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To cite this article: Donna Bassin (2017): From “bystander to witness”: The art of mourning and the Veterans’ Art Movement, International Forum of Psychoanalysis, DOI: [10.1080/0803706X.2017.1342867](https://doi.org/10.1080/0803706X.2017.1342867)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0803706X.2017.1342867>



Published online: 01 Aug 2017.



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From “bystander to witness”: The art of mourning and the Veterans’ Art Movement¹

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Abstract

Numerous veterans have observed that one does not heal from war, but rather one learns to surrender to the complicated losses that wartime experiences bring. Veterans have pushed back against stereotyped images of themselves as heroes, victims, or perpetrators. Many have challenged the implications of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a diagnosis, as well as the effectiveness of evidence-based treatment procedures for PTSD. Work emerging from the Veterans’ Art Movement by a poet, a photographer, and a “Combat Paper” maker will be discussed in relation to the tasks of mourning, reparation, and formation of postwar narratives. The work of these veterans offers useful insights into the psychosocial implications of unresolvable traumatic loss, as well as detailed strategies for the creation of therapeutic mourning spaces. Through a variety of artistic practices, veterans have created opportunities to transform themselves and their communities from mere bystanders to attuned witnesses of the dire consequences of war. Their work calls our attention to the therapeutic actions of aesthetic representation and art-making in the communalization of war trauma. Additionally, they expand our understanding of art practices for the identification of postwar losses and the working-through of moral injury.

Key words: *trauma, mourning, veteran, art, war, witness.*

Many veterans understand that one does not heal from war, but rather surrenders to the unexpected changes that loss engenders. Most of us condemn war and the monstrosity of the crimes we commit against each other. Unfortunately, and for the most part, the American public remains incurious or indifferent – a bystander to the trauma of war and the deep psychological wounds of our veterans. As bystanders, we commit a violence of silence by remaining inattentive to our shared responsibility for violence perpetrated by our warrior class. Garret Reppenhagen, a sniper from the war in Iraq, observed “the soldier might be the guy over there pulling the trigger, but we are all tools of this democracy” (Bassin, 2008).

Many veterans remain isolated within themselves – alienated from their families and communities – believing that if you haven’t been to war, you just can’t understand. The impact of war-related disabilities impinges on their families and communities, as well as on the systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community; 25% of the homeless population are veterans, and 22 veterans a

day commit suicide. And while the GI bill covers tuition, many veterans return unable to maintain the focus and concentration to manage the full-time educational commitment that the GI bill requires.

The long practice of veterans isolating themselves in protective bubbles is gradually shifting as some veterans are challenging themselves to reach out and tell their stories. Eli Wright, combat medic and director of Combat Paper, NJ, challenges non-veterans and veterans to enter into conversations. He is imploring veterans to break the silence, reach out to the non-veteran civilian population, and transform loss into forces for social cohesion.

Non-veteran civilians, protected from the specific experiences of war and its catastrophic losses, need the stories and images of returning military personnel to begin the necessary undertaking of attuned witnessing, a civic responsibility as well as a social-psychological task. Transformative empathy and community healing occur when we can imaginatively occupy the experience of the other. When the experiences of the other are traumatic, as they are for many combat veterans, civilians

¹A version of this paper has previously been published. See Bassin, D. “Beyond thank you for your service”: The creation of post-war veteran/non-veteran collaborative mourning spaces,” pp. 122–144 in J.L. Alpert and E.R. Goren (eds.), *Psychoanalysis, trauma and community: History and contemporary reappraisals*, Routledge, 2017.

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are challenged to not only tolerate these unsettling stories and images, but also allow themselves to be touched by them. Furthermore, this emotional transmission must be managed so that devastating affect can find thought and social change rather than disassociation. This process of cultural communalization requires many opportunities in which this exchange can occur.

My work with members of the veterans' community was unforeseen and sprung out of the rubble of Ground Zero after the World Trade Center towers collapsed. I turned to their communities for support to understand the despair and rage of a terrorized and grieving post-9/11 culture.

After September 11, I was called into Mayor Giuliani's office to consult with the Department of Mental Health to facilitate New York City's coping with and acceptance of the devastation, to initiate a community grieving process, and to assist in the design of the ash-filled urn to be given to the loved ones of those who had been killed. I spent many days in downtown Manhattan at Ground Zero with the families who had lost loved ones there, and on the site with first responders.

