

Transforming Trauma: Moral Injury and Arts with Military Veterans, Families and Communities

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Winston Churchill Fellow 2016



Armed Services Arts Partnership (ASAP)

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Executive Summary



Coming Home Project, Paddy Faulkner

In 2016 I was awarded a Winston Churchill Travel Fellowship to explore how the creative arts are supporting veterans, families and communities with the sometimes complex process of coming home from conflict. In America I witnessed many inspiring examples of arts practice. I also visited the extraordinary city of Sarajevo, with its rich history of arts as a symbol of resilience during the Bosnian War of the 1990's, for a gathering of international experts in the field of trauma, memory and healing. **The core discovery of my Fellowship is that the emerging construct of moral injury (Litz et al, 2009) and the deep societal challenges this presents, create a strong argument for arts being integral to future developments of trauma work in the UK.**

Arts and Health and Wellbeing in the UK

In 2015 the All Party Parliamentary Group for Arts, Health and Wellbeing launched a major inquiry into the role of the arts in health and wellbeing. The resulting report, published in July 2017, *Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing*, is a rallying, hopeful cry. It calls for greater commissioning of arts interventions across health and social care and testifies to the transformative impact and life-changing potential of arts engagement. Global advances in neuroscience are also contributing to the evidence base for arts engagement. Psychiatrist and trauma expert, Bessel van der Kolk, dedicates a chapter of his recent book, *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014) to theatre and its potential for helping people affected by complex trauma.

Listening to the wisdom

It is a hopeful time in some ways, deeply troubling in others. Travelling around America in 2016, it was impossible to ignore the growing drumbeat of Trump's violent campaign rhetoric. It created an uneasy backdrop to the stories and artworks I was experiencing, with their cautionary wisdom of the true human cost of war and divisive narratives. In Sarajevo I had the privilege of listening to local people who had lived through the siege of their city. They spoke of the pressing need to create cohesive communities where listening is truly valued. Those who have survived wars, as civilians or combatants, are the true experts on these issues. I hope in this report I can do justice to their voices.

Summary of Recommendations

1. Bring an awareness of moral injury into the UK discourse on veterans' and families' mental health; this will require further consideration of the ethical and spiritual dimensions of war related trauma and for these to be implemented into policy discussions and healthcare models.
2. Create opportunities for veterans' and families' stories to be shared through exploring the possibility of a UK Truth Commission on Trauma and Moral Injury.
3. Promote the inclusion of the arts and creative arts therapies in national health and military strategic plans and initiatives. Arts should be formally recognised as a credible and transformative modality for veterans, families and communities affected by trauma and moral injury, with arts routinely offered as an intervention, alongside clinical options.
4. Establish a **National Framework for Arts and Trauma**, so that learning from military and civilian populations affected by trauma can be shared. The starting point for this would be a Summit on Arts and Trauma for stakeholders across the arts, health and military sectors.
5. Develop training programmes for artists and creative arts therapists interested in working with veterans and families, with support and advice on project planning, recruitment, retention, working with sensitive material, boundaries and self-care.
6. Conduct research into the benefits and potential of arts interventions to address and repair moral injury. This would need to be multidisciplinary research, designed with sensitivity and an awareness of the "hard to measure" shifts and changes that arts engagement can bring about.

Background to the Fellowship



Abandoned Brothers, Re-Live, Michael Barnes

I am an Applied Theatre practitioner and CBT therapist. I am also the Co-Founder alongside Karin Diamond, of **Re-Live**, a registered charity providing an award-winning programme of Life Story Theatre work. Based in Cardiff, Re-Live works alongside people and communities, inviting them to share their experiences, so that audiences young and old can witness the untold stories of our time.

My journey into arts with military veterans and families began in 2012 when Re-Live, with the support of NHS Veterans Wales, created **Abandoned Brothers**, a theatre project with veterans and family members who experienced conflict in the Falklands, Northern Ireland and the Gulf War. This project was later awarded an Arts and Health Practice Award from the Royal Society for Public Health. This work has developed into an ongoing creative programme called **Coming Home**, where veterans and family members work with members of the local community, sharing life experiences and performing together with the aim of raising awareness of mental health, building resilience and reconnecting veterans with their community.

I am deeply grateful to those first veterans and family members, who took the step of entering into a creative process with us. They placed their trust in us. In the context of their experiences, this was no small act. They taught me a great deal about the complexity of the mental health crisis facing veterans and families and the failures of successive governments and military bodies to address it. They also taught me about the extraordinary strength of ordinary men and women, and the potential of the arts to create a platform for complex stories to be shared and witnessed by communities.

