Psychoanalysis, Trauma, *and* Community
History and Contemporary Reapprasisals

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Chapter 7

Beyond "thank you for your service"

The creation of post-war veteran/ non-veteran collaborative mourning spaces

Donna Bassin

A note on inspiration

This chapter is an expansion of an essay I wrote for a portfolio of fine art prints and essays in 2014, Celebrate People's History: Iraq Veterans Against the War, a collaboration between some 60 veteran and non-veteran artists and writers to commemorate Iraq Veterans Against the War's (IVAW) ten-year anniversary. Collaboration is the thread of the current chapter: in theme, subject material, its very composition, and its nascent end goal. Many of the following words have been given to me by the veterans who have been generous enough to let me follow their journey—words heard in many conversations and interviews from participants of Combat Paper, New Jersey workshops, or found in the poetry of Warrior Writers,[1] two of the most active organizations in the emerging veterans' art movement.[2] I have also asked Kevin Basl, an Iraq War veteran and facilitator with both organizations, to carefully read what I have written, in order to maintain respect for the cultures of the military and veterans in the telling of their stories. To get close to these veterans is to be touched and inspired. They have let me into their community to film them, interview them, listen to their stories, and make art with them and for that I am grateful.

Over the past decade, my work and the numerous relations I've made with veterans have pulled me further away from the traditional clinical setting and deeper into community work. This chapter (perhaps too ambitiously) is my attempt to work through aspects of veterans' struggles to "come back home," share some of their restorative efforts in this journey, and contribute to a growing practice of psychoanalytically minded

community mental health workers, while also reflecting on my own professional changes following 9/11. The conclusion I've drawn through my decade-plus field study is currently a work in progress: a warehouse-sized art installation—a collaborative mourning space—entitled By Our Own Hand, set to be opened in 2016. Beyond offering a detailed description of that project, this chapter will provide a summary of the path—the relationships, the materials, the lessons learned—leading to the development of such a space.

Overcoming resistance to the "violence of silence": Post Traumatic Stress and moral injury

Initially, I was a curious bystander to a number of veterans' movements, post-9/11. I observed as they transformed themselves from bystanders to witnesses of their own war-torn selves. I also observed different restorative and redemptive mourning practices in a number of the veteran communities, all of which had committed themselves to social activism, advocacy for wounded warriors at home, sponsorship of memorializing rituals for those killed in action or "missing in action," and self-witnessing through the creation of art and poetry. Over time, the therapeutic wisdom of the veterans' art and social justice movements became apparent, not only for their own journeys but for my own professional goals and personal development. I wanted to learn from their experiences and bring their insights and practices to the public.

My original interest was in the deconstruction of the "coming home" or "coming back to self and civilian relationships" practices of veterans' communities hoping to enrich our contemporary psychoanalytic understanding of catastrophic grief and (the working-through processes of) mourning, as well as resilience and self-forgiveness. More recently my attention has shifted to working collaboratively with Combat Paper, NJ in their endeavor to create conditions for self-witnessing and subsequently share veterans' stories with the majority of the non-veteran civilian population who has no visceral experiences with the damages and violence of war. Of course, we all condemn war and the monstrosity of the crimes we commit against each other; however, for the most part, the American public unfortunately remains a bystander to the violence of war, and the violence our veterans hold both as victims and as perpetrators. As bystanders, it is possible to commit a "violence of silence," perpetrated by remaining inattentive to

our shared responsibility for violence committed in our name by our warrior class. We non-veteran civilians need their stories and images of war to be able to begin the necessary task of witness, a civic responsibility as well as a social–psychological. Hannah Segel (l997) asserts that psychoanalysts who believe in the therapeutic power of speech must not be silent in the face of human suffering. This cessation of the violence of silence is a shared mission.

For many of the veterans I've met and worked with over the past decade, mourning has not been a private affair; they have taken on acts of social responsibility and humanitarian action, publicly sharing their inner battles and those memories that haunt them. Their exposure to the best and worst aspects of human experience—love and aggression—and their telling has triggered my own sense of vulnerability and, as Butler (2004, 2014) has speculated, slowly transformed me into a witness that is compelled to take action.

Over the past decade of war, the therapeutic wisdom of the veterans' art and social justice movements have become clearer in my mind. Their work requires an ongoing practice to learn how to take in and then "stay with," rather than turn away from, their testimonies of war. While many of them struggle to witness the catastrophic impact of war, they continue to carry a burden, an inner war that will remain with many of them for the rest of their lives. Like a Greek chorus, the stories our veterans carry express our collective sorrow; bearing culpability and trauma, they warn of the dangers of ignoring and forgetting. They hold the grief of war for us who will not. But they also hold something the majority of the US population remains unaware of: the bonds of loving attachments, connection (and camaraderie) constructed in the face of collective exposure to violence, death, and when the fog lifts, survivorship. For the ancient Greeks, it is these relational bonds that served as a ground when they and those around them went mad during combat (Shay, 1994, 1995, 2002).

