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TOMGRAM

Kelly Denton-Borhaug, Why Are So Many of Our Military Brothers and Sisters Taking Their Own Lives?

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In what seems like another life, I used to interview American veterans of the Vietnam War. Over the course of a decade, I spoke with hundreds of them, mostly about one topic: war crimes. Some were unrepentant. An interrogator who had tortured prisoners, for instance, told me that such actions — beatings, waterboarding, electric shock — were standard operating procedure in his unit and that, faced with the same situation again, he would do exactly the same thing. Others were ambivalent. But many were wracked with deep regret.

During one marathon phone call, a veteran with a big, bold laugh regaled me with innocuous war stories before I directed him back to the subject at hand. I had good reason to believe he had seen, maybe even taken part in, a massacre. When I asked about it, he suddenly fell silent. The seconds ticked away, but I let the silence linger... and linger... and linger... until he finally broke it. He couldn't recall the massacre but didn't doubt it happened. (It wasn't the first time I'd heard such a response.)

He remembered so many stories from the war but, he explained, when it came to the darkest corner of the conflict, all his memories had gone missing in action —

except for one.

He told me that story in a drawn-out, meandering way, but basically, his unit was burning down a village, which was something it did as a matter of course. In this particular “ville,” however, a woman ran up to him, enraged, shouting, blocking his path. She was no doubt complaining about the group of American teenagers destroying her home and all her worldly possessions. She grabbed his arm, chattering excitedly, until he pushed her off. She came back again, only to be met with another, harder shove. She kept at it and so did he. Finally, he turned away to break free, but only for a second. When he whirled back around, he slammed the butt of his automatic rifle into the bridge of her nose. It was an explosion of blood, he told me, followed by shrieks and sobs. He then spun on his heel and walked away laughing.

That veteran knew he had seen, and probably done, far, far worse, but the most terrible parts of the war had somehow been distilled into this single vile memory. At the time, he confessed, the Vietnamese woman’s suffering was meaningless to him. Decades later, however, he found himself reliving it every single day. Like a movie in his mind, he watched her nose shatter, the spray of blood, the screams. And each time he asked himself: How could I have done that? How could I have walked away laughing? I suggested that he was 19 years old, poorly trained, scared, and immersed in a culture of violence, but nothing I said satisfied him. Though he replayed that incident every day, that veteran was clearly never going to solve the riddle of how he could have done it, just as he was never going to forget that woman, what he did to her.

Soldiers have been grappling with the terrible things they’ve done since at least the dawn of Western civilization, and no doubt much earlier than that. In certain cases, they mete out bodily injury to others and contract **moral injury** in the process — a continuum of pain that, for some like that Vietnam veteran, can last decades, if not a lifetime. Others can’t bear to let the anguish fester and seek a more immediate remedy. Today, Kelly Denton-Borhaug, a professor of global religions at Moravian University and the author of ***And Then Your Soul is***

Gone: Moral Injury and U.S. War-Culture, examines the concept of moral injury; why so many veterans of America's twenty-first-century forever wars have suffered from it; and why, for some, suicide has been the only solution. *Nick Turse*

Moral Injury and the Forever Wars

What Americans Don't Want to Hear

BY [KELLY DENTON-BORHAUG](#)

This summer, it seemed as if we Americans couldn't wait to return to our traditional July 4th festivities. Haven't we all been looking for *something* to celebrate? The church chimes in my community rang out battle hymns for about a week. The utility poles in my neighborhood were covered with "Hometown Hero" banners hanging proudly, sporting the smiling faces of uniformed local veterans from our wars. Fireworks went off for days, sparklers and cherry bombs and full-scale light shows filling the night sky.

But all the flag-waving, the homespun parades, the picnics and military bands, the flowery speeches and self-congratulatory messages can't dispel a reality, a truth that's right under our noses: all is not well with our military brothers and sisters. The starkest indicator of that is the rising number of them who are taking their own lives. A [new report](#) by Brown University's Costs of War Project calculates that, in the post-9/11 era so far, four times as many veterans and active-duty military have committed suicide as died in war operations.

While July 4th remembrances across the country focused on the symbols and institutions of war and militarization, most of the celebrants seemed far less interested in hearing from current and former military personnel. After all, less than 1% of Americans have been burdened with waging Washington's wars in these years, even as we taxpayers have funded an [ever-more enormous](#) military infrastructure.

As for me, though, I've been seeking out as many of those voices as I could for a long, long time. And here's what I've learned: the truths so many of them tell sharply conflict with the remarkably light-hearted and unthinking celebrations of war we experienced this July and so many Julys before it. I keep wondering why so few of us are focusing on one urgent question: Why are so many of our military brothers and sisters taking their

own lives?