This Fellowship report is the culmination of the journey we began together in 2012. I wish I had known then what I know now about moral injury. I thank them and I thank all of the veterans, family members, artists and community members I met on my travels. I wish them peace.

New directions in trauma thinking in the UK

There were 2.6 million UK Armed Forces veterans living in households in the UK at the 2014 census, although recent estimates put the exact figure at closer to 5 million (Mental Health Foundation, 2017). Approximately 20,000 people leave the armed forces each year and over 220,000 troops have deployed to Iraq and/or Afghanistan.

Journalist and author Matthew Green recently carried out extensive research with veterans and families in the UK. His book, *Aftershock, The Untold Story of Surviving Peace* (2015) conveys the complexity of the suffering of those struggling with the aftermath of their war experiences. He writes of the “futureless isolation” many veterans are living with. His phrase resonates with my experiences of veterans at home in Wales and in America, capturing the deep, hard to articulate suffering, the loss of identity and purpose which cognitive therapy and medication often cannot reach.

Call to Mind: Wales Review of Veterans and Families Mental Health and Other Needs (May 2016) identified a serious lack of support for family members. Domestic violence, alcohol misuse, involvement with the criminal justice system are cited as significant issues. Partners and family members often end up taking on carer responsibilities which, unsupported, can lead to exhaustion, burnout and family breakdown. Family members can themselves end up being diagnosed (or not) with Secondary Traumatic Symptoms, as a result of living in close proximity to and sharing the impact of their family member’s trauma. The review emphasised the need to “recognise and appropriately cater for the practical, social and emotional support needs of the families of veterans with mental health problems”.

Arts with Veterans and Families in the UK

In the UK, arts with veterans and families is an emerging field. In late 2015, the All Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing held a roundtable discussion on Arts and Post-Traumatic Stress. Companies such as Rosie Kay Dance Company, Company Bravo Two Zero, Veterans in Practice and Combat Veteran Players presented the dance, theatre and film projects they have been developing and performing, and identified the future potential of this work.

The roundtable discussion identified the need to develop a common language to convey what the arts can offer the field of veterans and families’ mental health, the need for further research and evaluation and issues around sustainability of this work, funding and resources. It raised the wider question of how comfortably arts interventions can sit within the medical model, with its emphasis on diagnosis and cure, and acknowledged a shift that is beginning to occur, where someone affected by traumatic stress might increasingly be able to say, “Don’t ask me what’s wrong with me, ask me what’s happened to me.”

Trauma Informed Practice

These conversations are happening in the context of a growing awareness across the UK of the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE’s) and the need for Trauma Informed Practice. Wales recently launched the ACE Support Hub and Scotland has published *Transforming Psychological Trauma: A Knowledge and Skills Framework for the Scottish Workforce*, (2017) in response to the emerging evidence that trauma informed systems can have better outcomes for people affected by trauma. Bessel van der Kolk writes “We are on the verge of becoming a trauma-conscious society” (2014) and argues that the arts have much to contribute to this new wave of trauma informed practice.

Arts and the Military in the United States

There are more than 22 million veterans in the United States today, with the largest number from the Vietnam era. More than 2 million troops have been deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001. While many make successful, healthy transitions, there are serious and complex mental health issues facing the veteran community. The most commonly cited statistic around veteran suicide in the United States, the Department of Veteran Affairs, 2013 Suicide Report, states that an average of 22 veterans commit suicide every day.

National Initiative for Arts & Health in the Military

In October 2011, the *National Summit: Arts in Healing for Warriors* took place, bringing together for the first time various branches of the military with civilian agencies to discuss how engaging with the arts could help meet the key health issues the military population was facing.

This led to the creation of the **National Initiative for Arts & Health in the Military**, launched in 2012 to advance the arts in health, healing, and healthcare for military service members, veterans, families and caregivers. The goals of the National Initiative are to:

- ☐ Raise visibility, understanding, and support of arts and health in the military
- ☐ Advance the policy, practice, and quality use of arts and creativity as tools for health in the military
- ☐ Make the arts as tools for health available to all active duty military, staff, family members, veterans and caregivers

There are now 130 arts programs listed in the National Initiative for Arts and Health in the Military Network Directory, across a wide and growing range of artforms.

“Collectively, the challenges facing our military service members, Veterans, their families and caregivers require more than the traditional medical model can solve” Briefing Paper prepared for the National Roundtable for Arts, Health and Well-being Across the Military Continuum November 30, 2016

Centre of Excellence

Walter Reed, National Military Medical Center (WRNMMC), in Bethesda, MD, is the largest military medical centre in the United States, with 1 million patient visits a year including wounded warriors and their family members. This state of the art medical and research facility has a Creative Arts Program embedded in the care it offers. As well as the more widely understood art therapy programmes, Walter Reed Bethesda’s Department of Psychiatry hosts monthly performances for staff, patients, and family through the **Stages of Healing program**, which also includes bedside performances in individual wards and patient rooms.