Upon coming home from war, many veterans and service members find themselves in battle with a new enemy, Post Traumatic Stress (PTS). While existing protocols for the treatment of PTS have been useful for many returning veterans, others have received little help, being given a handful of prescriptions and barely a counseling session. Please note, that I have chosen to use Post Traumatic Stress rather than Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in order to de-pathologize what in fact is a human response to war rather than an adjustment disorder. Some of the veterans I have

worked with speak of PTS as a portal only to gain access to whatever health benefits the US Department of Veterans Affairs offers. And still others perceive the diagnostic category as a negation of the complexity of their experiences and a disavowal of the collective responsibility of the entire citizen population (veterans and non-veterans alike) to bear the burden of the sequela of war. They are resistant to the idea that reactions to the horrors of war should be seen as an adjustment disorder when it fact, as veteran Jeremy Stainthorp Berggren, a former Marine in mortuary affairs and active performer with Warrior Writers, states in simple terms in his poem ,"P.lease T.ry S.omething.D.ifferent," "try seeing death and then have nothing go wrong" (2011). Suicide, alcoholism, drug addiction, and isolation are solutions for many combat veterans who have killed or watched horrific violence.

The US Department of Veterans Affairs now recognizes moral injury as an additional aspect of the stresses of war, often accompanying PTS. Jonathan Shay, (1994, 1995, 2002) has extensively studied the narratives and traumas of the Vietnam veteran, and in his close readings of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, first observed moral injury in veterans, and began to refer to it as "something more than PTSD." Litz et al. (2009) have extended Shay's observations with research concerning the grave psychological ramifications for military personnel perpetrating or witnessing acts that violate collectively shared moral beliefs. They have concluded that the sequelae of moral injury and ethical conflicts can't be understood within our current conceptualization of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

From my couch to the streets—"The Ride to Freedom" and "Walkin' to New Orleans"

Following 9/11, as a consultant to the mayor's office of New York City, I was "assigned" to develop bereavement strategies for the grieving families of the victims and help facilitate the mourning process of a terrorized and grieving city. My experience at the devastated site where the World Trade Towers had stood, inside Ground Zero, was visceral. Being inside this violated and dismembered space evoked terror, anguish, and grief. I felt under siege trying to think in what could only be called a war zone. I spent too much time in the devastation of Ground Zero and left emotionally wounded and professionally challenged. Looking for support from others who had seen the ruins of war and seeking new models of community

mourning after collective catastrophic loss, I left the protected sanctity of the consulting room, and soon after I turned to combat veterans of the wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq for their wisdom in coping with such profound trauma. I eventually found my way to extended nighttime conversations with veterans, many of them members of Rolling Thunder, Inc., who were confronting their pasts at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington DC. My initial visits were viewed with a certain suspicion and resistance to speaking with me. But over a three-year period of showing up at their events and listening to political views and concerns they slowly accepted my presence.

While supporting the US commitment to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Rolling Thunder, Inc., consisting mainly of veterans who served in Vietnam, demonstrate against the US government's ongoing negligence of our returning warriors. A large part of their manifest agenda is the protest against the US government's lack of effort in seeking those "prisoners of war" and "missing in action" from the Vietnam War. They have also been insistent in getting government support for the recovery of "old bones" hoping to provide closure and permission to grieve to families who have never been absolutely certain of the death of their loved ones or able to bury remains. Annually, over Memorial Day weekend in Washington, DC, as many as half a million Harley Davidson motorcycles ride in remembrance and in protest from the North Parking lot of the Pentagon around the city to Maya Linn's Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall. The pipes of these motorcycles create their own rolling thunder, echoing the sounds of helicopters and B-52 bombers, perhaps reminiscent of the organization's namesake 1965 bombing campaign against North Vietnam, "Operation Rolling Thunder." This parade, the "Ride for Freedom," has transformed Memorial Day for these veterans, reclaiming it from the traditional, however limited, military displays of honor and from the barbecues and picnics that celebrate the start of summer. In essence, The Ride disavows the losses associated with the creation of this once meaningful remembrance day. In the process of constructing their own welcome home parade they have attempted to bring veterans down to the Wall to help them confront unresolved pasts and to initiate a healing process. Over the years, more and more Vietnam veterans have made the pilgrimage to the Wall. Veterans refer to those who come to see the Wall but stay at the edge of trees surrounding it as "50 yarders" or "tree liners," those yet to allow themselves to walk into the memorial's center where anguished memories

might be evoked.[3] More or less aware of their own war-torn, dissociate selves, many remain metaphorically "prisoners of war" and still "missing in action." Collectively attempting to affect their own return they have sought to communalize traumatic loss through strong relational ties with other veterans, creating their own facilitating environments in which to access complicated losses and manage the grief of war. Artie Muller, a Vietnam veteran and head of the New Jersey Chapter of Rolling Thunder, Inc. has described these deep platonic bonds among soldiers, observing that often even gravely injured soldiers want to return to war, because their brothers and sisters are "there." He has said you fight together, you die together, you share whatever you have and furthermore if you haven't been in that situation you just won't understand" ((Bassin, 2008, 2014). Shay (1994, 1995) has also emphasized the deep passion among those who experience combat together, comparing it to the earliest, profound family attachments. Society's failure to acknowledge this intimacy and love between soldiers during war, amplifies the veterans' isolation and solitude. Veterans come back to the civilian world where they are no longer held in the strong relational field they served within.