As a consultant to New York City, the challenge of my task to my professional expertise and personal resources became apparent. Overwhelmed as many of us were, I looked to support from others who had experienced traumatic loss. At the time, I found psychoanalytic writings on traumatic grief and community mourning strategies rather thin and without the benefit of the most current theory and activism of those exploring and writing about community psychoanalysis. So I turned to the veterans, initially from the war in Vietnam, and later from Iraq and Afghanistan, feeling contained within their communities.

I found my way to extended nighttime conversations with veterans confronting their past and their losses at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington, DC. Eventually, I connected myself with the veteran communities of Rolling Thunder, Inc., Veterans for Peace, Iraq Veterans Against the War, Warrior Writers, and Combat Paper, NJ, with an appreciation of the restorative elements of community activism that grew organically within these communities.

Utilizing strategies of social activism, advocacy for wounded warriors at home, and construction of new narratives with prose, art, and poetry, each community has engaged, in their way, the work to "return from war" and reintegrate their postwar lives. I wanted to learn from their experiences of traumatic loss, resilience, search for postwar identity, moral injury, and ways of grieving to bring their insights and practices to our contemporary psychoanalytic understanding of catastrophic grief.

Initially a curious bystander to a few veterans' movements, I observed as they transformed themselves from bystanders to witnesses of their wartorn selves. Over time, as trust developed, I was given more access to their activities and allowed to participate in their communities. Interviews expanded into invitations to participate in and document the communal rituals of mourning. My response to hours of conversations, interviews, and participation in veterans' community actions was the creation of *Leave no soldier* (Bassin, 2008), a full-length feature documentary that provides a public platform for stories of a number of US war veterans. *Leave no soldier* premiered at the 2008 Rhode Island International Film Festival and subsequently screened at film festivals and professional conferences, stimulating audience interest and conversation.

Leave no soldier attends to the ways in which some of our war veterans have come together to mourn and manage their posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It tells the story of journeys by two intergenerational communities of American war veterans who carried a military oath, "to leave no fallen soldier behind," from the battlefield to the home front. These groups, while divided by their politics, were united in their devotion and their commitment to take on acts of social responsibility. And in doing so, they have begun to take back their lives. The construction of this community and their journey back to self-respect is a model for any traumatized group struggling to rework their past. And once you form a community, you have already initiated social change.

Leave no soldier illuminates the attempts of veterans and military families to keep the grief of war in the consciousness of the nation – like a Greek chorus nudging a despondent nation: where is the national response to the profound grief that we carry? The film displays the dichotomy that exists between justifying the painful losses of loved ones and the support of our current soldiers. Even among the various veterans' movements that exist, there are passionate differences in what it means to support the troops and honor the fallen.

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, one is mindful of the aesthetics of affect regulation and the construction of coherent useful narratives. As a film-maker, 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 engendering further suffering in those whose told their stories.

The mourning after (Bassin, 2016; funded through a PEP-WEB grant, this can be viewed on their online site), my second film and a sequel to *Leave no soldier* (2008), shares the stories of participants in the emerging Veterans' Art Movement. The efforts of a poet, a photographer, and a "Combat Paper" maker offer valuable insights regarding the use and meaning of art practices for the identification of postwar losses, the working-through of moral injury, and the development of an empathic community. The task of metabolizing and recycling the past into constructive personal and social change is carried through the therapeutic actions through art-making in the communalization of war trauma.

The grief of war and *The mourning after*: Loss and moral injury

While the protocols for PTSD have been useful for many returning military personnel, the testimonies of others suggest psychological difficulties other than traumatic stress. These difficulties include the identification of complex multilayered losses, the complications of mourning during and after war, and gender-related expectations of men and grief. Losses include the death of comrades, unattended civilian fatalities, bodily injuries, the loss of the innocence of youth, trust in the mother country, radical shifts in identity and purpose, and, last and perhaps most significantly, the loss of moral integrity.

Moral injury

The Veterans Affairs Administration now recognizes moral injury as an additional aspect of the stresses of war, often accompanying post-traumatic stress. Jonathan Shay, (1994, 1995, 2002) has extensively studied the narratives and traumas of Vietnam veterans; in his close readings of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, he 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 sequel of moral injury and ethical conflicts cannot be truly understood within our current conceptualization of PTSD.

Bypassing the "minefield" of clichés about returning military service members, many have pushed back against the stereotypes of veterans and attempt to find ethical narratives that transcend the old polarities of victims and perpetrators. Instead, they experience themselves, through guilt, shame, and grief, as both victims *and* perpetrators.

Many vets are left wondering what an appropriate response to the horrific acts of war might be. In *The mourning after* (Bassin, 2016), Eli Wright states, "we are normal people who went and did abnormal things, but we come home, and we want to be normal people again."