Evidence Base

In 2013 the National Initiative published ***Arts, Health and Wellbeing across the Military Continuum, a White paper and Framing a National Plan for Action*** which listed key areas where the impact and effectiveness of arts interventions have already been demonstrated: fostering readiness, resilience, retention and reintegration. It made 17 recommendations, of which a 2016 review stated 9 have so far been successfully implemented.

Theme 1 Moral injury and wounded souls; what can the arts offer to the emerging debate?



“If there are any serving or past members of the military travelling with us today, we would like to thank you for your service and invite you to board the plane first”

I heard these words over the tannoy in every airport I visited in America. Each time I was struck by the contrast between the invisibility of veterans in the UK and the public gestures of gratitude on display in America. I quickly discovered however that there was a dissonance between the public displays and what many veterans were actually experiencing. A veteran I met in Minneapolis introduced me to the concept of moral injury, and described her ambivalence about the ritual thank you’s

“How can people “Thank me for my service” but not even ask me what I’ve done or been through? Nobody wants to hear the reality. It’s a cop out and I’m not feeling the love.”

What is Moral Injury?

The first use of the term “moral injury” is thought to be in the war diaries of Camillo Mac Bica, a Vietnam veteran. Unlike PTSD, which has become an all-encompassing term for understanding the psychological suffering of veterans, moral injury acknowledges a deeper, spiritual condition, a “soul wound” (Tick, 2005) encompassing shame, guilt and loss of identity.

Brett Litz and colleagues define moral injury as stemming from “perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations.” David Woods, Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and author of *What Have We Done: The Moral Injury of Our Longest Wars* (2016) has described moral injury as “the signature wound of today’s veterans”.

The concept of moral injury resonated with my experiences of working with veterans in Wales. Stories I had heard of the murkiness of the long “dirty war” fought just across the water in Northern Ireland came to mind, where as one veteran said “I could be on patrol in Belfast at 10am and back home in Cardiff at teatime, with my kids”. I thought of an Irish veteran who shared with an audience the fact that he had been “ordered by the British government” to assassinate IRA men. Another who, in the chaos of a gun battle had accidentally shot and killed a child. I thought of a gentle man who told of seeing his best friend blown to pieces by an IED in Afghanistan and how he, as the medic on the team, was tasked with literally picking up the pieces. The scars on the arms of group members told the stories, not just of battles fought in foreign lands, but of suicide attempts and chronic self-harm. The moral murkiness was slowly killing some of these men, and their families too. Their souls needed healing.

How is America responding to moral injury?

Although moral injury is an ancient condition, research and treatment are in the very early stages. Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini are developing pioneering work at The Soul Repair Center at Brite Divinity School, addressing moral injury from a spiritual perspective. Brett Litz and colleagues are piloting a treatment called Adaptive Disclosure (2015) which centres around incremental sharing of morally injurious experiences in groupwork settings for veterans, with an emphasis on self-forgiveness and compassion building.

The Moral Injury Project, Syracuse, America was formed in 2014 by academics, researchers, religious scholars, veterans, chaplains, and mental health providers exploring the question: “What are we doing about moral injury among US military veterans?”

What can the arts offer to Moral Injury?

- A non-judgemental space that is neither a therapy nor religious setting where ethical and existential questions around forgiveness, reconciliation, atonement that struggle to find their place in the clinical model can be explored
- Witnessing by an audience, which can contribute to the letting go of shame. Early developments in evaluating approaches to repairing moral injury share the finding that having the story heard by the community can contribute to the healing process. Jonathan Shay writes that, “Moral injury can only be absolved when “the trauma survivor... [is] permitted and empowered to voice his or her experience....” (Shay, 2010)
- Creative approaches do not necessitate the re-visiting or re-experiencing of the traumatic event which can be a barrier to veterans seeking or staying with talking therapies. Arts present multiple ways of looking at, reflecting on and reshaping complicated moral experiences
- A chance to restore and develop the imagination which trauma often takes away and is central to being able to fully live again (van der Kolk, 2014) and a space to create “surplus reality” (Moreno, 1965) where imaginary conversations can be had eg. with combatants or civilians who have died and alternative futures considered
- Reconnection with other human beings through the focus and camaraderie of a shared creative process; physical, emotional and social connectedness.

