

On a Sunday morning, Capt. Paul Erwin, recently retired from the U.S. Navy after 25 years, left his home in a quiet neighborhood in a liberal college town. He usually went to the gym on Sunday mornings. His wife became concerned when he didn't come home at his usual time. She found a note. In it Paul said simply that he would miss them. He hoped that they would understand. Paul's body was discovered by a farm worker on Monday in a small grove of trees outside of town.

Paul is survived by his wife and three children. By all accounts, they seemed like a closely knit, happy family. He had a high level administrative job with the university, one in which he employed skills he had developed in his military service. As a Navy Captain, he was the equivalent of a Colonel in the other branches of the military. Put another way, the next rank above Navy Captain is Admiral. Why would this man take his life?

Pause. This past Wednesday, and today, we remember those who have fought and died for our country; we also remember those who have not died, but who have returned home different than when they left, which is all of them. Some are broken in body or in spirit. Those broken in spirit are the subject of the 2012 book *Soul Repair*, by Gabriella Lettini and Rita Brock, from which I draw some of my material. Lettini, and Brock distinguish between Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, and moral injury.

Post traumatic stress disorder has become recognized as a widespread medical issue in our veterans of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. PTSD is a physiological response in the brain to extreme trauma or danger. Among other symptoms, later events can trigger “flashbacks” of the original episode. PTSD is clinically treatable, but it is not Moral Injury, although there is much confusion in the literature and in the military about this.

Moral injury occurs when an individual violates their most deeply held moral convictions, something which soldiers are asked and trained to do. “Thou shalt not kill” is the core moral tenet of every major religion in the world, and it is deeply embedded in the souls of all of us. To violate this tenet, no matter how justified, causes irreparable damage.

We heard in our reading from Camilo Mejia, who served in Iraq. He said “nothing ever prepares you for what that does to you as a human being...to kill an innocent person. Nothing is going to prepare you for the level of destruction you bring upon a nation and you bring upon yourself for being part of it.”

We will likely never know why Paul Erwin took his life. During Paul's long career the United States has been in two wars in Iraq and a war in Afghanistan. Paul's soul may have been damaged because of his participation in war. There may have been other reasons.

Paul had recently retired from a distinguished career in the military. While he had entered civilian life in a very responsible position, with a department of hundreds of employees and a

budget of tens of millions of dollars, he had entered a work culture light years apart from his military experience. Not only was the work culture different, but his time in the military was likely not valued by many with whom he worked. Worse, my academic friends tell me that his military service was likely demeaned by many, if not explicitly, then implicitly. Paul may have simply been suffering depression at the loss of the career to which he had dedicated his life, which had given his life meaning.

Pause. Many of you know that I served for seven years in the Navy as a fighter pilot. I served during a period of extended peace. I was fortunate in never having to drop bombs in war. I give thanks with all my heart that I don't have to live with the knowledge that I participated in killing.

I know something about the transition from military to civilian life. It is hard. It was hard for me. I was lost for a year. It took me many years to find my footing. It wasn't until I recognized and accepted my call to the ministry, decades later, that I felt like I had truly come home.

About half way through my four years in seminary I had an epiphany about my military service. In years of counseling, this had never come out. I realized that what I loved about the military, and I did love it until I lost faith in the mission, were three things. First, I loved the sense of serving a larger purpose, serving our country. Second, I loved the opportunities for leadership. Finally, I loved the ritual. (smile) Yes, the military does have just a little ritual, doesn't it? (Joke about Naval Academy) There was a fourth realization which came later. As a military flight instructor, I had the opportunity to teach highly motivated young adults. I discovered that I was good teaching and I loved it.

The second part of my epiphany was that in the various professional jobs I held after the military, I never experienced more than one of these four loves, these four things which were at the core of who I was. Now, as a minister, I get to experience all of them. My seminary professors and minister colleagues who have not served, which is most of them, always shake their heads when I draw this comparison between the military and ministry. (smile) They don't get the military, and so they don't get the comparison. They know only the negatives, and of course there are many, of military service.

I was only in the Navy for seven years. How much harder, I imagine, is it for someone to make this transition in mid-life? In my transition I never sought out professional help, either in the form of career counseling or in emotional counseling. Nothing was offered by the military. I could do this by myself, I thought. I felt shame that I was not coping. It wasn't until my marriage came unglued four years after I left the Navy that I finally sought help. I strongly suspect that Paul never asked for help. That's not how we are trained in the military.

There has been much publicity over the numbers of suicides among veterans in recent years.ⁱ While there is disagreement among scholars over just how high those numbers are, there is agreement that military veterans are not getting the support that they need.

How do we in this liberal faith community support our military? First, we must make an honest appraisal of how many of us feel about the military. Many Unitarian Universalists have conflicted feelings about war and the soldiers who fight them. Those only a few years older than I were often among the protestors and conscientious objectors to the Viet Nam War. Later generations of us have protested the more recent wars. Coming from this background, we often don't know how to treat our veterans.