After a number of Memorial Day weekends with Rolling Thunder, Inc., I would meet Jan Barry, grassroots activist, poet, and journalist. In his quiet wisdom, he pointed me toward the work of a manifestly different group of veterans: Veterans for Peace (VFP), IVAW, and Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), an organization Barry co-founded in 1967. Barry was instrumental in eliciting Robert Lifton's participation in the original veterans' self-help groups and served as my mentor and introduced me to many of those at the helm of the veterans groups.

On the third anniversary of the post-9/11 US invasion of Iraq, I had the honor to join, as civilian participant and documentarian, a five-day, 132-mile trek along the Gulf Coast, on Highway 90 from Mobile, Alabama to New Orleans: "The Veterans' and Survivors' March." This simultaneous act of witness, protest, pilgrimage, and reparation was conceived by the older generation of veterans from VVAW and VFP who, as David Cline (then National President of VFP) suggested, had re-emerged with new force to protest the war in Iraq and provide guidance to returning Iraq vets who founded IVAW in 2004. David told me that he, like many Vietnam-era veterans, felt disbelief and enormous frustration over the nation's abandonment of its returning military personnel after wars end, and took this repetition "as a slap in the face." With a legitimacy and

authority only possible by their own military service and recollections of the young soldiers they once were, the Vietnam-era vets stood in as concerned and compassionate parents to the newly returned Iraq War veterans. For many Vietnam-era veterans, the temporal boundary between the wars on terror and Vietnam had dissolved. Increased numbers of the older veterans came out of their isolation and began to acknowledge ongoing and long-term struggles with a variety of post-combat stress and losses. The War on Terror triggered, as Toni Morrison (1987) suggests in her novel, *Beloved*, disremembered pasts that are haunted by that which was neither forgotten nor remembered. The Vietnam-era veterans also served as interlocutors, providing the initial language and "therapeutic endeavors" for the younger generation. However, like all generative parents, the Vietnam-era veterans gracefully moved over and took a place on the sidelines, empowering IVAW to take leadership.

A moving peace train, with IVAW up front, consisting of VFP, Military Families Speak Out, Gold Star Families for Peace, and Survivors of Hurricane Katrina, walked, danced, gave testimony, and sang reconstructed military cadence to bring national awareness to the traumatic plight of the survivors of Hurricane Katrina and the negligence of the government to care for them. During the march, I heard a number of the younger veterans describe the strong resemblance of the storm-ravaged coast with the devastation they had seen in Iraq. I imagined that, like a homeopathic remedy, a dose of devastated American landscape reignited those losses experienced in combat and resonated with the internal devastation one must feel post-war. But here in the supportive environment of their band of brothers and sisters, grief and vulnerability became rebelliousness, harnessed for social justice. Grief, as I have learned from my contact with many in IVAW, is complicated and often laced with guilt and shame, as many veterans experience themselves not as victims but as perpetrators. And grief, for IVAW, was not marked under marble memorials, but rather used to ignite attempts at restoration and reparation. During the march, Garret Reppenhagen, who had served as a sniper in Iraq before joining IVAW, shared his experience of moral injury. His response is worth quoting at length:

> After I shot my first innocent civilian, I was very distraught. I came back to my bunk, my hooch, and I destroyed it. I tore everything down. I was a mess. There's another form of mental illness that isn't being addressed, and that's the fact that a lot of us are coming back

> and we don't feel like the victim. A lot of us feel like the criminal. We feel like we're the murderer, the thief, we're the rapist, and we come back and it's, "Thank you, Johnny. You did a great job, Johnny. Well done, Johnny. Welcome home, Johnny. Here's a beer, Johnny. Drink one on us, Johnny."
>
> *Leave No Soldier* (Bassin, 2008, 2014)

> And Johnny's somewhere in the Midwest where it's not socially acceptable to say, "Hey, hold the hell on. You guys got it wrong. What I did is not good. I was killing farmers and craftsman and Iraqis that were upset of the abuse and the humiliation of the occupation." And I'm not getting sent to prison. Now I'm being thanked. I'm guilty for what I did, and the shame is that I'm guilty of who I've become. And if I'm not punished for what I did, then I'm going to punish myself. Whether I'm conscious of it or not. I'm going to get into alcohol and drugs … I'm going to abuse my family and take it out on them, or my friends. I'm going to isolate myself and confine myself. I'm going to hang myself or shoot myself, because I am guilty.