Case Study 1.1 Exit 12 Dance



Exit 12 Dance, Tracy Dorman

“This is my passion, this is what drives me, gives me purpose. It gives me a feeling of service to other veterans. And it has given me a community and a family. That’s what this has been to me, extremely cathartic and extremely healing”. Roman Baca

I had the privilege of meeting Roman Baca, an ex-marine who set up Exit 12 Dance Company. Watching the beautiful dance work of his company, at St Joseph’s University theatre, New Haven, interspersed with Roman’s stories of his time in Iraq was a powerful and hopeful testament to recovery from war. Roman had loved ballet before joining the military and when he returned and found himself struggling with the transition, he realised that ballet could be part of the solution.

“When I was in Fallujah, the pull to art was even stronger...I didn’t feel comfortable doing anything balletic, so I turned to another form or art. When we had time off I would climb to the top of where we were staying and I would sit on the roof and I would sketch. I also dreamed up the beginnings of what would become Exit 12.

Investigating the moral questions

“I wanted to transport the audience to Iraq. Coming home, and seeing the media and the stories and perceptions of what it was like to fight in the Middle East, there was so much that was wrong. Or overdramatised or not talked about enough. I wanted to communicate the experiences of a single

soldier serving overseas and being totally ripped from what they knew into a land where everything was foreign.

“In the first show I dramatized an experience that happened in Iraq when we took down an Iraqi civilian that had a hidden weapon. I put it onstage because I wanted to investigate it. Look back and say, were we right? Were we wrong? What really happened? I had two of my dancers perform the marines and I performed the Iraqi civilian. And to shift that perspective spoke volumes. To feel how it would feel if I had my wife and my kids behind me, and someone came up with a weapon, slung, ready, right in front of me, it automatically creates this chasm.”

Roman is using his artform to explore and re-evaluate the complex moral and ethical challenges his deployment presented. His dance work captures the struggle of *“feeling empathy and compassion for Iraqi civilians while following rules of engagement and the detachment, violence and aggression the role demands”*. Roman and his company invite their audiences to share in this process of re-examining. This echoes Brock and Lettini’s thinking on moral repair, where the community must share in the journey of meaning making and collective responsibility for wars that have been fought.

Exit 12 Dance have performed at Walter Reed Military Medical Center, West Point Military Academy, Lincoln Center, Stanford University, and perform annually on the deck of the USS Intrepid in honour of Memorial Day.

Compassion in Action

Roman exemplifies the warrior code. His war experience appears to have deepened his empathy for others in distress and his sense of purpose is driving him forward. Community action and activism have been central to his transition. Alongside their professional dance work, Exit 12 have developed an outreach programme where veterans and at-risk youth are introduced to movement and dance.

In 2012, several years after serving in Fallujah as a marine, Roman returned to Iraq “no helmet, no uniform” to deliver a dance outreach project with Iraqi children. At a performance in Irbil in between dances Roman told his story of why he had returned, to an audience of 250 people, translated into Kurdish and Arabic,

“Last time I was here I carried a gun. This time I want to have a different conversation.”

Roman’s TED talk

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjwFMgsQmBI>

2. The healing power of community; stories must be heard



“The only force of nature powerful enough to overcome the moral injuries that are inherent to traumatic experiences is a strong sense of human community and human connection.” Joshua Mantz, US Veteran

Isolation is a key feature of moral injury; a sense of being contaminated can prevent veterans from wanting to engage with others. As one Welsh veteran said, “You have these experiences that are so horrible you no longer feel like a human being.” We heal from trauma in the context of relationships and part of the healing journey from moral injury appears to be the sharing of stories with other human beings.

Creating a platform for stories to be heard

“Should moral injury ultimately be revealed as a public health problem as PTSD has, healing our veterans' wounds will require forgiveness, empathy, and a willingness to hear their stories.” Jeremy Jinkerson, The Military Psychologist, 2014

Trauma expert, Bessel van der Kolk and Max Rayneard, Director of Research and Outcomes at The Telling Project both cite witnessing first hand the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa as an inspiration for their work in America. In 2010, in response to professional and family experiences of moral injury, Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini had the idea of creating a Truth Commission on Conscience in War.

“We each had experiences with previous truth commissions as researchers of their processes and as organisers of them. We believed they opened people to truth in unique ways and enabled a deep quality of listening that is rare in society. In planning the TCCW, we learned that many veterans, regardless of their moral position on the war they fought, struggle with moral conscience after fighting.”

The Commission launched on March 21, 2010 with a Public Hearing at the Riverside Church in New York City. The hearing brought together a diverse group of over 50 Co-Sponsors and 80 Commissioners to receive testimony from 14 veterans and experts. From this, the Soul Repair Centre and its ongoing work have become a reality, with a commitment to deepening communities’ understanding of moral injury and its consequences.