The Moral Injuries of War

The term *moral injury* is now used in military and healthcare settings to identify a deep existential pain destroying the lives of too many active-duty personnel and vets. In these years of forever wars, when the moral consciences of such individuals collided with the brutally harsh realities of militarization and killing, the result has been a sharp, sometimes death-dealing dissonance. Think of moral injury as an invisible wound of war. It represents at least part of the explanation for that high suicide rate. And it's implicated in more than just those damning suicides: an additional 500,000 troops in the post-9/11 era have been diagnosed with debilitating, not fully understood symptoms that make their lives remarkably unlivable.

I first heard the term moral injury about 10 years ago at a conference at Riverside Church in New York City, where [Jonathan Shay](#), the renowned military psychologist, spoke about it. For decades he had provided psychological care for veterans of the Vietnam War who were struggling with unremitting resentment, guilt, and shame in their post-deployment lives. They just couldn't get on with those very lives after their military experiences. They had, it seemed, lost trust in themselves and anyone else.

Still, Shay found that none of the typical mental-health diagnoses seemed to fit their symptoms. This wasn't post-traumatic stress disorder — a hyper-vigilance, anxiety, and set of fears arising from traumatic experience. No, what came to be known as moral injury seemed to result from a sense that the very center of one's being had been assaulted. If war's intent is to inflict physical injury and destruction, and if the trauma of war afflicts people's emotional and psychic well-being, moral injury describes an invisible wound that burns away at a person's very soul. The Iraq War veteran and writer [Kevin Powers](#) describes it as “acid seeping down into your soul, and then your soul is gone.”

A central feature of moral injury is a sense of having betrayed one's own deepest moral commitments, as well as of being betrayed morally by others. People who are suffering from moral injury feel there's nothing left in their world to trust, including themselves. For them, any notion of “[a shared moral covenant](#)” has been shattered. But how does

anyone live in a world without moral guideposts, even flawed ones? The world of modern war, it seems, not only destroys the foundations of life for its targets and victims, but also for its perpetrators.

Difficult Truths from Those on the Front Lines of Our Wars

For civilians like me, there's no way to understand moral injury without listening to those afflicted with it. I've been doing so to try to make sense of our culture of war for years now. As a religious studies scholar, I've been especially concerned about the ways in which so many of us give American-style war a sacred quality. Think, for instance, about [the meme](#) that circulates during national holidays like the recent July 4th, or Veterans Day, or Memorial Day: "Remember that only two forces ever agreed to die for you: Jesus Christ and the American soldier. One died for your freedom, the other for your soul; pass it on!"

How, I wonder, do such messages further shame and silence those already struggling with moral injury whose experiences have led them to see war as anything but sacred?

It's been years since I first heard Andy, a veteran of the Iraq War, testify in the most personal way about moral injury at a Philadelphia church. He's part of a family with a long military history. His father and grandfather both served in this country's wars before, at 17, he enlisted in the Air Force in 1999. He came to work in military intelligence and would eventually be deployed to Iraq.

But all was most definitely not well with Andy when, after 11 years in the Air Force, he returned to civilian life. He found himself struggling in his relationships, unable to function, a mess, and eventually suicidal. He bounced from one mental healthcare provider to the next for eight years without experiencing the slightest sense of relief. On the verge of ending his life, he was referred to a new "[Moral Injury Group](#)" led by chaplain Chris Antal and psychologist Peter Yeomans at the Crescenz VA Hospital in Philadelphia. At that moment, Andy decided this would be his last effort before calling it quits and ending his life. Frankly, given what I now know, I'm amazed that he was willing to take that one last chance after so many years of suffering, struggle, and pain to so little purpose.

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Kelly Denton-Borhaug

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The professionals who lead that particular group are remarkably blunt about what they call “the work avoidance” of most citizens — the way that the majority of us fail to take any responsibility for the consequences of the endless wars we’ve been fighting in this century. People, they’ve told me, regularly deflect responsibility by adopting any of three approaches to veterans: by *valorizing* them (think of the simplistic “[thank you](#) for your service/sacrifice” or the implicit message of those “hometown heroes” banners); by *pathologizing* them (seeing vets as mentally ill and irreparably broken); or by *demonizing* them (think of the Vietnam-era “baby-killers” moniker). Each of these approaches essentially represses what those veterans could actually tell us about their experiences

and our wars.

So, the leaders of the Crescenz VA Moral Injury Group developed an unorthodox approach. They assured Andy that he had an important story to tell, one the nation needed to hear so that civilians could finally “bear the brunt of the burden” of sending him to war. Eight years after leaving the military and a few weeks into that program, he finally revealed for the first time to those caregivers and vets, the event at the root of his own loss of soul. While deployed in Iraq, he had participated in calling in an airstrike that ended up killing 36 Iraqi men, women, and children.

I’ll never forget watching Andy testify about that very moment in the Philadelphia church on Veterans Day before an audience that had expressly indicated its willingness to listen. With palpable anguish, he told how, after the airstrike, his orders were to enter the bombed structure. He was supposed to sift through the bodies to find the supposed target of the strike. Instead, he came upon the lifeless bodies of, as he called them, “proud Iraqis,” including a little girl with a singed Minnie Mouse doll. Those sights and the smell of death were, he told us, “etched on the back of his eyelids forever.” This was the “shame” he carried with him always, an “unholy perpetration,” as he described it.