Garret continued to speak of the value of IVAW:

> But with Iraq Veterans Against the War I can take that power back. I empower myself. And that is a huge healing step because there are a lot of soldiers out there that feel like they can't do anything. And they sit in their homes and they rot because they don't realize that there are organizations out there like us. They don't realize that they're not alone and there are other people that feel the same way that they do, and are doing something about it. And that's why I'm here. That's why I'm at the march. That's why I'm frustrated about what happened when the hurricane hit New Orleans and the government did nothing, because I see it happen over and over again to the veterans all the time. There's a lack of responsibility to our citizens. I have to be engaged; I have to try to do well. I've got my third eye opened up and I can't close it now because I've seen the wrong. And if I rest and I stop doing this kind of work, then the war creeps up on me even more. My nightmares get worse.

Here, rage has covered grief and Garret draws a link between self-destructive behaviors and the smothering of pain of grief and self-loathing. Anne

Carlson (2006) reminds us, "Why does tragedy exist? Because you are full of rage. Why are you full of rage? Because you are full of grief." Grief, in the context of IVAW, may be seen as rebellious and useful to activate and direct social activism. Service people are taught that at times they must kill or be killed, though as veteran–poet and IVAW member Jon Turner (2014) bluntly reminds us in his poem *Standard Operating Procedure*, "No one in their right mind would kill a man." Stan Goff, a former Special Forces sergeant and current anti-war activist, has said military service people in Vietnam were taught to say, "It don't mean anything. We just killed a woman, it don't mean anything. One of our soldiers just got killed, it don't mean anything" (Bassin, 2008, 2014). Boundaries between "them and us," friend and enemy, the living and the dead, must be firm and absolute in the theater of war. But as Goff has also observed, once you put on the psychological armor of detachment, you can't take it off. And in the midst of the fog of war,[4] soldiers find themselves detached from the horrors and may have little or only a vague memory of what happened and what they saw.

The grief of the veterans on the Gulf Coast March unsettled me. But, as Garret suggests, access to such grief can be redemptive and used to build an effective ethical community. For many returning combat soldiers, the grieving self is experienced—despite the overwhelming pain and anguish—as a necessary part of the change that loss and violent actions engender, an embodiment of one's fidelity to remembrance, and a place where attachments to their losses may survive. Clinical interventions that attempt to provide pre-mature narrative suggesting the protective strategy of "moving on" may be experienced as mis-attunement with the complicated and multi-layered experiences, particular of combat veterans who experience themselves, with guilt and shame, as both victims and perpetrators. Many combat veterans are resistant to the misguided but culturally sanctioned idea of "moving on" and "getting over it" and feel banished from the very communities that sent them to war and to whom they must return as sanitized civilians.

While soldiers are battle-proofed and "taught how to kill" as psychological protection, the protective armor (as Goff has described) must come off in order to integrate back to civilian life. But the morally reprehensible acts don't peel off as does the uniform or get left behind on the battlefield, and the grey areas that fall beneath the cracks of the rules of engagement are enormous when combat occurs within a village or city, where civilians and enemy combatants are often interspersed and ambiguity precedes life or death decision-making. "Perpetrating, failing to prevent, or bearing

witness to acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations" (Litz et al., 2009, p. 697) create within service personnel severe inner conflicts, isolation, shame, guilt, and deep grief for the moral person they were before war. Losses caused by moral injury cut deep into the psyche and may create ongoing inner conflicts.

Many veterans experience confusion about how to mourn this person they now experience themselves no longer to be. While loss is unique and individual, understanding of the loss often requires social validation of the moral transgressions and injuries to the sense of self-worth as well as an empathic non-judgmental community to help the veteran manage the overwhelming affects. How can traumas of moral injury be mitigated through listening—by tolerating the horror of the veterans' stories—not turning away or being apathetic? These veterans call for the creation of a space in which the individual's life as forever changed by the experience of loss and moral injury can be held as an ongoing process. As one changes, the meaning of ones' actions hopefully undergo some compassionate revision initiating the beginning of a long journey toward forgiveness. By perceiving veterans as others placed in a position of either heroes/victims or perpetrators, they have been denied the necessary spaces where losses might be named and mourned.

Most soldiers hold on to an ideal that state-sanctioned violence is a noble cause, to protect their character from the potentially damaging effects. However, over time, that protective bubble will pop. If it is years down the road, the buildup of stress will be more harmful. Whether conscious of it or not, because these soldiers are never punished by society and their leaders are not being held accountable, the veteran takes on self-destructive habits and sometimes commits suicide, as described by Reppenhagen above.

Among the veterans I have worked with there is an attempt to find ethical narratives that transcend the old polarities of victims and perpetuators, as well as a new language that recasts the impact of war on soldiers' hearts and minds from a medical formulation of wounds and disorders. Many vets are left wondering what an appropriate response to the horrific acts of war might be.

