

Killing and Conscience in War Creates Lasting Impact

by Amy Blumenshine, DM, Coming Home Collaborative

“Just don’t ask if we’ve ever killed anybody,” said Kevin Doyle, 27, a Houston cop and a veteran of the Afghan war. “It’s the most private thing in the world.” The veteran was responding to a journalist’s query about what guidelines he should follow as he accompanied a group of veterans on a healing-oriented camping trip run by Sierra Club. (Read the March-April 2010 article at www.sierraclub.org/sierra/201003/veterans.aspx).

Pastoral care providers have no problem understanding the moral injury implicit in taking lives and a person’s reluctance to talk about it. While the subject is definitely inappropriate for casual conversation, the people who have killed usually suffer alone from the moral injury of the experience. They need a place to lay their burden down in a context that appropriately recognizes the significance of human life.

Talking about killing is the recommendation of a recent study in the *Journal of Traumatic Stress*. It was based on their finding that Iraqi veterans who had direct connection to killing in combat, including giving orders to kill, were more likely to report the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, alcohol abuse, anger and relationship problems than other veterans.

The New York Times quoted Rachel Yehuda, a professor of psychiatry at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York, in their article about the study. “People don’t understand the moral ambiguity of combat and why it is so hard to get over it,” she said. “What makes combat veterans ill is not always about being a victim, but, in some instances, feeling very much both a perpetrator and a victim at the same time.”

Euphemisms that cloak the mission of the military, such as “neutralize,” “clear” and “collateral damage,” can make it more difficult to address the reality of the moral issue of killing. Other terms such as “service” and “sacrifice” can confuse military killing with religious imperatives.

While most deployed military do not engage directly in killing, all are taught how to kill and can be ordered to do so. Regardless of what recruiters promise, the military is under no obligation to provide training or assignment to a non-killing military occupation. Many recruits do not know what they will be ordered to do.

Since WWII-era research indicated that many military did not act to kill the enemy, military training has changed to de-sensitize the recruits to overcome their aversion to taking human life. Since then, the rates have risen for



suicide and other indices of serious personal problems in the aftermath of military experiences.

A multi-faith national initiative is forming to address the military service member’s right to protect themselves from violating their consciences. A group with a Web site at www.conscienceinwar.org argues that military members have the right to claim conscientious objection to particular wars and to particular activities in conducting war.

Resources

The Veterans Ministry Roundtable gathers for a simple lunch, noon to 1:30 p.m., Tuesday, March 9 at Our Saviours Lutheran Church, 2315 Chicago Ave., Minneapolis. Anyone interested in ministry with veterans and their families is invited. Please RSVP for lunch to ListenToVets@comcast.net.

A recent Minnesota Public Radio series provides good information for those who provide pastoral care to veterans and their families. The series can be accessed at <http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2010/02/12/midday2>.

Veterans suffer from a higher rate of unemployment than the general population. A number of resources address this problem. Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development will hold its annual veterans career fair from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. on May 5 at the Earle Brown Center in Brooklyn Center. In addition, employment coaches, volunteers from the business community, are available to provide one-to-one motivation, guidance and help with job-landing skills. To access this service or to volunteer, go to www.beyondtheyellowribbon.org/tiki-read_article.php?articleId=48