MORAL INJURY

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Moral Identity and Meaning

"As moral injury takes its place in the common parlance, we need to ask what it provides our consciousness and what it limits, and how we could more fully address the human experience of moral suffering."

--Zachary Moon, Warriors Between Worlds, Forthcoming

Increasing evidence from neuroscience and psychology that human beings are born moral and that moral conscience is part of human empathy, pattern making, and social existence.

Content of moral systems and individual identity have at least five dimensions *(See Seligman, A, R. P. Weller (2012) Rethinking Pluralism: Ritual, Experience, and Ambiguity. Oxford.):*

1. Habits

a. Learned by mimicry, repetition, practice, and coaching. Largely subconscious behavior that determines daily human interactions. Habitual behaviors carry moral content. Embed gender, culture, race, and context.

b. Difficult to change and constitute most moral behavior on a daily basis.

2. Meaning-Orienting Systems

a. Overarching philosophical, mythical, and/or religious-theological value system that defines crucial aspects of relationships and life purpose.

b. Assumed, rather than explicitly discussed unless challenged.

c. Questions of meaning emerge when ambiguous situations arise.

3. Rules

a. Hard moral cultural/social boundaries that cannot be crossed without penalty.

b. In complex, pluralistic society, where informal custom fails, rules are often laws.

c. How rigidly a society or person relates to rules varies greatly and involve what is customary, legal, taboo, and moral.

4. Rituals

a. Deliver meaning system by enacting important values in symbolic ways or via stories so that they are part of body-memory as well as conscious memory.

b. Teach meaning and values through repeated behavior that includes stories or other forms of delivering meaning.

c. Often bodily re-enactment of a ritual can evoke the emotions of the meaning system.

d. Provide opportunities to enact aspirational aspects of meaning—performing ideal self v. real self.

e. Used to integrate ambiguity or threats to meaning via story, myth, and connection to ideal self.

5. Experience

a. Can reinforce or challenge all of the above.

b. Trauma=Experience of Suffering: (Keefe-Perry, L. C. & Moon, Z. (2018)
   • Hard to assimilate into normal life;
   • Overwhelms beliefs, values, behaviors, and/or relationships;
   • Can be an event, a harmful social structure, or life circumstance (poverty, gender oppression, incarceration);
   • Requires new, functional coping strategies that facilitate survival and meaningful relationships.

c. Devastating, traumatic experiences can destabilize meaning and identity at any point in life—this is moral injury.

d. Coherence can only be reestablished in the struggle to create a new meaning system and identity adequate to integrating trauma.

Moral Injury

Some Moral Emotions

- Guilt
- Shame
- Embarrassment
- Alienation
- Sorrow
- Remorse
- Outrage/Anger
- Disgust
- Contempt
- Revenge

Shay definition: Moral Injury is 1) the violation of what is right by 2) someone in authority 3) in a high stakes situation. This kind of moral injury correlates to betrayal and rage and to higher rates of co-morbidity with PTSD (Jordan, 2017).

Litz, et. al., definition: Moral Injury' is a syndrome of shame, self-handicapping, anger, and demoralization that occurs when deeply held beliefs and expectations about moral and ethical conduct are transgressed. It is distinct from a life threat as it is also not inherently fear-based; it can arise from killing, perpetration of violence, betrayals of trust in leaders, witnessing depraved behavior, or failing to prevent serious unethical acts.
-- Litz, B. T., et al. Adaptive Disclosure, 2016): p. 21, paraphrased.

Brock Definition: Moral injury is a response to trauma when a person or group's existing core moral foundations are unable to justify, process, and integrate trauma into a reliable identity and meaning system that sustains relationships and human flourishing. It results from:

A. Being betrayed by people and/ or institutions that should have been trusted to be moral and do the right thing;

B. Committing, witnessing, imagining, or failing to prevent acts or events that can be judged as harmful or evil and that violate foundational social and ethical rules;

C. Being involved in events or contexts where violations of taboos or acts of harm leave one feeling contaminated by evil or "dirty;" or

D. Surviving conditions of degradation, oppression, and extremity.

Moral feelings include guilt, shame, despair, remorse, outrage, grief, disgust, and self-condemnation result in suffering found in broken trust, alienation, a sense of betrayal, and social withdrawal.

