



Afterwar: Healing the Moral Wounds of Our Soldiers by Nancy Sherman.

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The words “thank you for your service” can be as vapid as “have a nice day.” What veterans of America’s “forever wars” often take them to mean, according to philosopher Nancy Sherman (Georgetown Univ.), is something like “don’t tell me how it was; I don’t want to understand your experience.” They react to such thank-yous with a resentment that is, in effect, “a bid for respect, a demand of the person who caused the injury, or who contributed significantly, to acknowledge one’s standing” (49). Philosophers call such emotions “reactive attitudes.” A soldier may interpret a civilian’s thank you as a moral injury calling for a reaction. In this case, a civilian’s appropriate response might be to acknowledge the realities of wars fought on behalf of a nation of incurious and unengaged civilians.

Sherman ascribes the term “moral injury” to Joseph Butler, an eighteenth-century English bishop.

[It] refers to experiences of serious inner conflict arising from what one takes to be grievous moral transgressions that can overwhelm one’s sense of goodness and humanity. The sense of transgression can arise from (real or apparent) transgressive commissions and omissions perpetrated by oneself or others, or from bearing witness to the intense human suffering and detritus that is [sic] a part of the grotesqueries of war and its aftermath. In some cases, the moral injury has less to do with specific (real or apparent) transgressive acts than with a generalized sense of falling short of moral and normative standards befitting good persons and good soldiers. (8)

Sherman draws on countless interviews and conversations she conducted with service members over many years. But she concentrates on the experiences of nine particular men and women, one pseudonymous, who served in Iraq and Afghanistan and came home scathed. She is an excellent storyteller.

Afterwar is a call to action, urging readers to assist in healing moral injuries incurred during wartime military service. These injuries may manifest as post-traumatic stress or the sequelae of physical wounds, including traumatic brain injuries (TBI) and the frustrations of war in particular and military life in general. The latter extend to civilian-military relationships or—especially in our time—the lack thereof. Sherman bills her book as “a manifesto for how to engage in moral repair, one on one, with individual service members so that we can begin to build a new kind of integrated community. Once we appreciate the reactive attitudes as emotions that call for a response (often *from us*), we can see what it might take to forge such a community” (19). This is a tall order and she offers too little guidance on how to carry it out.

Eduardo (“Lalo”) Panyagua, a Marine corporal, returned from Afghanistan with wounds physical and psychic, and a profound sense of moral injury, largely self-inflicted. The Marine Corps ethos fit Panyagua like his dress blues. “Semper fidelis”—take charge, be responsible, never leave anyone behind, look after the weak—these were the qualities of the neighborhood protector role he had assumed growing up in East LA. And things went well for Lalo, until he convinced himself he had fallen short of his and the Corps’ expectations after his friend, Cpl. Justin Wilson, stepped on a land mine. Lalo picked up the pieces and stuffed them into a black trash bag. The medevac helicopter (and a

proper body bag) did not arrive until the next morning. He had slept next to his friend's remains all night. Wilson's death demolished Lalo's sense of self.

Lalo came home with debilitating physical injuries; a TBI had scrambled his short-term memory. Other symptoms were slow to appear. Severe post-traumatic stress assaulted him day and night. Compounding these injuries was bitter self-reproach—he felt overwhelmingly responsible for the loss of Corporal Wilson and another Marine. His Marine ideals had been inculcated all too well. “Lalo’s moral injury is complex.... At its core is a young person’s self-imposition of oversized liability—liability for the destruction of a friend who has instantly become body shards that have to be gathered up in a shameful trash bag, with no time to properly mourn” (64–65).

The moral injuries of war are so circumstantial and idiosyncratic in their causes and effects as to resist cataloguing. Army major Jeffrey Hall’s moral injury arose from being caught in the middle between his commanders and the Iraqi civilians who counted on him to make amends for three family members accidentally killed in a crossfire. When he tried to help retrieve their bodies from the morgue, he was stymied by the temporary American bureaucracy, and the unembalmed corpses rotted in the desert heat. The amount of solace money Hall’s commander offered was grotesquely small. When Hall pointed this out, his superior was unmoved and insisted that his order be obeyed. Hall handed the money to a family representative, who contemptuously threw it to the ground. The final indignity came in the form of death certificates, which Hall helped obtain from the Iraqi authorities, stamped “ENEMY.” Hall “felt profoundly betrayed by his command and coalition, and humiliated that their massive incompetence forced him to betray innocents who had suffered so grievously” (79). The injury was worse than anything else he went through in his three years in Iraq. He felt so deeply shamed that one day back home at Fort Riley he found himself unable to pull his combat boots on. Eventually he recovered by learning self-empathy, “an important part of recovering a sense of lost goodness” (80).

