

# Healing of Memories Workshops Help Veterans

by Amy Blumenshine, DM, Coming Home Collaborative

Recent research with military veterans points to the importance of addressing moral injury. Pastoral care providers and congregations can learn approaches that are helpful to both military and other trauma survivors in helping people grow through moral injury. A promising modality – the Healing of Memories workshop – was recently offered locally to veterans for only the second time in the Americas.

Led and developed by Rev. Michael Lapsley, the two-and-a-half day workshops incorporate the expressive arts, supported story telling and ritual in helping people heal and grow after moral injury. The sponsoring group, an ecumenical task force of the Humphrey Institute's Warrior to Citizen Campaign, hopes to root the modality in our region so that the workshops can be available for veterans and also other members of the general public who are suffering from troubling memories.

Originally from New Zealand, Father Lapsley went to South Africa and became involved as a chaplain to the African National Congress in the anti-apartheid struggle. He became a victim of a state-sponsored assassination attempt when the religious magazine he opened exploded. It had been armed by agents of the government of South Africa. In the aftermath of pain, Father Lapsley suffered many permanent losses. Among them, he lost an eye and both hands, requiring assistance for the rest of his life with his most basic human needs.

Nevertheless, he says that his spirits were buoyed during his recovery with an international outpouring of love and support. He was able to live and grow through his own trauma and ongoing physical pain and limitations. He assisted Archbishop Desmond Tutu with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He also was able to develop approaches to reconciliation and trauma recovery that became part of the Institute for the Healing of Memories, bringing healing to many more across the world.

The veterans who attended the workshop in October continue to report that they felt that their lives were transformed by the experience. For the African-American veterans, in particular, Father Lapsley represented hope in the human race, "white" people, in particular. All of the black veterans had searing personal experiences of mistreatment because of their racial identity.

They were amazed that a person of European descent would suffer so much on their behalf. He had set aside a portion of his own privilege and become involved. He dared to challenge, as a Christian cleric, the churches who supported the apartheid violence. The state tried to kill him, but instead he rose again – not to bring vengeance, but to bring healing.

A Healing of Memories workshop intended for clergy will be held locally Monday dinner through Wednesday lunch, October 25-27. Contact Sheila Laughton for more information: phone 651-641-0008, ext. 13, or email [sheila@loyolaspirtualitycenter.org](mailto:sheila@loyolaspirtualitycenter.org).

Lapsley characterizes the healing journey as growing from victim to survivor to victor. "Sometimes people remain prisoners in their hearts," he noted. "The rage and bitterness inside is taken out on ones we love."

Lapsley recognizes the need to create safe and sacred spaces where people can share from the heart what has happened, their own experience of damaged humanness alongside the journey of their nation. "All of us have a story to tell. Every story needs a listener," Lapsley explains.

He encourages a kind of intentional and ritualized storytelling where there is time and attention for the story to be acknowledged, revered and recognized. Additionally, the workshop participants prepare and conduct a ritual as a significant part of the shared healing experience.

"We are all in need of healing, because of what we have done, what has been done to us and what we failed to do. This is true of individuals, communities and nations." He points out that all of us have been deeply affected by the wars our country has fought, sometimes because of how those wars impacted our parents or grandparents.

"My disability taught me," Lapsley notes, "we can't be human by ourselves."

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*Note: Under apartheid policy, the government of South Africa deprived the majority black population of many human rights, including their citizenship. All services were segregated and inferior for blacks and mixed race persons. Apartheid policies ended after Nelson Mandela was released from prison and elected president in 1994.*

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