Grief as a Dimension of Moral Injury

- Loss of closest friends;
- Loss of innocence or sense of goodness
- Loss of profession
- Loss of mission
- Loss of role / purpose for others
- Loss of family or capacity for intimacy– conflict / divorce
- Loss of faith and meaning community
- Loss of self—forever changed
- Living with broken heart

Relation of PTSD to Moral Injury
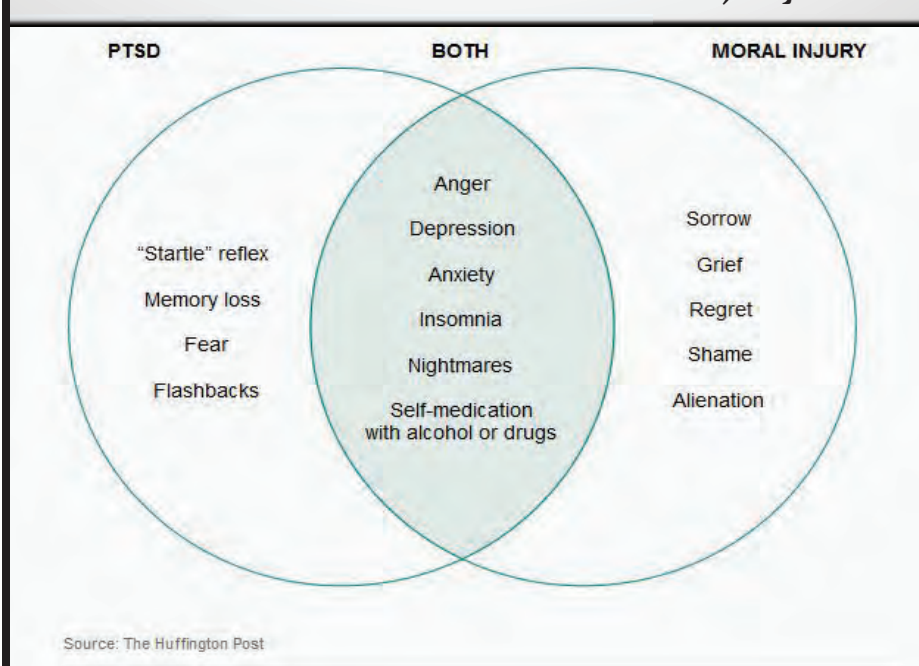
The above diagram created by William Nash, M.D., USN ret., Greater Los Angeles VA

Aspects of Moral Injury
- Close correlation of betrayal, in particular, with PTSD. (Jordan, 2017)
- Can emerge long after events or experiences or immediately after an event.
- Is found in every war or extremity.
- Can also result from traumas such as natural disasters, sexual assault, and oppressive contexts such as poverty etc.
- Creates mistrust and isolation.
- Alienation hard to overcome.
- Can be found in many professions and circumstances outside the military.

The above diagram created by William Nash, M.D., USN ret., Greater Los Angeles VA

RISK FOR MORAL INJURY AND BURN OUT

	Social Worker	Activist Leader	Nurse	Minister	Mother of Newborn	Therapist	Teacher	Lawyer
Life and Death Consequences	Y	Y	Y	?	Y	Y	Y	Y
Physically Dependent Charges	Y		Y	?	Y			
Ethical Dilemmas	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Emotionally Charged Participants	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Expected Perfection	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y			
Limited Choices	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y
High Risk for Liablility	Y		Y		Y	Y		
Isolated Working Conditions					Y	Y		
Responsibility with Little Control	Y	Y	Y	?	Y		Y	

Y=Yes, ?=Maybe.   Chart provided by Dr. Joanne Braxton, used with permission

Recovery

Moral injury is not a psychological disorder, but a normal human response to extremity and the disruptive impact of violence, oppressive contexts, and moral failure. Authoritarian systems with a lot of coercive control are especially morally injurious.