Leave no soldier and the bonds of love

Tim O'Brien, Vietnam veteran and author of *The Things They Carried* (1990), has described the heavy loads that combat soldiers carry on the battlefield: weapons, mine detectors, tents, radios, bibles, fear, grief, and

most poignantly, each other. This military ethos of "leave no fallen soldier behind" reminds those who serve to honor their humanity, even in the surrealistic theaters of war. Rolling Thunder, Inc., IVAW and its parental communities, VFP and VVAW, have taken this ethos from the battlefield, extended its literal meaning, and applied it to their post-war civilian lives.

The refusal to abandon those still missing in action or to turn away from those lost who symbolically reside on the Vietnam Wall may be seen as an understandable, although melancholia, response to loss. However, the activities of Rolling Thunder, Inc. and Gold Star Mothers (mothers who have lost their children in war) lobbying for changes in veterans' legislature and visiting at US Department of Veterans Affairs hospitals suggests the ability to develop caring relationships in the present simultaneously with a fidelity to the past. Eng and Kazanjian (2003) argue that the refusal to abandon the dead through conventional mourning may be seen as an ethical commitment to love and may demonstrate the useful and rebellious aspects of melancholia. Many of the above veterans' activities suggest that one can both maintain a relationship with their lost loved ones as well as invest in social justice projects and new relationships.

Over the years of my education within these various veterans' communities I came to appreciate the new narratives that were unfolding. These veterans refused to be victims looking for revenge and retaliation and eschewed the unreflective manic response of civilians who wore yellow ribbons and "thanked them for their service." Instead, they have been working to become activists, caregivers, protestors, and restorers. These truly heroic efforts are forms of reparation and self-forgiveness.

As I listened to the stories of the veterans, my awareness of their need for public platforms grew. Edie McCoy, a member of Rolling Thunder, Inc. who was an intensive care nurse in Vietnam, says, "Some people say that the sound of bikes sound like helicopters. I don't think so. I think they sound like power. When you are on these bikes and with the powerful people who drive them, you feel like you finally have some power [to get the nation's attention]" (Bassin, 2008, 2014). I heard many stories similar to McCoy's that spoke to the veterans' efforts to mobilize grief of war and moral injury into humanitarian and moral repair and to have public platforms on which to tell their stories. My interest in creating a public platform on which the wisdom of the veterans could be shared and recognition and compassion inspired, pushed me into creative engagement with the concerns, tasks, and ethics of public witnessing and the power

of aesthetic representation. As a psychoanalytic practitioner, attention to the aesthetics of affect regulation and construction of a coherent narrative was well within my experience. As a filmmaker, I was challenged to evoke and represent the testimonies of the veterans in a form that would engage and "move" the audience from bystander to witness without contributing to further injury and suffering or diminishing those whose stories are told. The finished product, *Leave No Soldier* (Bassin, 2008, 2014), bears witness to their efforts, but moreover presents, in coherent story form, alternative narratives of post-war collective grieving.

The ways in which veterans have attempted to carry each other in the service of "leave no soldier behind," to build a community that extends the bonds of attachment and love, the ability to stay in these spaces where past, present, and future exist simultaneously and past loss is metabolized serving as a fertile ground for change, shaped the direction my documentary took. In *Leave No Soldier*, combat veterans and military nurses open their lives to unexpected and potentially transformative possibilities through their commitment to take the military oath—"leave no soldier behind" — from the battlefield to the home front. For many, massive traumatic losses (and those they may have caused) catalyzed a call to activism and social responsibility. Their grief, both redemptive and rebellious, fueled moral consciousness and humanitarian action rather than retaliation. They redirected their helplessness into advocacy soldiers at war overseas and for wounded warriors at home.

Combat Paper: mourning and materiality

Beyond the art practices I have used to work through difficult and/or traumatic experiences defying narrative representation, as a psychoanalyst I have explored the relational and reintegrative functions of art for those whose traumatic memory fragments can't be contained in words. Since the completion of my film, I have become a mental health support and research advisor for Combat Paper NJ, an affiliate of The Combat Paper Project, an organization that provides printmaking and hand papermaking workshops for veterans and their communities.

The philosophy and practice of Combat Paper originated when Drew Cameron, a veteran then-recently returned from Iraq, cut his uniform off his body and shredded, pulped, and pressed those fibers into handmade paper. He would go on to share the process with his peers, traveling

across the country bringing workshops to veterans and their communities. Through Combat Paper, as the process viscerally enacts, the experience of mourning may be mediated through the body, which is temporarily displaced to the uniform.

Currently, groups of veterans are offered the opportunity to be taken from soldier to civilian–artist through this process of finding, reclaiming, reassembling, and enlivening fiber fragments of their military uniforms into handmade paper in the presence of a community of their peers. Combat Paper is made in many different settings, whether in veteran-only workshops, public gatherings, university classrooms, or individual artists' studios.