Oh, it's easy for us to admire our World War II vets, or even Korean War vets, but what about Viet Nam? The two Iraq wars? Our longest war in Afghanistan? In our minds, and by international standards, these wars, possibly excepting the first Gulf war, do not stand up to accepted standards for "just" war. Our ambivalence towards the men and women who fought these wars is palpable.

Our ambivalence may be helped by better knowing; Who are our soldiers? We can get clearer about this by understanding why people join our "volunteer" military. People join out of a sense of duty, love of country, patriotism. They are looking for a purpose and higher calling than our consumer driven culture can provide.

At its best, the military can provide these things, and military recruiting materials play this aspect well. It's difficult for most young persons to understand the dark side of war when inundated with propaganda and popular culture which says otherwise. I joined partly out of a sense of higher purpose, of wanting to serve my country.

People also join for income, structure, free education and stability. Studies have shown that the military is a way up for the disadvantaged among us, and that the disadvantaged in our society are disproportionately represented in our volunteer forces. While certainly not disadvantaged, I also joined for economic reasons. A Navy ROTC scholarship was my ticket to attend an otherwise unaffordable Ivy League college.

Finally, there is a strong American myth of regeneration through violence. I know that there was a significant period in my life when I truly believed that I could never reach my highest potential without being tested in battle. This myth is perpetuated in some of our most successful movies. When I was in the Navy, the movie *Top Gun*, with Tom Cruise, perpetuated this myth. Now, one need look no farther than the highly successful Marvel Comics action movies. Spider Man comes to mind.

Movies and documentaries which examine the true personal costs of war do not do well at the box office. Films such as *The Ground Truth*, *Lioness*, *In the Valley of Elijah* and *Stop Loss*, are not titles that jump quickly to our tongues (smile). *Let There Be Light*, the final part of a

trilogy commissioned by the Army during World War II, followed the struggles of veterans in a military hospital. While there were heroic stories, there were also stories of moral anguish and brokenness. The film was suppressed until 1981. Broken soldiers are not part of the Army mythos.

So how do we help? One way in which we can help is through social action. We can become knowledgeable of and involved in advocacy for veterans issues. Homelessness is one example. Last week after the service, Brad Montgomery from the Torres shelter told me that about 7 percent of the people he serves are veterans. He estimates that the number is higher among the homeless who don't seek shelter, who don't seek help. Sound familiar?

What can we do on a personal level? Those of us participating in Safe Space may have the opportunity to have a conversation with a veteran. Some of us have veterans in our families. What do we say? How do we react? What don't we say?

First, what should we not say? Some of these may sound ridiculously obvious, but I'll mention them anyway.ⁱⁱ

- Do you have PTSD?
- Did you kill anyone?
- I know just how you feel.
- I'm glad you made it home ok, or I'm glad nothing happened to you. (We have no idea what wounds this person is carrying that are not immediately visible.)
- You should put it behind you; move on with your life
- Did you see the news about the latest horrific event? (Can trigger a flashback)
- Finally, what can I do to help? (unless you really mean it.)

Do:

- Welcome them home, if they are recently returned
- Thank them
- Ask how they are doing?--but be prepared to listen.

This simple question, "How are you doing?" or alternately "What's going on?" was how I opened most of my chaplain visits in the hospital. It is an invitation, which, when given sincerely, can open space for a person to talk. Be prepared to listen. Ten to twenty minutes would be reasonable. Otherwise, don't ask this question.

If you are lucky enough to talk with a vet, be aware of any ambivalence you may carry. You can't deny your own feelings, just be aware of them. Don't voice them. Try to separate the person in front of you from whatever feelings you have about the military and war. Remember that our first principle calls us to recognize the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Suspend judgment. If you get into a real conversation with a vet, you may hear some things which are shocking. Your role isn't to judge. The vet is probably already doing that to herself. Your role is simply to listen and let feel. Ask questions. Acknowledge their feelings. How do you do this? Here are some examples.

- That sounds like it was really scary. You must have been frightened.
- What you've just described would make me angry. Are you angry?
- That must be so painful to live with.

Most importantly, cultivate compassion. This is a fellow human being you are talking to. Our seventh principle tells us that we are all connected. Allow yourself to be open to this, difficult as that may be.

And if you have a difficult conversation with a veteran, I am here to listen. Come talk with me.

There will likely always be war, much as we may do to prevent it. And as long as there is war, we will have youth who will fight and die. We will have youth who return broken. Our role as UU's, as humans, is to suspend judgment and to cultivate compassion. Listen. And let feel. And if we do these things well, then perhaps, there will be healing.

Amen and Blessed Be

ⁱ Veteran Suicide: A Public Health Imperative 1st Edition by Robert M. Bossarte , PhD (Author, Editor), chapters 10, 11

ⁱⁱ <http://www.alternet.org/personal-health/9-things-not-say-veterans> accessed 11/14/15