Writing the Stories

“Forty-three years old, and the war occurred half a lifetime ago, and yet the remembering makes it now. And sometimes remembering will lead to a story, which makes it forever. That’s what stories are for. Stories are for joining the past to the future.” Tim O’Brien, *The Things They Carried*

There is a long history of returning soldiers turning to the written word to communicate their experiences. In America, the Iraq and Afghanistan wars have seen a new wave of literature, film and theatre emerging as combatants, families, artists and writers strive to make sense of the impact of these conflicts. A dynamic, competitive network of writers, writing groups and organisations exists across the country. **Words After War** is a literary organization bringing veterans and civilians together to examine war and conflict through the lens of literature. Founded by Brandon Willits and Mike McGrath in 2008, this organisation developed when its co-founders “witnessed first-hand the transformative power of storytelling and community building”.

I visited a **Voices from War** writing workshop and was impressed by the combination of craft and camaraderie. All classes are led by professional writers, and while the primary emphasis is on developing writing skills, a palpable sense of community and shared purpose was in the room. Founder, Kara Krauze is a civilian, and cites her own traumatic experience of losing her father to suicide as a motivation for wanting to create this program of creative writing opportunities for veterans. She talks of “breaking the silence” and allowing space for “complicated experiences to be explored”.

I also experienced the powerful performance work of **Warrior Chorus**, led by artist and veteran, Maurice Decal with Aquila Theater Company, New York. The company uses ancient literature to build dialogue regarding the veteran experience, war and service through writing workshops, performances and discussions.

There are several models here which could be successfully replicated in the UK, providing low-cost interventions which encourage community, develop understanding and create high quality artistic and literary output.

Case Study 2.1: The Telling Project



The Telling Minneapolis, Telling Project

“My unspoken truth kept me in dark places in my head, and the Telling Project shed light into that, which set me free. I could not heal alone.” Dee B., Veteran & Military Spouse

The Telling Project have created a highly skilled model of connecting veterans and communities through storytelling theatre, which they are implementing on a national scale, a remarkable feat from this small, inspiring team. Executive Director, Jonathan Wei and Director of Research and Outcomes, Max Rayneard are committed to creating a platform for dialogue, their mission summarised in their words: “It’s time to speak, it’s time to listen.”

Process

- The writer/director meets with participants for an in depth interview about their military experience. He then goes away and writes a script, weaving together the stories of each veteran or family member into a cohesive, poetic narrative
- Each veteran or family member reads the script for approval before the group comes together for a short, intensive period of rehearsal and performance training
- The play is performed at a professional theatre in the local community, supported by a full-scale publicity campaign to build interest and audience
- Each performance is followed by a discussion between audience and performers, veterans and their community with the aim of deepening understanding and bridging the military/civilian divide

Reach

- Since 2008, The Telling Project has produced 40+ original performances
- 180 veterans and family members have shared their stories on stage
- Veterans have performed in 16 states across the nation
- Decision makers and policy experts are reached through targeted performances and discussions through the Telling Project Institute