During a Combat Paper workshop veterans essentially perform the same ritual as Cameron, cutting up in the presence of a group of supportive peers his or her military uniform. This process is reminiscent of the ancient Jewish practice of Kriah, tearing one's clothing as a material expression of grief and anger following the death of a close loved one. This visceral affective discharge, a controlled act of anguish, rage, and destruction is performed in the presence of supportive family members. Tearing represents, on one level, the death itself that "tears" the loved one from the living, a violent act evoking the destructive force and the gravity of the experienced death. This practice assists in the activation of grief through sensory bodily-based memory, similar to the way Combat Paper participants often tear their uniforms apart, setting aside the scissors, an object for a more careful deconstruction of the uniform. In the act of tearing and cutting up a uniform, the violence within is transposed to an external act.

Donning a uniform is one of the first steps in becoming a member of the military and when they leave service veterans often take a duffle bag full of uniforms back to civilian life. While the uniform obscures personal identity it is also a bond of attachment to other soldiers. A military uniform is akin to a soldier's skin festooned with tattoos displaying eye-grabbing patches and campaign ribbons, a feisty advertisement of where this veteran has been. Once soaked in the dirt, sweat, and blood of war the material uniform fragments are, in a sense, "cleansed" in a water bath (the process of being "pulped" in a Hollander beater, a machine developed for macerating rags and fibers) and lastly pressed into sheets of handmade paper. The cleansing of the fragments may be seen as a process of purification of the simultaneously destructive and violated body held symbolically in the uniform.

This purification process reminds me of a similar practice of Rolling Thunder, Inc.: their monthly gathering to wash the The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall, that physical object seen by many Vietnam veterans as symbolically holding the bodies of their lost comrades. These rituals are reminiscent of ancient cross-culture traditions, from the sweat lodges of Native Americans to the bathes of the Vestal Virgins (French, 2003), designed to cleanse the returning soldier from the transgressions of combat in order to support their transition back to civilian life.

Combat Paper is not only a new surface, but also a symbolic container of reconstructed war experiences with the now-transformed and embedded material fragments of combat uniforms. While the resulting paper contains no explicit reference to any specific event, it embodies the veterans' military experience. This new surface, a container of symbolically reconstructed war experiences (though initially devoid of obvious visual representations or content), becomes a space (within the "safe space" created by the veterans in their workshop) upon which participants begin a process of self-witnessing, through printmaking and photographic transfer techniques. Veterans are "liberating the rag" in the sense that they are transforming a meaningful material into a new platform, freed of media, politics, and clichés, and derived from the transformative possibilities of their own creativity. The experience of war is held in these artworks, beyond the surface images, through enacting the subjective experience of mourning.

The well-known South African artist, William Kentridge, has described the process of making art as a form of slow-motion thinking, which over time, in its uncertain and imprecise fashion constructs and serves as a model of how to construct meaning (Danto, 2007). In the interaction between implicit domain bodily gestures and art media, invisible memory becomes visible. In this process of forming, erasing, and modifying, emergent forms are captured and repossessed as they are "recognized" by the art maker as an equivalent of an "unthought-of thought" now seen and eventually known. The survivor artist begins to witness and dialogue with previously unrepresented aspects of the self in the construction of his or her own experience in the formation of the art product itself. This dialogue with their own traumatic subjective experience, now located in a viewable art product, holds many possibilities. After catastrophic loss, when the internal world is fractured—a state which often cannot be verbalized—the artmaking process pushes the subject to seek modes of expression of

the unthought-of and/or of the unthinkable traumatic memory, co-creating aesthetic form in the interaction with materials, or discovered in pre-existing cultural aesthetic forms, that which resonates with his raw or sense memories.

The unique capacities of artmaking to capture, repossess, reintegrate and transmit dissociated emotional, sensory, or perceptual fragments, provides the experience(s) of trauma to be "known" and potentially supports the development from non-verbal expression to declarative meaning and creation of a meaningful and affectively rich narrative. Co-creating aesthetic and bodily-based sensory forms in the interaction with materials resonate with losses seeking representation. Through this process, one isn't just representing one's experience; rather, one's experience is being shaped in the process of representation with the attuned material as the self is encountered in the art object.

In the process of creating these relational aesthetic moments—between self and resonating art object, and eventually between self/art object and witnessing audience—memories can be re-embodied, or linked, with affects. Relational attachments, virtual or actual, can also be rebuilt, opening a dialogue with the world, mitigating isolation as the result of shame. Furthermore, the art product restores a sense of aliveness and integrative capacities for the maker.

By Our Own Hand: "It is in the shelter of each other that people live" (Irish Proverb)

This brings me to my current project, a public art installation I have designed as a containing space to facilitate and support community grieving, a collaboration between veterans and non-veteran organizers and artists around the country. Since the War on Terror began, 6,717 men and women have been killed in action according to the Department of Defense. During this time—and equally tragic—a larger and unknown number of US service members and veterans of these wars have died by their own hand.