In *Leave no soldier* (Bassin, 2008), Garrett Reppenhagen describes his postwar conflict and his attempt to find ethical narratives that transcend the old polarities of victims and perpetrators:

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 have a daughter, and a lot of my nightmares involve her. I'll be at a Dairy Queen eating an ice cream cone with my daughter, in my dream, and insurgents attack us. All of a sudden, there's American soldiers involved engaging the insurgents. An American soldier dies right in front of my girl and me. I got a Jihadi running across the street, and he's in my sights, and I got him. And I see him out of the corner of my eye as I am flipping my selector switch to fire – I see out my daughter staring in my face. You know, waiting. What's dad going to do? You know what I mean? What am I going to do? I can't kill this guy in front of my child. You know, and when am I going to tell my daughter what I did in Iraq? A lot of us are coming back, and we don't feel like a victim. A lot of us feel like the criminal. We feel like we're the murderer, the thief, the rapist, and if I am not punished for what I did, then I'm going to punish myself, whether conscious or not. I am going to get into alcohol and drugs. I'm going to hang myself or shoot myself. You know, because I am guilty of something.

Mourning, survival, and masculinity

Historically, the cultural task of mourning after war, specifically the anguished public displays, has fallen upon women. The grief of men is relatively unwritten and leaves men marginalized if their mourning does not follow cultural expectations. The social construction of wartime roles for men and the impact of fantasies about appropriate gender-related mourning are noted in the testimonies of the veterans. In their stories, the refusal to support the manic rhetoric that hides the devastation of war reveals the aims of the state to motivate citizens to partake in war and stay the course.

The aims of the state require the extrusion of violence, death, and prolonged anguish. Catastrophic losses must be hidden and reframed as honorable and patriotic, for example as a heroic death for one's country. Recall that, during the early years of the Gulf War, images of the coffins containing the

remains of falling soldiers were banned from public view. And, despite George Bush's proclamation that it was to honor and respect the families of the fallen, this suppression served to hide the devastation of war from the American public. The coffins of soldiers are covered with American flags emphasizing patriotic service rather than the remains of loved ones within.

During a war, emotions attendant to loss and moral conflict must be put aside or even disavowed for the sake of soldier survival. Soldiers are taught how to manage and suppress distracting emotions, but are left with this protective armor when they leave service. As Master Sargent Stan observed in *Leave no soldier* (Bassin, 2008), "During war, we learn to say, we just killed an old lady, that doesn't mean anything. But once that emotional armor is put on it is rather difficult to remove." This delay of grief may contribute to the development of PTSD or depression.

However, for a number of veterans I have come to know, military service and prolonged exposure to combat created a crisis of identity, including of what it means to be a man. They developed a critical understanding and unraveling of the gendered construction of wartime roles and behavior for men. The intense emotional experiences often evoked within veterans' gatherings provided an opportunity for an emergence of and receptivity to alternative ways of being a man. The veterans had opportunities to reevaluate the ideals of the soldier-hero and reflect on the performative aspects of masculinity. One could argue that the bonds of family-like attachments and camaraderie during combat, constructed in the face of collective exposure to violence, death, and, when the fog lifted, survivorship, served as grounds for new expressions of mourning.

Deconstruction of "manhood" and "manning up" liberates aspects of humanity, attachment, and vulnerability that ironically give these men the real sense of manliness that they imagined would be obtained through the ideal of the warrior-hero. As Sebastian Junger (2016) suggests, the pervasiveness of images of military equipment, uniforms, and dramatic action cover up the humanity of people fighting wars. In *Leave no soldier* (Bassin, 2008), Artie Muller, the head of Rolling Thunder, Inc., suggests that "folks think he is a macho man into heavy metal because of the spikes on the shoulder of his motor-cycle leather jacket." Ironically, the spikes cover over and protect an old war wound from being slapped on the shoulder from well-intended comrades.

War is one situation where men express love for each other without inhibition. Artie Muller, in *Leave no soldier*, spoke to the fierce, intimate bonds

that men have with their fellow soldiers and observed that extreme acts of courage are based on love for each other rather than duty. Artie says, "you die for each other, you share everything you have." The interdependence within platoons provides for closeness akin to family life.

US veterans have sought to communalize trauma through strong relational ties with other survivors of violent war, hence creating their facilitating environments in which to access and manage the grief of war, to mark and redress their unresolved mourning, and to affect their return from metaphoric "prisoners of war" or "missing in action" to witnesses of the war and their combat experiences.