Individual Recovery

- **MEMORY PROCESSING:** Writing/drawing/enacting personal narratives. Need ways to externalize inner struggle and express story many times. As they are retold, the older layers of the self and new perspectives can emerge in the retellings.

- **HOLISTIC HEALTH PRACTICES:** Sleep hygiene, mindful eating, and time outdoors.

- **TRUSTWORTHY, BENEVOLENT CONVERSATION PARTNERS:** Talking to benevolent moral authority to process moral and theological struggles.

- **SITTING IN THE FIRE:** Processing trauma pain so it no longer dominates behavior and controls a life narrative.

- **INTEGRATION OF TRAUMA:** Integrating memory/story into a larger life narrative— as memory is processed over time, it will change as new experiences accumulate.

- **RESTORATION OF EMPATHY:** Re-humanization of Enemies, lessen need to hate or fear, perspective-taking, compassion for self.

- **INTIMATE, CARING RELATIONSHIPS:** Reconnection with estranged others, especially family.

- **COMMUNITY:** Long-term community to sustain meaning-orienting system and a provide ways to serve others.

- **ACCEPTANCE:** Compassion for self and others, forgiveness, love of beauty and life, or submission to a meaning-orienting system adequate to the magnitude of suffering experienced.

Collective Strategies and Communities

Rituals

- **LAMENTATION:** to process grief for various kinds of losses.

- **LIMINAL SPACES:** (sequester outside ordinary time and space— "eternal now") to transition from military life and identity to civilian community that understands and cares (ex. Navajo Enemy Way Ceremonial, or ancient Christian penance system). This process places an individual story within the context of a larger one to restore meaning and belonging with support from the entire community.

- **USE OF ARTS:** such as music, dance, theater, writing groups, visual art, to integrate all three brain areas and process experience, to restore capacities for joy and love of beauty.

- **SPIRITUAL PRACTICES:** that calm stress, enable exploration of inner feelings and emotional intelligence, offer ways to experience trauma pain to burn through it (sitting in the fire), and create inner equilibrium.

- **ENACT ASPIRATIONAL VALUES:** the re-humanization of enemies and values that restore collective connections to life.

- **PUBLIC RECOGNITION:** commissioning for service work, other symbols of belonging to a larger mission and meaning system. Ways to validate that an individual life matters to others.

Community Acts:

- WELCOME: Prepare a welcoming context by

- Offering ministries of presence through open-hearted acceptance and opportunities to serve others
- Practicing deep listening (see details below)
- Attending to ways to create safe gathering spaces for those struggling with post-traumatic stress symptoms and moral injury
- **SUPPORT:** Peer Specialists to Mentor and Facilitate Groups (Many people can have moral injury, especially those who work under emergency life or death conditions—medical care givers, EMTs, law enforcement officers, prison guards, gang members, people in natural disasters, etc.).
- **FOCUS ATTENTION:** Use spiritual practices that create inner emotional/bodily awareness.
- **CREATIVITY:** Think creatively about how people can be lifted in spirit:
  - Singing groups
  - Ministry through animals (equine therapy, service dogs, and pets)

- Festivals that help restore playfulness, relaxation
- Theater or dance
- Outdoor Activities
- Prayer/meditation groups
- **GROUPS:** Organize groups that facilitate telling personal stories (stories need to be told multiple times for a person to process their trauma story)
- Book groups
- Writing groups using writing prompts to create poetry or personal stories
- Art creation groups, visual, kinesthetic, musical, literary, etc.
- **HOLISTIC HEALTH PRACTICES:** Develop ritual practice groups to learn and sustain embodied calming processes, reflection, spiritual disciplines
  - Meditation
  - Tai Chi
  - Contemplative Prayer
  - Yoga
  - Labyrinth Walking

Deep Listening

Deep listening is based on empathy and respect.

1. Small groups: http://www. spiritualityandpractice.com/ practices/features.php?id=15570

In The Sacred Art of Listening, Kay Lindahl writes:
There's something beyond technique when two or more people are deeply listening to each other. It is an awareness that not only are we present to each other, we are present to something that is spiritual, holy, and sacred.