I've conceived By Our Own Hand, a warehouse-scale art installation, as a response to not only those killed in action, but also to the soaring number of suicides among military personnel of the last decade. The installation is visually modeled after the ancient practice of Tibetan prayer flags hung to mark an important and challenging occasion where traditional wishes are

Figure 7.1 By Our Own Hand installation model.
Installation designed by Donna Bassin. Model by Robert Pyzocha.
Photo by Steve Hellerstein, featured with his kind permission.

made for global peace, hope, strength, compassion, and protection from harm. For the installation, the flag-draped cords will attach to the ceiling and the walls at different heights to create a variety of visual planes, suggesting the weight and gravity of loss of life and producing an inner quiet within a contemplative space. In Tibetan tradition, it is believed that as the flags are shredded by the wind, the content within the flag will be released. Traditional belief suggests that even the slightest movement of the breeze will activate and release the prayers on the flags for the benefit of all. Ideally, the movement of the public walking through this space will activate the hanging flags, thus "releasing the prayers" associated with each. These paper flags of sacrificial remembrance will create a haunting canopy rising above a public space ideal for reflection and conversation. The enormity of the installation will make tangible the gravity of the rising death toll.

Sheets of Combat Paper, one for every killed in action, will be made at community workshops around the country. Each of the workshops will follow a structure designed to engage veteran and non-veteran communities, putting them in dialogue, sharing in the military experience by physically

manipulating and reclaiming the "trace object," the military uniform. Current plans include the creation of an additional 22 sheets of combat paper to be made everyday at the installation. These will symbolically represent the 22 veteran suicides estimated to occur everyday. By Our Own Hand enlists the ethic of "leave no soldier behind" to attend to the epidemic rate of suicides among military personnel and veterans. It is hoped that critical reflection on the reasons for these self-inflicted deaths will result, thus unsettling a society largely apathetic to veteran issues.

Dynamic memorials such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial or the recently constructed Reflecting Absence at the World Trade Center site, and the community's interaction with these aesthetically meaningful structures, constitute a dynamic memorialization process, providing opportunities for education, shared memory, and collective grieving. The actual material object—the wall, the fountains—are only one piece of the intersubjective collaboration. The public that is engaged and receptive to its power to elicit memory is the other piece.

Shay (1995) writes that when ancient Athenian warriors came home, the entire populace gathered at the foot of the Acropolis to accompany the warriors on a journey through mourning, reparation, and restitution. By Our Own Hand will provide such a gathering place for the general public, active duty service personnel, veterans, and their families in an attempt to recreate the respect and nurturing practices of ancient Athens toward returning warriors. The installation will invite the receptive viewer to enter in, experience, and explore along with the papermakers, promoting a mutual understanding of the consequences of the military experience, combat especially. This is an effort to create a space in which to remember and critically reflect (not necessarily to provide presence), encouraging the possibility of a more engaged remembrance. The idea of an Athenian chorus of citizens gathered at the Acropolis singing songs of purification to help restore moral integrity to those returning from war is a far cry from the rituals of modern American culture. In Ancient Greece, an entire populace wept and witnessed, accompanying the perpetrators of state-sponsored violence on their journey of mourning, helping warriors reintegrate back into society. Athenian tragedies, performed by combat veterans for an audience of returning warriors, were filled with violence and anguish and have been seen to be a form of civic group therapy (Meagher, 2006).

Veteran suicide is on the rise, yet remains a hushed subject in regards to how those fallen ought to be memorialized. Butler (2004, 2014) has written

powerfully and extensively about the cultural refusal to mourn certain losses, those whose mourning is prohibited due to social stigma (e.g. the "ungrievable life" of an individual with AIDS, convicted criminals, drug addicts, and perhaps even suicides). She argues for public recognition of these losses. The perception of our military as heroes, victims or perpetrators, has led to a relative absence of community spaces where the losses of war might be named and mourned. A healthy society requires the creation of such spaces.

Toward a theory of collaborative mourning spaces: psychoanalytic perspectives applied to community

The creation of a collaborative mourning space, especially in a post-war context, calls on society (and the veteran) to perform the following:

First, one must find what has been lost and reawaken hidden grief. The narratives need to be found and told to a receptive other who serves as a witness. This includes a courageous acknowledgment of transgressions, an acceptance of responsibility and desire to make reparation for morally reprehensible acts during war. Stan Goff has said of his dehumanizing behavior during the war in Vietnam, "I can't take it back, I have to live with the consequences. But I can make amends" (Bassin, 2008, 2014).

Second, one must find a social structure to assist in the regulation of overwhelming affects and to validate the losses. Mourners can't grieve alone. Klein (1940) has suggested that bereavement requires the comfort of a good internal objector. However, as elaborated by Grand (2009), during trauma there is no sheltering parental body, no comforting parental presence, no containing parental mind to hold the overwhelming affects. As the (m)other originally bore witness to and helped organize the early effects of her infant, mourners require, as Hagman (2001) suggests, a community or an other to stand in for the mother, thus mourning with the mourner.

Third, a community of mourners should utilize the past as a generative medium for something new to emerge. Eigen (1999) has suggested that guilt and other psychic injury can be a way into deeper contact with ourselves and to the depths of others, into a deeper sense of life. Grief, for the veterans' communities I have worked within, was not marked under marble memorials or solemn ceremonies, but rather used to ignite attempts at restoration and reparation. They chose to use their pasts rather than suffer them.