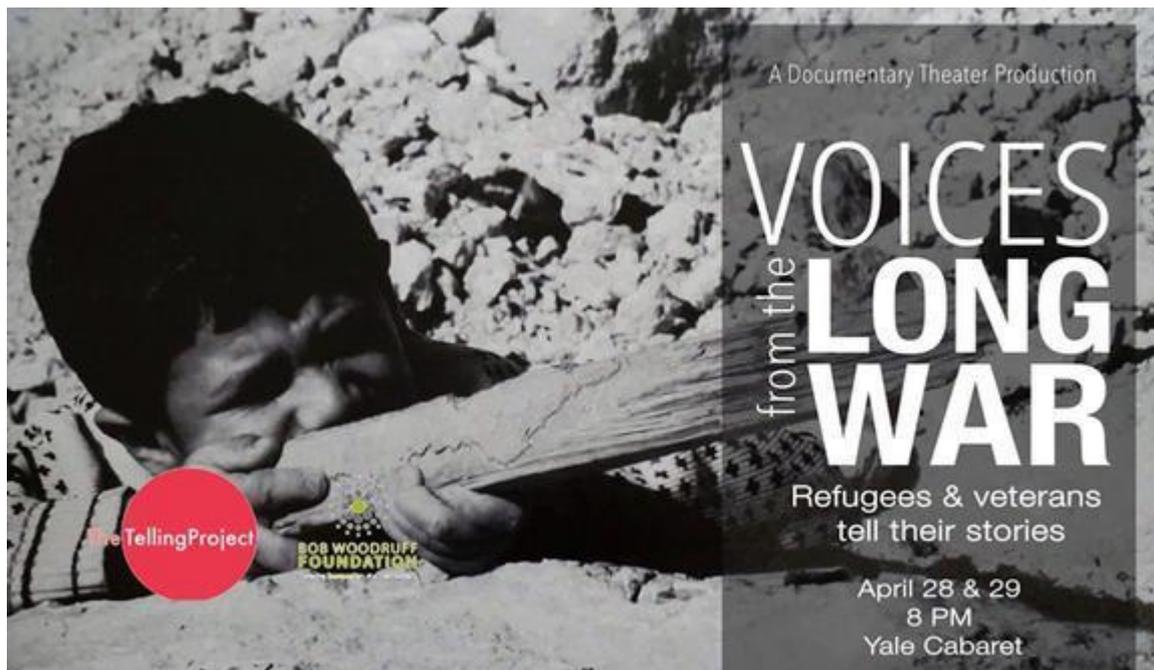
The Telling Project

“The Telling did what theater at its best does: start a conversation. The performances were very true and compelling, and the impact on the audience was extraordinary.” Martha S., Audience Member

Moral Repair

The Telling Project’s success is challenging the much stated belief that only veterans will be able to hear and understand veterans’ experiences. Their plays do not apologise for their content; audience’s listen to veterans reflect on the pain of seeing children die, the helplessness of not being able to save civilians. Across America, audiences at Telling Project events are bearing witness and sharing the weight of moral injury and the consequences of warfare. As Brock and Lettini write, in their work on moral repair:

“Veterans need each other, and they may never share with the rest of us what they share with each other. But they also need the civilians in their lives, those of us with whom they must learn to live again. To listen to veterans requires patience with their silence and with the confusion, grief, anger and shame it carries...we must be willing to engage their moral and theological questions with openness and to journey with them as we are mutually transformed in the process.” (2012)



“I wanted to share my story with everyone. We are all humans, it doesn’t matter your nationality, I want to show the world what experience I have” Ali As Saadi, Performer

Voices from the Long War was a powerful performance which brought together Afghan and Iraqi refugees now living in New Haven, with American veterans who had fought in their countries to share their experiences onstage. Watching the performers support each other onstage was deeply moving. There was an uncomfortable honesty in hearing the stories of the soldiers and local civilians side by side, which forced us, the audience, to connect with the enormity of the impact of “The Long War” on communities at home and abroad.

“I knew I needed to do something to connect. I felt the need to take a perspective that was wider than the veterans – to include the people who grew up in these war-torn countries” Tom Berry, Director and US Veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan

“One of the scenes that does that dramatically is when our Marine veteran, Tom Burke, is confronted with a tough decision on whether he should shoot a young boy on a motorbike coming his way. At the same time, one of our Iraqi refugees was that boy in a situation in a Baghdad market where he was almost shot by U.S. troops. So by inter-splicing their words in the telling of the story, you see the parallel experience... The narrative is just a little bit wider than you get normally when you see these types of reflections on war.”

Not making it ok

Despite the fact that each of the performers told their stories calmly and stoically, and there was laughter and hopeful banter during the aftershow discussion, I felt haunted afterwards. The starkness of their words and the simple staging allowed us to see the emptiness. It felt as though a part of those young people had gone. We could almost see the void, a lost space behind the eyes. A soul wound.

Theme 3. Transforming Trauma; the artform as a container



Feast of Crispian Workshop

“It’s important to push yourself to the edge, to the limits. That’s when change can happen. Trauma gets you stuck, new experiences can shift you, get you unstuck.” Bessel Van der Kolk

Trauma, Embodiment, Synchrony and Finding your Voice

I attended a symposium at the Garrison Institute, New York State, convened by trauma expert, Bessel van der Kolk in partnership with artists from SongwritingWith:Soldiers and Feast of Crispian, a professional theatre company working with veterans through Shakespeare. This was an exciting, confronting enquiry into the therapeutic potential of arts in trauma settings. Experiential and immersive, the event brought together latest thinking from neuroscience and the clinical world with innovative artistic practice with veterans and families.

Key themes:

- Traumatized people are often “scared to feel”, the arts can provide a container in which emotion can be safely experienced and explored
- Bringing together best practice from clinical and artistic worlds is the best way to advance trauma work; theatre, movement, music can help with emotional regulation and soothe the nervous system of traumatized people by developing synchrony and rhythm
- The power of Shakespeare’s language allows traumatized veterans a way of communicating their experience that doesn’t require them to tell their story; they can be “shielded by character” and “empowered by the language”

SongwritingWith:Soldiers



Songwriting with Soldiers Creative Team

After singer-songwriter Darden Smith performed at a US military hospital in Landstuhl, Germany, he returned to Austin, Texas, determined “to use the art of songwriting in the service of our brothers and sisters in arms.” He partnered with Mary Judd, an expert in communications and educational programming and established SongwritingWith:Soldiers in October 2012.