Such "deep listening" goes against the cultural grain. Lindahl cites research studies by the International Listening Association: we spend about 45 percent of our time listening, but we are distracted, preoccupied, or forgetful about 75 percent of that time. The average attention span for adults is about 22 seconds. Immediately after listening to someone talk, we usually recall only about half of what we've heard; within a few hours, only about 20 percent. (This is probably worse now because of technology devices and their distractions.)

Here are some approaches to deep listening.

l. Start with a ritual. At the beginning, light a candle or sound a gong, for ex., to signify that this is a time for focused attention. The ritual marks the space as special and heightens the feeling of intimacy during a conversation.

2. Listen for understanding, not judgment or evaluation. Give your full attention to the speaker. This is easier to do when you are not distracted by planning what you want to say, your opinion, or how you should to respond. Knowing there will be no questions and asking people to sit in silence after someone speaks allows what is said to settle into our hearts and be received. You are not there to analyze, judge, or try to fix another's experience, just to be fully aware of them and to be present to them. Lindahl writes: "You do not have to agree with or believe anything that is said. Your job is to listen for understanding."

3. Listen and speak from your heart. This means you must be open and vulnerable, willing to describe your yearnings and admit your failings. The listening space is less safe place if we are not hearing with open minds and loving hearts -- and more anxious if listeners respond by evaluating and judging—these are ways of keeping others out of our hearts.

4. Respect the power and difficulty of speaking and allow silences and tears without trying to make the pain go away. Let the full feelings of the speaker be present as a gift of trust.

5. Always ask first if you want to share someone's story (this agreement of whether or not comments need to be confidential should be decided ahead if a group is closed and private). Be truly present to the speaker. Don't be distracted by your plans, assumptions, judgments, or need to respond. Experience the deep communion that is possible as you deeply listen to another.

This style of listening without comment is not always appropriate. Obviously, there are occasions when you need to be engaged in dialogue and your responses are expected. But try this approach to listening at least some of the time.

2. General resource: http://www. selfgrowth.com/articles/what_is_ deep_listening.html

From "Slowing Down to the Speed of Love" – From Joe Bailey, a licensed psychologist.

Deep listening occurs when your mind is quiet. Your thoughts are flowing rather than crowding your mind with distractions, interpretations, judgments, conclusions, or assumptions. Your mind is open, curious, interested -- as though you were hearing this person for the first time.

- Deep listening is listening intently and openly, we aren't analyzing or figuring out -- we are simply letting the feelings and sounds affect us.

- Deep listening is not defensive, argumentative, or intrusive. It is not about struggling to analyze or interpret. It is a purely receptive state of mind. In a state of deep listening, we realize our oneness.

- We realize that we are not separate, but truly one spirit -- we are connected.

- When we listen deeply, we let go of any beliefs we have about the other person. We let go of our prejudices and past memories of him or her.

Preparation via Meditation:

- Try to sit stable and still, like a mountain. Be relaxed and alert.

- Listen to what you hear.

- Do not imagine, name, or analyze what you hear. Just listen with wide-open awareness.

- As thoughts, emotions, memories, associations arise in your mind, notice them, gently let them go, and return to the speaker.

- Radar that goes out looking for something and a satellite dish with a wide range just sits in the back-yard, waiting. Be a satellite dish. Stay turned on and receive.

- If there are no sounds, listen, and rest in the silence.

Deep listening applies not only to communication with another, but also to listening to ourselves. The goal is to hear beyond the words to the essence of what the words and feelings are pointing to. When your mind and heart are joined -- you are listening wholeheartedly.

The goal of deep listening is to be touched by the other person, embrace his or her story and truth, and to hear the essence of what he or she is saying.

RESOURCES

(Visit the moral injury resources page at www.voa.org and www.brite.edu/soulrepair for additional resources, including films, videos, blogs, and news articles.)

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The Shay Moral Injury Center at Volunteers of America

Under the direction of Rev. Rita Nakashima Brock, Ph.D. and named for Jonathan Shay, the Shay Moral Injury Center at Volunteers of America aims to deepen understanding about moral injury in the many populations who experience it. The center builds on Volunteers of America's work, spanning more than a century, of helping veterans and others who live with this emotional trauma.

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