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. Alternative modes of mourning are facilitated in intergenerational communities of containing environments that hold the myriad of overwhelming emotions in the wake of traumatic and catastrophic loss. These communities alleviate the shame of grief and offer a refuge for men to drop the burden of "manhood."

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. Marble memorials or solemn ceremonies did not mark grief, but rather continually engage them in efforts to ignite restoration and reparation. They chose to use their pasts rather than suffer them.

Combat Paper

Combat Paper, a community in the emerging Veterans' Art Movement, originated when Drew Cameron, a returning soldier, publically cut his military uniform off his body in the presence of his peers. He subsequently shredded, pulped, and pressed the pulped uniform into handmade paper. Cameron called the process "liberating rag," and the product "combat paper." Currently, groups of veterans in Combat Paper workshops, throughout the country, are offered the opportunity to duplicate Cameron's process with their military uniforms.

Combat paper is not just paper; it is an art object that materially and symbolically holds the traces of the war experiences the soldiers encountered while wearing those now-deconstructed uniforms. The fibers of the paper literally "contain" the blood, sweat, tears, and mud of combat. And while the

handmade combat paper contains no explicit reference to any particular wartime event, veterans are encouraged, within the safe space of all veteran workshops, to begin a process of storytelling on the paper with words or imagery. Combat Paper transforms returning military personnel from "bystanders" to self-witnessing veteran artists. Combat Paper reflects the relational and reintegrative functions of art for those whose traumatic memory has not been containable in words. Past unspeakable losses are captured and reconstructed through the material reenactment with their combat fatigues.

Their efforts illustrate the capacities of visual art to capture, reintegrate, and transmit something of the experience of traumatic memories, and, in doing so, provide a manageable dose of reengagement with unspeakable losses for both veteran-artist and available witnessing-audience. Their challenges and recuperative strategies are timely in light of the current political climate, which requires turning anger and despair into power and social action. As a mental health support and research advisor for Combat Paper, NJ, I have come to appreciate the transformation of uniforms into paper as a strategy of mourning. Here, wartime experiences, fractured and fragmented, are reconfigured into the grounds in which the process of integrating may be a possibility.

By Our Own Hand

Since the War on Terror began, 6717 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. Veteran suicide is on the rise, reflecting a tragic solution to unbearable moral injury in our veteran population. 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. As Sue Grand has suggested, "we have a tremendous imbalance in who experiences moral injury, it is the soldier who carries it, and it is time that civilian society took on some of the burdens we placed on the soldiers who fight in our name" (Bassin, 2016).

Shay has re-read *The Iliad* with an appreciation of the value of the Athenian community in facilitating the reintegration of the returning warrior. He suggests that:

Both the veteran community and the greater public for whom they have suffered should meet face to face in daylight, and listen, and watch, and weep, just as

citizen soldiers of ancient Athens did in the theater at the foot of the Acropolis. But the ancient practice of the Athenian theater required the participation of all citizens of the democracy to share the burden of combat grief and guilt to restore themis or moral consciousness to the warrior as well as the nation. (Shay, 1994, p. 194)

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 had been seen to be a form of civic group therapy (Meagher, 2006). Their mourning has not been a private affair; they have taken on acts of social responsibility and, in doing so, they have begun to take back their lives, and in doing so transform themselves and their communities from mere bystanders to attuned witnesses of the dire consequences of war.

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 nonjudgmental community to help the veteran manage 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 space in which the individual's life is forever changed by the experience of loss, and moral injury can be held as an ongoing process. As one changes, the meaning of one's actions hopefully undergoes some compassionate revision, initiating the beginning of a long journey towards 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.

Currently, and in collaboration with Frontline Arts, an emerging veterans art collective, a warehouse-sized public art installation is being designed to facilitate and support community grieving. 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 made for global peace, hope, strength, compassion, and protection from harm. For the installation, cords draped with combat paper "flags" will attach to the ceiling and the walls at different heights to create a variety of visual planes, suggesting

the weight and gravity of the 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 flags 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 person 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 dialog, sharing in the military experience by physically manipulating and reclaiming the “trace object,” the military uniform. Current plans include the creation of additional 22 sheets of combat paper to be made every day at the installation. These will symbolically represent the 22 veteran suicides estimated to occur every day. 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.

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 towards returning warriors. The installation will invite the receptive viewer to enter in, experience, and explore, along with the paper-

makers, promoting a mutual understanding of the consequences of the military experience, combat especially. By Our Own Hand hopes to create a community mourning space encouraging critical reflection and engaged remembrance of the price of war.

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