The day of that attack, he said, he felt his soul leave his body. Over years of listening to veterans’ stories, I realize that I’ve heard similar descriptions again and again. It may seem

extreme to speak about one's very soul being eviscerated, but it shouldn't be treated as an exaggeration. After all, how can we even imagine what the deaths of so many men, women, and children may have meant for the Iraqi families and communities whose loved ones perished that day?

Andy's story clarifies a reality Americans badly need to grasp: the destruction of war goes far beyond its intended targets. In the end, its violence is impossible to control. It doesn't stay in those distant lands where this country has been fighting for so many fruitless years. Andy is the proof of that. His "loss of soul" almost had the direst of consequences, as his own suicidal impulses began to take over. Of that moment and his seemingly eternal imprisonment in the hell of war, he said: "I relive this alone, the steel cylinder heavy with the .38, knowing that to drive one into my own face will free me from this prison, these sights and smells."

Taking Moral Injury Seriously Goes Against the Grain of American War Culture

Valorizing, pathologizing, and demonizing vets are all ways of refusing to listen to the actual experiences of those who carry out our wars. And for them, returning home often just adds to their difficulties, since so much of what they might say goes against the grain of national culture.

We're generally brought up to see ourselves as a nation whose military gets the job done, despite the "forever wars" of the last nearly 20 years. Through national rituals, holidays, and institutions, hot embers of intense pride are regularly stoked, highlighting our military as the fiercest and strongest in the world. Many of us identify what it means to be a citizen with belonging to the most feared and powerful armed forces on the planet. As a result, people easily believe that, when the U.S. goes to war, what we're doing is, almost by definition, moral.

But those who dare to pay attention to the morally injured will find them offering inconvenient and uncomfortable truths that sharply conflict with exactly those assumptions. Recently, I listened to another group of military veterans and combat correspondents who gathered their courage to tell their stories publicly in a unique fashion for [The Moral Injuries of War](#) project. Here are just three small examples:

* “The military just teaches you don’t ask questions, and if you figure it out, it really isn’t your business anyway. That part, that probably is the biggest thing, having to do things you wonder about, but you can’t ask a question.”

* “The cynical part of me wants the public to understand that it’s your fault; we are all complicit in all of this horror. I don’t need other people to experience my pain, I need other people to understand that they are complicit in my pain.”

* “People want to say thank you for your service, wave a flag, but you’re left with these experiences that leave you feeling deeply shameful. I burned through any relationship in my life with anybody who loved me. I have this feeling in my gut that something really bad is going to happen. God’s shoe was going to fall on me, I can’t breathe.”

I remember how struck I was at the Veterans Day gathering in that Philadelphia church where I first heard Andy speak, because it was so unlike most such celebrations and commemorations. Instead of laying wreaths or planting crosses in the ground; instead of speeches extolling vets as “[the spine of the nation](#)” and praising them for their “ultimate sacrifice,” we did something different. We listened to them tell us about the soul-destroying nature of what actually happened to them during their military service (and what’s happened to them ever since). And in addition to civilians like me, other vets were in those church pews listening, too.

After the testimonies, the VA chaplain leading the ceremony asked us all to come to the front of the church. There, he directed the vets to form a circle facing outwards. Then, he asked the civilians to form a circle around them and face them directly. What happened next challenged and moved me. The chaplain suggested we simply stand in silence for a minute, looking into each other’s eyes. You can’t imagine how slowly that minute passed. More than a few of us had tears running down our cheeks. It was as if we were all holding a painful, sharp, unforgiving reality — but doing it together.

Moral injury is a flashpoint that reveals important truths about our wars and the war-culture that goes with it. If focused on, instead of ignored, it raises uncomfortable questions. In the United States, military service often is described as the epitome of citizenship. Leaders and everyday folks alike claim to value veterans as our most highly

esteemed citizens.

I wonder, though, if this isn't just another way of avoiding a real acknowledgment of the disaster of this country's twenty-first-century wars. Closing our ears to the veterans who have been on their front lines means ignoring the truths of those wars as well.

If this nation truly esteemed them, wouldn't we do more to avoid placing them in just the kind of circumstances Andy faced? Wouldn't our leaders work harder to find other ways of dealing with whatever dangers we confront? Wouldn't everyday citizens raise more questions about the pervasive "innocent" celebrations of violence on national holidays that only sacralize war-culture as a crucial aspect of what it means to be an American citizen?

For Andy, that Moral Injury Group at the Crescenz VA was the place where his "screaming soul" could be heard. Instead of being "imprisoned by guilt," he described how he began to feel "empowered" by it to tell the truth about our wars to the rest of us. He hopes that the nation will somehow learn to "bear its brunt of the burden" of those wars and the all-American war-culture that accompanies them in a way that truly matters — a new version of reality that would start with finally listening.

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