- ☐ Songwriting acts as a catalyst for positive change, offering veterans a unique way to tell their stories, rebuild trust, release pain, and forge new bonds.
- ☐ In retreat and workshop settings, veterans and service members are paired with professional songwriters to craft songs about their experiences of combat and the return home
- ☐ Through their songs, participants rediscover their creativity and reconnect with family, friends, and communities.
- ☐ The songs are recorded and shared through CDs, concerts, and social media with the aim of bridging the divide between military and civilian communities

Shakespeare with Veterans

Veterans outreach program at Bedlam Theatre, New York



“In our classes, veterans discover what they learned about humanity from their combat experiences, and how their experience resonates within the broader Western Culture that sent them to war. I have found that military veterans sometimes feel more at home in Shakespeare's tragedies and history plays than they do in 21st century New York.” Jonny Meyer, US Veteran, Bedlam Outreach

- Weekly Shakespeare workshops “every single Monday, all year round”. Veterans of all ages, “from their 20’s to 80’s” some with no theatre experience, come together to explore and express through Shakespeare
- Established by actor and veteran Stefan Wolfert whose acclaimed one man show, Cry Havoc, explores issues of duty, courage and transition through Shakespeare

Case Study 3: Comedy Bootcamp, Armed Services Arts Partnership (ASAP)



Armed Services Arts Partnership, Comedy Performance

"As I looked back on this journey, I realized that I did not have to be 'that guy' with PTSD. In fact, when I perform [comedy], I am not 'that guy,' I am a totally different person." William Breckenridge, US Army Veteran

I'm sitting in a packed comedy club in Washington DC. Anticipation and excitement fill the room, the audience is a mix of young military folk, families and local community. As the first comic steps onto the stage, a middle-aged female veteran with her service dog, a roar of support and approval fills the club. She kicks off the night with a hilarious story of how she acquired "brain injury Number One". It is irreverent, painful, funny and we are with her all the way. This extraordinary evening showcased the best of what the arts can do, this was truly transforming trauma.

Mission

Armed Service Arts Partnership's mission is to reintegrate veterans into their communities through the arts:

"Through our collaborative, community-driven, and deeply focused program model, we are forging a new path for veterans to reintegrate into civilian life, and for our communities to welcome them home."

Approach

- ASAP's Founder, Sam Pressler has created an extraordinary arts organisation based on his belief in and personal experience of the transformative power of comedy. After losing a family member to suicide while in high school, Sam turned to comedy to cope.
- When he later learned about mental health challenges affecting veterans through his college research, Sam felt compelled to act. While still at college he launched the country's first comedy class for veterans, as well as the largest veterans writing group in the Southeast. Through his creative vision and entrepreneurial skill, this has grown exponentially
- ASAP now offer free, weekly classes in stand-up comedy, improv, storytelling, and creative writing for veterans.
- They host regular performances and veteran open mics, partnering with arts organizations and teaching artists to ensure consistent opportunities for artistic growth.

Impact

- ASAP is thriving in the D.C. Metro area and Hampton Roads, VA, serving thousands of veterans and military families, and empowering its alumni to become artistic leaders in their communities.
- They have performed at The White House, been featured on a PBS documentary, and have won multiple awards and recognitions, including Forbes 30 Under 30 list for "Social Entrepreneurship."

Conclusion/ Coming Home



Coming Home Rehearsal, Michael Barnes

Shortly after my return from America, in May 2016 I led a two week intensive arts project, in which veterans, family members and local community members came together and worked with a musician, choreographers, theatre practitioners and a film-maker to explore the impact of coming home from traumatic experiences. This work was infused with all of the learning and perspectives I had gathered in America. At its heart was a recognition that we – veterans and civilians - are perhaps not as different as we think. As stories and experiences were shared, it became clear that putting on a uniform does not create an insurmountable barrier to understanding. We all had experiences of loss and pain to share. We were not just working with the trauma of war - but the trauma of difficult childhoods, of abuse, of poverty and lack of love. And we were celebrating the hope that reconnection and belonging can offer.

