and then U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, rightly observed that «the greatest challenge to our military is not from a foreign enemy – it’s the widening gap between the American people and their armed forces».

A set of popular cultural images of veterans have stepped into the vacuum left by the absence of authentic knowledge about veterans and engagement in the process of their social reintegration. These images fall into three categories: 1) the traumatized veteran, 2) the heroic veteran, and 3) the hybrid «broken hero», which Army veteran Chris Marvin describes as the veteran «who once did incredible things but is now forever damaged and in need of help».

A scene from a short story written by Phil Klay demonstrates how these images can combine in the minds of civilians. In the story, a marine who had spent his deployment to Iraq behind a desk returns to New York City, where he meets a college student. When he learns that the young woman assumes

36 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
he is suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, he muses, »I don't have PTSD, but I guess her thinking that I did is part of the weird pedestal vets are on now«.\(^\text{40}\) Such illusions conceal from view what David Wood has described as the dark truth of war we are all complicit in keeping. We know, though we rarely acknowledge it, that war imposes terrible costs on human beings and that, while some are strengthened by the experience, other buckle. We understand at some level why combat veterans shrink from sharing their stories: we don't want to know them.\(^\text{41}\)

In discussing contemporary attitudes, psychiatrist Jonathan Shay emphasizes the societal ambivalence with which veterans are regarded. Shay writes that when we »are terrified and enraged by an enemy attack«, we value the soldier’s fighting qualities.\(^\text{42}\) »In fear of the enemy, nothing is too much or too good for the ›greathearted spirit‹ (thumos) of our fighting men;« when the enemy no longer scares us, and the soldiers come home as veterans, »we see their needs as greedy, demanding, uncultivated belly (gastēr)«.\(^\text{43}\)

Psychoanalyst Martha Bragin has further pinpointed the origins of societal ambivalence towards returning veterans. She understands this ambivalence as an indication of widespread resistance among civilians to acknowledging their own aggressive potential. Bragin writes,

\begin{quote}
Combat veterans are different from other people. The violent fantasies that psychoanalysts believe all people may have dreamed about, played at as children, seen in movies or played out in video games have been enacted before their eyes. [...] They have been protagonists as victims, observers, and perpetrators. [...] Combat veterans are the same as other people. The violent acts they have participated in are the same ones that other people dream about, play at as children, or are entertained by in movies or video games.\(^\text{44}\)
\end{quote}

Bragin understands the difference, then, between veterans and civilians as one of actualization: The aggressive deeds of soldiers are enactments of fantasies, be they conscious or unconscious, that all people have. War guilt becomes an insurmountable challenge for veterans when they cannot take for granted that their fellow community members recognize themselves in them. As Gray says about nations and individuals,

\begin{quote}
Nothing corrupts a soul more surely and more subtly than the consciousness of others who fear and hate us [...] the awareness that others tremble or grow enraged
\end{quote}


\(^{\text{41}}\) Wood (note 10), p. 11.


\(^{\text{43}}\) Ibid.

at the sight of us poisons the mind and makes us, individuals or nations, in the end into aggressive pariahs, distrustful, capricious and empty.\(^ {45} \)

V. Coming Home

In a case study about an Angolan child soldier named Pedrito, Bragin provides an account of the young soldier’s return to his community that demonstrates how vital it is for the well-being of soldiers that they and their social environments be mutually engaged in the process of their reintegration. When Pedrito came back into his community, he was suffering from nightmares, fits of anger and tears, and severe headaches. Using traditional healing techniques based on medical knowledge preserved from the years before colonial invasion, the community intervened and took part in a ritual, led by two healers, to reintegrate the soldier. A part of the ritual involved the skinning of a goat, which one of the healers performed, afterward wrapping Pedrito in the hide, with the blood of the goal retained within. As Pedrito sat mantled in the skin, members of the community cooked and ate the goat, just as they subsequently ate a stew that Pedrito later prepared from a chicken whose blood had been rubbed into his scalp. Analyzing the significance of blood in these rituals, Bragin writes,

> The young killer wrapped in the animals’ blood and skin and getting warmth from them, is publicly acknowledged as bloodied and bloodying, at the same time that his healing becomes the source of food for the community. This symbolizes acceptance that a person who has killed may be one who brings good things as well, and that both of these capacities exist in all of us.\(^ {46} \)

Through these rituals, the soldier is »not asked to leave his experiences behind him; rather he is asked to wrap himself in them and to serve food for those who survived«.\(^ {47} \)

The bathing of the veteran in blood is an act that symbolizes how taking part in wartime killing is not at odds with becoming a productive member of one’s civilian community. Performance of the ritual also forged identifications between the veteran and the community, thereby serving to express, and redress, the community’s own need for »expiation and forgiveness« for the violence perpetrated in its name.\(^ {48} \) Lastly the ritual was successful because, as a shared cultural practice, it acknowledged, and embodied, society’s necessary role in the healing of veterans after war.

\(^ {45} \) Gray (note 18), p. 229.


\(^ {47} \) Ibid., p. 11f.

\(^ {48} \) Ibid., p. 15.
While it would not be possible to replicate these culturally-specific Angolan practices within a U.S. context, my brief discussion of them was intended to underscore the importance of the community’s involvement in the process of reintegrating its veterans into society. In the U.S., increased societal engagement could be achieved by holding gatherings that revolve around the sharing of veterans’ narratives.\textsuperscript{49} Junger also advocates for such an approach, suggesting that Veterans Day could become an occasion when veterans speak about their experiences and their communities listen:

The bland phrase ‘I support the troops’ would then mean actually showing up at your town hall every Veterans Day to hear these people out. Some vets will be angry, some will be proud, and some will be crying so hard they can’t speak. But a community ceremony like that would finally return the experience of war to our entire nation, rather than just leaving it to the people who fought.\textsuperscript{50}

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\textsuperscript{49} One of a number of US programs designed to build bridges between veterans and their communities is the University of California’s Veterans Summer Writing Workshop, of which I am founding director (https://www.ihc.ucsb.edu/public-humanities/uc-vww/). The Workshop instructs University of California student veterans in effective narrative practices and provides opportunities for them to share their writings with the public, through live presentations and online in the journal \textit{Instant Separation} (https://www.instantseparation.org/).

\textsuperscript{50} Junger (note 26), p. 123.