The most widely recognized forms of moral injury in the US Armed Forces today are sexual harassment and assault. A 2012 Pentagon study disclosed that twenty-six thousand service members, half of them men, reported that they had been targets of unwanted sexual contact, ranging from inappropriate touching to rape. Sherman tells the story of “Sally,” an Air Force enlisted woman who served in Iraq. Young and attractive, Sally was subjected to prurient ogling whenever she walked into the overwhelmingly male mess hall. An airman began stalking her and spread rumors he was sleeping her. Her underwear was stolen from a base washing machine. Feeling threatened and alone, she took the chance of reporting the harassment to her immediate supervisor; this male noncommissioned officer successfully resolved the stalker incident, but did not take the underwear theft seriously. Thrown back on her own minimal resources, she began carrying a knife under her uniform. The end of her service was a release from fear and the need for incessant wariness. That Sally endured relatively mild sexual harassment is beside the point. For trust is both the foundation stone and the ridgepole of the military edifice. Its absence gravely imperils the conduct of military operations, as the Army learned from the fragging incidents of the Vietnam War.

Sherman ends her intricate discussion of the varieties of moral injury on a note of hope, moving from the inflicting of such wounds to their healing, which lies at the heart of her project. She tells the story of a twenty-five-year-old Army lieutenant, Dan Berchinski, who was horrifically injured by an IED in Afghanistan in 2009. The explosion blew off nearly half his body. In earlier wars, he would surely have died. But improvements in the technology and practice of military medicine saved his life, as they have those of so many others in the era of the forever wars. Still, no one in the Army had ever walked again after sustaining such injuries. Determined to be the first, Berchinski found a model to emulate in Andre Kajlich, a civilian who had walked again after losing a hip and both legs to amputa-

tions above the knee. Through two and a half grueling years of physical and occupational therapy, Kajlich mentored him in the use of prosthetics, teaching him how to “wear legs.” Against formidable odds, he became ambulatory and able to live independently. “Dan’s case illustrates well how hope can be pragmatically rational. We can speculate that, in the course of his recovery, Dan [put] ... the examples of ‘unsuccessful’ similarly injured military guys that would stand between him and emulation to the side.... True, in taking up this stance of hope he restricts exposure to evidence, but does that much in the way that we do many emotions” (141).

Sherman calls on civilians to reach out to individual service members, but the distance between this speck of a community (ca. 0.5 percent of the US population) and the larger civilian universe is hard to bridge. Some encouraging attempts are being made, however. For example, special programs at American universities welcome veterans into their classrooms and help them integrate into college life and create their own support groups. Some curricula feature writing courses meant to serve therapeutic ends. Still, university life is only somewhat less insular than military life.

Phil Klay, a former Marine Corps captain and National Book Award-winning author,¹ cites Sherman’s book approvingly in his demand for more civilian involvement in civil-military affairs. Recent census data, he reports, show that veterans are more engaged in civic life than their civilian peers:

Perhaps the way forward is merely ... a greater commitment by the citizenry to the institutions of American civic life that so many veterans are working to rebuild.... No civilian can assume the moral burdens felt at a gut level by participants in war, but all can show an equal commitment to their country, an equal assumption of the obligations inherent in citizenship, and an equal bias for action. Ideals are one thing—the messy business of putting them into practice another. That means giving up on any claim to moral purity. That means getting your hands dirty.²

J. Kael Weston’s new memoir puts more sting into this call to action:

Fifteen years have passed since September 11, 2001.... [A] disfigured veteran’s mirror test should become our own: individual Americans reflecting on what it means when a country, but not a nation, goes to war—and is still at war. It is past time for this kind of shared reckoning. More of us are beginning to act conscientiously, indeed responsibly, as citizens—engaged citizens—seeking to better understand and learn from these 9/11 wars. When we look into that mirror, let’s not turn away.³

Like Klay and Weston, Sherman’s eyes are fixed on the “long present.” She mentions World War II only in passing, in connection with her father, who was an Army medic. Vietnam gets just a bit more space. Though *Afterwar* is a work of philosophy, not history, our present-day forever wars are not unique in American experience. The Indian wars of ca. 1865–1900 were brutal, violent, and seemingly unending. A force of Regulars averaging about 0.5 percent of the nation’s civilian population fought these conflicts in places remote from and unfamiliar to their fellow citizens. These troops also bore the brunt of the fighting against the Philippine Insurrection (1899–1902). They were undoubtedly subject to the kind of moral injuries Sherman describes.

Though she could have made better use of the previous literature on her subject,⁴ Nancy Sherman has produced in *Afterwar* a timely and salutary study of war-borne moral injuries

1. *Of Redeployment* (NY: Penguin, 2014), a collection of short stories set in the Iraq War.

2. “The Citizen-Soldier: Moral Risk and the Modern Military” – www.miwsr.com/rd/1621.htm.

3. *The Mirror Test: America at War in Iraq and Afghanistan* (NY: Knopf, 2016).

4. E.g., psychiatrist Jonathan Shay’s books *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (NY: Atheneum, 1994) and *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* (NY: Scribner, 2002) appear only in an endnote and her bibliography. Sherman reduces Odysseus, the protagonist of the oldest homecoming story in Western literature, to a trickster figure.