

“Active Waiting”

Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

On this Memorial Day weekend I was thinking about a young man who I have grieved for many times. When I was in Waterloo I knew his wife pretty well, and I knew his grandfather-in-law extremely well. We prayed for him when he was in Iraq and Afghanistan, and we were thrilled when he came home. But after he returned he wasn't the same young man who left - no matter what we did or anyone did. He just was never going to be the same. About a year or so later, he committed suicide.

So I was trying to come to terms with what does that mean for Memorial Day. I have come to realize that Memorial Day is a day in which we recognize those people who have given the ultimate sacrifice for their country: dying for their country. There are a large number, tens of thousands of soldiers who have given the ultimate sacrifice; they just gave it slowly in their death after they returned. They left their lives in battle fields in Afghanistan and Iraq, Viet Nam, Korea and there are still a few left that gave it in Japan or Germany in World War II. We want them to be just fine; to pretend none of this ever happened; to get back to work. Produce. Sometimes you can't. Because what you saw, and in some cases what you did, is not something that you can come to terms with. And it is going to take a great bit of care to guide people back to wholeness and life, after so much of their minds and their joy has been taken from them.

As I was pondering all of this, this past week, I found a story that spoke to me and helped me understand what happened to this young man that I knew for so long, and how can we be of help. It was written by a war hero, Lance Corporal Michael Fay.

He said, “In April of 2004, I was in Baghdad anxiously waiting by a truck that my team leader had stopped us by, so he could take a look at an ordinance that their robot had said was relatively safe. But, you don't always trust the robots. You go and you make sure that it won't blow up when you are on top of it. While we were waiting and they were off in the distance, it wasn't unusual for kids to run up and beg for candy.”

This particular day, Michael didn't have candy, but he did have water, and he said, “It is relatively early in the day, and they have the water bottles in the freezer all night.” And, he said, “They are probably still cold.” So he pulled a bunch of them [water bottles] out of the Hummer and brought them over to the kids, to hand them to them.

The first boy up was no more than 8 years old, and he stubbornly said, “No, I want candy.”

In that moment, Lance Corporal Michael Fay, lost it. “I'm here protecting you. I'm here out of the goodness of my heart giving you water and it is never good enough. Nothing is good enough,” and, in a rage, he twisted that bottle cap off the first water and dumped some of it out. He threw it at the boy.

All of a sudden this elderly man ran over, probably his [the boy's] grandfather, grabbed that 8-year-old boy and looked at Michael Fay. But, it wasn't a look of outrage or even of

sadness. It was fear. In that moment it hit him [Michael] what he had done. “Wait a minute, you shouldn’t be fearing me. I’m here to help you.”

But what he had done, he couldn’t undo. He carried with him the guilt of treating that young boy so shamefully. He carried it with him through two tours of duty and he couldn’t shake it. He could pretend. He tried to forget. He tried to fantasize that it hadn’t happened, blocking it away in his mind.

Michael Fay continued by saying, “I first encountered the term ‘moral injury.’ I want you to remember that phrase: ‘moral injury.’” He said, “I learned it when I got back from the war. I decided I needed to go - after a period of struggle - to seminary to be a minister.”

He went to Bright Divinity School and it was there he heard the term that fit him - moral injury. He learned it from authors Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini. They coined the phrase “moral injury,” and they defined it as having transgressed one’s basic moral identity, and violated the core moral beliefs that you hold. Moral injury destroys meaning and forsakes noble causes.

Fay had done that when he threw that bottle at that child. His moral values are to care for all human beings - especially children. In that moment he injured, not the child; the child went away saying, “Oh, those dumb Americans,” and kept on going, and never thought about it again. But he injured himself. And worse than a scar that will heal, or a bone broken that will get better, moral injuries don’t heal nearly as easy. They hang and corrode the soul - and that is what he found.

He felt so lifted up that there was finally hope, because he could name what he had struggled with. He found it again in a clinical psychiatrist by the name of Jonathan Shay, who works with veterans in trauma clinics around the country. Fay found in an article that Dr. Shay had written in the *Clinical Psychology Review*, this term “moral injury” again. He defined it as “Perpetrating. Failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations.”