Ceremony:

At the end of the two weeks, we invited an audience in to witness some of the work we had been creating. Our sharing ended with a homecoming ceremony. We wanted to create a ritual to provide the ending that the veterans in the group had not had when they left the military. We invited the audience to stand with us in a circle, and the veterans moved into the centre, carrying the rucksacks and holdalls they had carried throughout the performance. Several community members spoke these words aloud:

We hear your stories

We feel your pain

We stand with you

And all who carry the weight of war

You are not alone

We will share the fear

The shame

The loneliness

We will bring you home

Together we can heal

Together we are strong

We will bring you home

Each of the men lowered their bag to the floor, and made a brief statement to the audience, their community. We had not rehearsed this and simply invited each person to say whatever they would like witnessed in that moment. Their words included:

I want to let go of the guilt and the anger

I want to move forward

I want my children back

I want to express myself through writing

The older women in the project, some of whom had family members in the first and second world wars, then walked into the circle, took the men by the arm and led them back into the circle. We then invited the audience to join us in singing a simple choral song;

This is home, where I belong, in this breath, in this heart

This is home, where I belong, in this voice, in this song

The Long Road Home

Recovering from trauma is a long road, and requires great strength, support, patience and flexibility. Many of the veteran artists, performers, practitioners and survivors I have been privileged to meet share an intensity of purpose and drive that could only come from a deep and challenging inner journey. I share the observations of Matthew Green as he writes

"...many of the men and women I met proved that remarkable recoveries were possible...For some, the suffering they endured on leaving the forces cracked the shell of their military persona and allowed a deeper, more authentic self to shine through – provided wise enough help was on hand to support a prolonged and often painful rebirth."

It is clear from many of the conversations I had with veteran artists across America that their work is generating post-traumatic growth, and that the arts have much to contribute to our understanding of the process of growth after trauma. The White Paper, *Arts, Health and Wellbeing across the Military Continuum* states that "Research is needed to determine the effectiveness of the arts in promoting post-traumatic growth." I would add to this that we would also be wise to invest into research on the arts and moral injury, for it is here, in the deepest places, the soul wound, that the arts may have the most to offer.

Recommendations

- 1. Bring an awareness of moral injury into the UK discourse on veterans and families mental health;** this will require further consideration of the ethical and spiritual dimensions of war related trauma and for this to be implemented into policy discussions and healthcare models.
- 2. Create opportunities for veterans' and families' stories to be shared through exploring the possibility of a UK Truth Commission on Trauma and Moral Injury.**
- 3. Promote the inclusion of the arts and creative arts therapies in national health and military strategic agency and department plans and initiatives.** Arts should be formally recognised as a credible and transformative modality for veterans, families and communities, with arts routinely offered as an intervention to veterans and families affected by trauma and moral injury, alongside clinical options.
- 4. Establish a National Framework for Arts and Trauma, so that learning from military and civilian populations affected by trauma can be shared.** The starting point for this would be a Summit on Arts and Trauma for stakeholders across the arts, health and military sectors.
- 5. Develop training programmes for artists and art therapists interested in working with veterans and families,** with support and advice on project planning, recruitment, retention, working with sensitive material, boundaries and self-care
- 6. Carry out research into the benefits and potential of arts interventions to address and repair moral injury.** This would need to be multidisciplinary research, designed with sensitivity and an awareness of the "hard to measure" shifts and changes that arts engagement can create.

References, further reading and viewing

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- Van der Kolk, B.A. (2014) *The Body Keeps the Score*. New York, Viking Penguin
- Shay, J. (2010) *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* Scribner,
- Tick, E. (2005) *War and the Soul*.
- Moral injury as a new normal in the modern war*, Jeremy Jinkerson, *The Military Psychologist*, 2014

Organisations visited

- <http://exit12danceco.org/>
- <https://thetellingproject.org/>
- <https://voicesfromwar.org/>
- <http://wordsafterwar.org/>
- <http://bedlam.org/outreach/>
- <http://www.asapasap.org/>
- <http://www.aquilatheatre.com/warrior-chorus>
- <http://www.feastofcrispian.org/>
- <http://www.songwritingwithsoldiers.org>
- <http://www.tpo.ba/b/novosti1EN.html>

Publications and Policy

In the UK

Inquiry Report *Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing*

<http://www.artshealthandwellbeing.org.uk/appg-inquiry/>

Transforming Psychological Trauma, A Knowledge and Skills Framework for the Scottish Workforce

<http://www.nes.scot.nhs.uk/media/3971582/nationaltraumatrainingframework.pdf>

In America

Arts, Health and Wellbeing across the Military Continuum, White Paper and Framing a National Plan for Action

http://www.americansforthearts.org/sites/default/files/pdf/2013/by_program/legislation_and_policy/art_and_military/ArtsHealthwellbeingWhitePaper.pdf