"A Broken Soul"

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
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Harold and Betty were married just before he left for basic training and then for war. When he returned, they made up for those long absences of military service by spending much of their time together. However, during the second week of August, Harold and Betty went their separate ways.

While both of them were faithful members of the local United Methodist church, only Betty would spend that warm week in August at the annual Methodist camp meeting. For ten days, the faithful would gather in worship morning and evening. Between and after the services, there would be the fun. For years, Betty was in charge of the highly competitive ping-pong tournament.

But, Harold would pass on the worship and on the fun of the camp meeting with his beloved wife. Instead, he would spend that week with another group to whom he was closely bonded: the veterans with whom he had served. Each year they would come from across the country—some even from Canada—to a different city, a different hotel where they would be together. Spending vacation time and money for the travel, like Harold, many of the veterans never missed a year—at least not until age or death betrayed them, forcing them to stay away.

In their book *Soul Repair: Recovering from the Moral Injury of War,* authors Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini write,

> For so many, the company of other veterans remains a lifelong support system. They offer each other spaces to share what they cannot say to their families or friends, and they find people who understand how to support each other when no one else knows what to do.

For many veterans, the experience of war is not something easily shared or explained to those who have not seen what they have seen, done what they have done. After the intensity of battle, returning to civilian life can be disorienting.

When Harold had returned to Betty after war, he would wake thrashing with horrible dreams. Betty had kept a scrapbook of the war. . . adding articles about the regions where she knew he had been. To this she added the small black and white photographs of horror

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he had taken with a camera he had found abandoned on a battlefield. Even with these pictures, Betty would never really know what Harold had seen.

As a culture, I think we have become more aware of the possible effects of war on veterans. From PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) to increased risks for suicide, if we choose to know, the knowledge of the struggle many veterans face is there to be seen. Brock and Lettini's book point to an effect of war that has been less widely discussed—moral injury. In short, moral injury occurs when a soldier acts in ways counter to their conscience. It is behavior that violates a core sense of self, that cuts into ones soul.

As the book explains, current military training teaches soldiers reflexive shooting. In other words, shoot first and think later. But what happens when later the soldier considers their actions and believes what they did was morally wrong. Yes, they were following their orders and their training. Yes, they were protecting their unit—the friends and people they have grown to trust with their own lives. *And*, they know they have caused suffering upon other human beings. This is moral injury.

As Unitarian Universalists, sometimes we shy aware from language of sin and forgiveness. Sometime such language feels too judgmental, too suffocating. Rather than mold ourselves to an external authority of Right and Wrong, we cultivate skills to hone our own conscience. We may listen to religious tradition, yes, but we may also look to reason and experience, examples of lives we admire or to lessons of science to understand proper human behavior. At our best, we act in accordance with our values and principles.

Until we don't. We all fall short of our ethical ideals. We all fail to perfectly live out our values in every encounter. We wrestle with how to do a bit better. We apologize to those we have harmed and, as possible, try to make amends.

But some values and ethical commitments run deeper than others. Some go to the core of who we are, of what we consider to be a good person or a life worth living. For example, you may hold in your core that a good person would never abuse a child, cruelly dehumanize someone of a different race/gender/sexuality/nationality/religion, or purposelessly take the life of another.

Until you did. This is moral injury. An injury to your core—to that inner sense of deep self that some might call soul. When you've injured this deep part of self, how do you heal? How do you ever feel whole again?

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I like that Brock and Lettini use the language of soul *repair*. To me, this suggests that the end goal may not be to restore things to a pristine condition, but rather to get things back into some kind of working order. To use an old and dated example, a broken radio doesn't need to have all of its original parts . . . it just needs to keep playing music.

Immediately after the war, Harold worked for a time as a local police officer. After some kind of controversy, Harold left the force, eventually landing a good factory job he would hold until retirement decades later. After a time, Harold and Betty chose to adopt one child and then another. They moved into a brick home in a nice neighborhood, joined a bowling league and the burgeoning Methodist church.