When we do something that goes against our moral integrity we are bruised, and if that moral injury that we self-inflicted, is really bad, we are not just bruised - we are broken. And, while doctors do a great job of healing physical wounds, they don’t do nearly as well with emotional wounds.

We in the ministry – chaplains – have done an even less than an official job of dealing with spiritual wounds. We have a lot of our people sitting in the pews who have served our country well, but they sit there with a moral injury that they do not want to share, because of their guilt, and we haven’t found a way to let them share it. Either we will be critical of them or we will pooh, pooh them and say, “It’s ok. It’s ok,” because we don’t want to hear it. We don’t give them a chance to share it, because it’s not ok, or they wouldn’t feel this way. They wouldn’t be broken. It is so important that we get ahead of it.

Fay continues by remembering his past, where he saw detainees in the hot sun, bound - without water, outside - wondering how long the torture of that heat stroke would continue and how many would die. He remembers seeing men – hooded – dragged from their homes in the dark, wondering how many were killed. He remembered one night when he saw a

civilian shot dead in the street and the military kept going because they were too busy, understandably. But he was haunted by the fact that the body was lying there when they got there and continued to lay there after they left. It bruised his soul over and over again. He was in the hospital with exposure to chemical weapons when the Abu Ghraib prison scandal broke, and, while he had nothing to do with it, it still bruised him, because it was his people and we should be better than that.

Corporal Fay said, “In my case, the moral self I thought I had been cultivating my whole life went missing in that moment, when I saw fear in the eyes of that young boy’s grandfather, and I could never get it back. Nothing I did to push it away could keep me from seeing that face over and over again.

He said, “Before the war I thought of myself as a good person, a capable person - that I could choose goodness. But I recognize now that I’m not good. That I can never truly be good the way I once imagined. Yet, I know I can heal from such recognition, now that I know that I have a moral injury, because once I can name the injury I can fix it. In the same way if someone has internal bleeding, and they don’t know it, they will die. But once they know they have that injury they know how to deal with it – and fix it.”

Fay said, “Once I had that moral injury, I started seeking it out.” Before he knew he had the moral injury, he had cut himself, tried to die, and was in the hospital. But afterward he said, “No. If I have an injury, there must be a way to fix it, and it must be through the power of the Holy Spirit. Moral injuries can only be healed by the love of the living God.”

He said veterans cannot “un-happen” events. Don’t “pooh, pooh” them. They are real. Let them [veterans] talk them out. The rest of us must listen and not judge, but also not condemn. They [veterans] can only do it [survive moral injury] when they have shared out loud. It may be a small group of people who have done similar issues or been in similar places, or maybe in a church group where they feel safe - but each veteran needs to articulate the void and the moral injury, so they won’t continue to be dead - the walking dead - after they have returned home.

Fay said, “In the Church that I want to serve, I want to provide pathways for hope, through individual and collective guilt.” He said, “I began to realize it isn’t just the veterans’ issue. Many of us sitting in the pews have betrayed our own morality, at one moment or another in time. We have not been our best selves, we have injured ourselves morally.”

We need to name it. We need to go and get help, because if we don’t we will never be whole. We have internal injuries, you and I, but they can be healed - not by denying it or ignoring it - but by acknowledging it to yourself and to God and, if you need, someone else - then go to someone else to hear you out that you trust and who has the courage and the bravery to listen, without judgment, but also with determination to hear the whole thing - all the good and all of the bad and everything in between. Then you will begin to heal, not overnight. Just like an internal injury, it will take some time, but you will heal and you will get whole again.

On this Memorial Day weekend, we pray for the soldiers who lost their lives. We pray for those who are healing from their moral scars. We pray that the soldiers will come home and that they will not lose their lives, whether overseas or in our own neighborhoods. That we

as a church, can find ways of giving them the chance to talk, so they can have the chance to heal. Do not forget about “moral injuries,” so you can be there for them and for each other, because this isn’t just a “veterans’” issue, it is for every single one of us and we are all in need of restoration and to be made whole. By the power of the Spirit of the living God, through Jesus Christ our Lord, we pray and hold. Amen