Fourth, one must reconnect with the ethos of leave no soldier in one's civilian life and within one's community. In essence, what is needed is a

re-establishment of the bonds of attachment, the relational ties that mitigate social isolation and promote self-forgiveness.

Lastly, organized protest and community actions should be used as a way to restore individual agency in a socio-political arena that is becoming evermore abstract and divisive. The process and "products" of the memorializing and protest activities discussed above assuage persecutory anxiety and survival guilt through restitution and reparation (Klein, 1937), highlighting Titchener's observations (1982) that the violent and destructive drives released during war must be attended to in order to treat "post-traumatic decline." Although the language differs, Bragin (2007/2010) has highlighted what the veterans intuitively understood: opportunities for reparation are necessary in the grieving process.

In the end, though, I've learned that one doesn't heal from war. One learns to surrender to the changes that loss brings. Butler (2014) speaks of mourning "… as a yielding to an unwanted transformation, where neither the full shape nor the import of that alteration can be known in advance." While the grief of others unsettles us, it allows us, according to Butler (2004), to experience vulnerability, thus enlarging the self through connection to the experience of others. In turn "bystanders" may transform into "good-enough" witnesses that may be moved to take ethical actions within their communities. Rosenbaum (2009) encourages us to consider the model of the legendary Greek poet and musician Orpheus who entered the bowels of the Underworld and returned as a task of the psychoanalyst working with survivors of violence. And while visionary architects of the socio-political implications of unresolved mourning such as Herman (1992/1997), Lifton (1993), Caruth (1996, 2014), Derrida (2001), Butler (2004), Laub (2005) and Boulanger (2007), and, have written theory and drawn philosophical blueprints for construction of an intersubjective ground in which traumatic losses can be processed, the details might best be found in the lives of those, such as combat veterans, who have created their own ways of working through collective traumas.

> And even though they said our war was over,
> It sure doesn't seem that way.
> But hopefully
> One of these days,
> We'll finally make it back home.
>
> From "Game Over" (Wright, 2014)

Appendix

American Gold Star Mothers, Inc. is an organization of mothers who have lost a son or daughter in service to the US. They are a Veterans Service Organization, established in 1928 and chartered by the United States Congress in 1984. Nationally, the organization has approximately 2,000 members. www.goldstarmoms.org

Combat Paper Project hosts papermaking workshops, where veterans use their uniforms worn in service to create works of art. The uniforms are cut up, beaten into a pulp, and formed into sheets of paper. Participants use the transformative process of papermaking to reclaim their uniforms as art and express their experiences with the military. www.combatpaper.org

IVAW was formed in 2004. IVAW's membership includes recent veterans and active duty servicemen and women from all branches of military service, National Guard members, and reservists who have served in the United States military since September 11, 2001. Since their inception, they have called for the immediate withdrawal of all occupying forces in Iraq; reparations for the human and structural damages Iraq has suffered; and full benefits, adequate healthcare (including mental health), and other support for returning servicemen and women. www.ivaw.org

Rolling Thunder, Inc. states their primary mission is to publicize the Prisoners Of War–Missing In Action (POW–MIA) issue: to educate the public that many American Prisoners of War were left behind after all previous wars and to help correct the past and to protect the future veterans from being left behind should they become POW–MIA. While many members of Rolling Thunder, Inc. are veterans and many ride motorcycles, neither qualification is a prerequisite. www.rollingthunder1.com

VFP is comprised of over 140 chapters worldwide, whose work includes: educating the public on the consequences of militarism, advocating for a dismantling of the war economy, and providing services that assist veterans and victims of war. www.veteransforpeace.org

VVAW was formed in 1967, and once boasted over 30,000 members. Throughout the 1970s, the organization worked to get PTSD officially recognized and advocated for veterans suffering agent orange exposure, while demonstrating publicly for the withdrawal of US troops from Indochina. They are still active today. www.vvaw.org

Warrior Writers' mission is to create a culture in which veterans and service members speak openly and honestly about their military experiences.

In the form of veteran-focused writing and artmaking workshops, participants are encouraged to share their stories in the form of books, performances, and exhibitions. They have released four anthologies of writing to date. www.warriorwriters.org

Notes

1 The veterans' poetry featured in this chapter is reprinted from *Warrior Writers: A Collection of Writing and Artwork by Veterans* (2014) with the kind permission of Kevin Basl and Warrior Writers.
2 See appendix for detailed descriptions of organizations appearing herein.
3 The Wall is perceived as symbolically holding the bodies of those killed. The journey to the Wall and the interaction at the Wall, that is, the walk into its center (which implies seeing one's reflection in the black granite surface, and may include a search for the "body" of a lost soldier: finding a particular name, touching that name, and taking a rubbing as if reclaiming a piece of the deceased's body) is an attempt to find what has been lost.
4 Exposure to prolonged trauma and fear impacts on the brain's amygdala and hippocampus which not only regulate emotions but link emotions to memory.

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