Brock and Lettini write, "Often, a job and family are not enough. A sense of life purpose and a need to be of service to others are also important." Harold had the job and the family. He had the camaraderie of annual reunions. But was it enough?

Many of you may have surmised that Harold and Betty are not just 'any' couple—they are my maternal grandparents. I think of my grandfather Harold often on Veteran's Day. He not only attended those annual reunions, he often wore the insignia of his unit on his clothes and he had a vanity license plate made with the unit name. My grandmother Betty died twelve years ago this week and Harold followed her a few years later. As we often do we those who have died, my knowledge and understanding of my grandparents has continued to unfold. I have been to some of the places Harold fought in World War II. As an adult, I have been allowed to see the scrapbook and the horrific photos he brought back from war.

And Brock and Lettini's book taught me something more. Harold served others. From regularly ushering at the church (*a very laudable action I add...hint, hint...)* to painting the parsonage (*I'm ok there for a few more years...),* he was often doing for others. My mom loved when he visited because something in the house often looked or worked better after he had left. I had always thought of Grandpa's actions in terms of his Christianity. But, *Soul Repair* has me wondering. Were all those actions of service a way to also repair his soul?

I will never know. I cannot ask him. But what I do know is that when Harold and Betty wanted to adopt a child, a church leader sent a letter to the adoption agency explaining his controversial leave at the police department. The public news stories at the time suggested that Harold had been a part of a group of corrupt police officers reselling tires that had been confiscated. *Not the good Christian grandpa I had grown up believing I had!* Many years later my mom obtained the adoption file and stumbled upon the letter. Harold, a married but childless man at the time of the police controversy, appeared to have taken the fall for another officer with children. A good, moral man, the letter assured.

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Brock and Lettini suggest that when veterans with moral injury receive commendations and gratitude from others they may feel deeply conflicted emotions. Yes, as a soldier, they may have done their duty . . . but as a person, they may feel morally bankrupt or unworthy of any praise. They may even resent and be angry with us who are civilians in whose name they have fought and yet who do not want to know the actions taken in their name.

Of course, Harold fought in the 'good war'—a war the Allies won and that was widely popular. And yet, still it was war. There was still so much suffering and death. Brock and Lettini continue,

> After seeing and inflicting so much suffering on other human beings, being able to make a positive difference in the world, not just with other veterans but also with the civilian world closes a circle of meaning shattered by war.

I can picture Harold high on a ladder painting the parsonage on a summer day. I see him crouched over scrubbing the hard water stains in the tub at our house. And I wonder, was this his way of moving past the suffering of war? Was this his way of stitching together a meaningful life as he served others, showered kindness and care on others?

To be clear, Harold was no saint. He is also the grandparent whose racism was evident, whose nicknames for others thinly buried criticism in a shell of humor. And, I wonder, were I sitting in that circle of veterans on a hot summer day, would I have learned more about the ways he fell short of his moral code? Did he question his role in the war?

I will never know for certain what was discussed in those veteran's circles—or among the soldiers in the fields of war. But as a citizen in whose name wars continue to be fought, I am left with the more present question of my role in helping veteran's today reconnect with the civilian world. I wonder if First Parish might be a place where a young vet with a partner and a couple kids might find a place to belong, to serve, to heal? I wonder what it might mean to welcome a veteran with a moral injury, whose past actions they and we find reprehensible, and yet still receive them with the universal love we proclaim in our name?

Although Harold and Betty went their separate ways for a week each August, they both went in search of belonging to a larger story that helped to close the circle of meaning. I think we all are in need of this sense of meaning. This need is often what brings us here to this community, to this shared story of being a place and a people where we help care for each other. Especially when our world feels shattered, we need a place and a people where we can be loved and belong. Whether we are the one in need of support or are in a place

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where we can help to carry another, by showing up *we* are part of the larger story that can sustain us all. We are part of the circle of meaning that can help to heal a broken soul.

So may it be. Amen.

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