

Soul Repair

*A sermon delivered on Sunday, November 13, 2016 at the
Lakehead Unitarian Fellowship, Thunder Bay, Ontario*

“Soul Repair” The Rev. Suzanne Wasilczuk

Edward Tick is a psychotherapist and founder of “Soldier’s Heart” – during the Civil War what we now know as [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder] PTSD was called “Soldier’s Heart.” The current “Soldier’s Heart” group was founded 10 years ago to tend the invisible wounds – the “soul wounds” resulting from war and military service. In his book *War and the Soul* Edward Tick writes:

“On the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month in 1918, World War I ended. A year later, Woodrow Wilson proclaimed this day, November 11, Armistice Day in the hope that it would be associated with the quest for world peace. An act of Congress in 1954 changed the name of Armistice Day to Veterans’ Day.”

Edward Tick writes: “During the thirty-six years between the creation of Armistice Day and its renaming, the world witnessed the Great Depression and the Spanish Civil War. World War II followed – the costliest war in history, with more than twenty-two million dead and thirty-four million wounded. We developed and used atomic weapons for the first time. The Korean War soon followed. The modern era proved itself a time not of world peace but of massive disillusionment. The War Department was renamed the Department of Defense, a change seeming to reflect our modern confusion in which we aggressively pursue military action but always justify it as a matter of necessary self-defense. We are apparently convinced we will always need the military and thus always create veterans. The name and intention of Armistice Day has faded from memory, and the holiday on November 11 has become a time, not to meditate on the end of war, but to thank those who fought,” (l, 245-246)

And, indeed, we do thank those in the military. But, with reservations. With eyes wide open.

*He's five foot-two, and he's six feet-four,
He fights with missiles and with spears.
He's all of thirty-one, and he's only seventeen,
He's been a soldier for a thousand years. [“Universal Soldier,” Buffy Sainte-Marie]*

In a Peanuts/Charlie Brown cartoon Lucy, that perennial curmudgeon and pessimist, draws a heart on a fence. The heart seems to have a jagged line down the middle, and half of it is shaded. Lucy tells her little brother Linus, “This, Linus, is a picture of the human heart! One side is filled with hate and the other side is filled with love. These are two forces which are constantly at war with each other.”

Linus stands there, soaks in all this information, starts looking a little queasy and says, “I think I know just what you mean... I can feel them fighting.”

Unitarian Universalists feel a bit queasy about this subject of war, the reality of conflict and the ideal of peace.

We’re a bit at war with ourselves on Remembrance Day – most of us know veterans, or folks who have served in the military.

Many of us have marched against war, especially the recent conflicts – they’re not so recent anymore. We have stood on street corners with signs, signed petitions, sang songs, written letters. Read the accounts of soldiers returning.

Today we remember that we are at war with ourselves concerning our peace efforts and our war efforts.

*And he's fighting for Canada,
He's fighting for France,
He's fighting for the USA,
And he's fighting for the Russians,
And he's fighting for Japan,
And he thinks we'll put an end to war this way.*

During the U.S. 15 years of armed conflict – after the bombings of September 11th, 2001 – and our subsequent reactions – we as individuals and a country have had a lot of time to reflect on war, the intended and unintended consequences.

Kevin Benderman, a U.S. Army combat veteran writes [in *Soldiers of Conscience*]:

“My father, who fought in World War II, tried to tell me, ‘War is not as glamorous as they make it out to be.’ But I was too stubborn and bull-headed to listen. When you are young, you want to get that experience for yourself... and, boy, I asked for it.

I saw more than I ever wanted to see... You are seeing how war affects civilians in the area. Every house you look at has bomb craters or bullet holes in it... It makes them [civilians? Soldiers?] put their humanity aside to make it in a war zone. You see all that stuff and you see how it affects you and

everyone around you, and you say, 'Why are we doing this anymore?'

[I found out] we were in the area of Iraq that was supposed to be the Garden of Eden, the cradle of civilization where mankind began. I had to ask myself, 'Why am I carrying around an M16 in the Garden of Eden?'" [Quoted in *Soul Repair*, p vii]

*He's a Catholic, a Hindu, an Atheist, a Jain,
A Buddhist and a Baptist and a Jew.
And he knows he shouldn't kill,
And he knows he always will,
Kill you for me my friend and me for you.*

This sermon started as a reflection on a book by Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini – both professors at liberal seminaries. The book is titled *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury during War*.

In an opening passage the authors quote Rev. Herman Keizer Jr., a retired U.S. Army colonel and chaplain:

"To violate your conscience is to commit moral suicide." Many wounds of war might be described as "moral injury." [p xi, 56]

"Moral injury results when soldiers violate their core moral beliefs." [p xv] They evaluate their behavior negatively – whether that behavior was warranted or not, unavoidable or not."

Right and wrong get jumbled up, and the soldier may feel the world no longer makes sense, is no longer a safe or reliable place to be. They lose faith in themselves as good human beings.

So they isolate themselves. Try to deal with survivor guilt. Try to deal with overwhelming depression or anger. Self-medicate with alcohol, with drugs.

And they commit suicide at alarming rates. In the U.S. veteran suicides average one every eight minutes, six thousand a year.

Here in Canada a *Globe and Mail* investigation tells us at least 70 military members and veterans have taken their lives after returning from Canada's longest military operation, a much higher number than originally revealed.

These rates continue [to rise], despite required mental health screenings of those leaving the military, more research on PTSD, and better methods for treating it. [SR, p xii]

Those unforeseen consequences of war.

Brock and Lettini tell us “Veterans return from combat to solitary confinement... locked in a space of inarticulate silence where they cannot find words for the atrocities and terrors they experienced. Haunted by... silent space”. Society has continued in its “consumption- and entertainment-driven” ethos without them. No place for their doubts, their memories, their pain.

“Veterans often return to self-imposed and socially imposed pressures to ‘put the war behind you and move on,’ or they find their humanity challenged because they served in the military. Perhaps even more alienating is hero worship or the formulaic ‘thank you for your service.’” [p 48]

Veteran war correspondent Chris Hedges, in his memoir *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, writes:

“One of the most difficult realizations of war is how deeply we betray ourselves, how far we are from the image of gallantry and courage we desire, how instinctual and primordial fear is. We do not meditate on action. Our movements are usually motivated by a numbing and overpowering desire for safety.” [38-39]

In the Balkans Canada sent over tens of thousands of troops. Peacekeepers. But they also witnessed numerous atrocities as the conflict dragged on. And then there was the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/investigations/remembering-31-canadian-afghanistan-war-veterans-lost-to-suicide/article32657290/>; accessed 10 Nov. '16

A month after arriving in Kandahar, Afghanistan Canadian Corporal Justin Stark writes in his war journal: “You just never know when one step will be your last.”

Soul Repair tells the stories of several veterans and their families.

A young man, returning from Iraq, writes:
“...When you are coming home from where nothing good happened to you or anyone over there, there is nothing to clap about or smile about or celebrate. Nothing at all. This is war. Everybody thinks they are right in a war, but everyone still dies in the end. There’s nothing good about it.” [58]

*But without him,
How would Hitler have condemned him at Dachau?
Without him Caesar would have stood alone,
He’s the one who gives his body
As a weapon of the war,
And without him all this killing can’t go on.*

A young veteran of the Iraqi war writes:

“Soldiers... push the humanity out of the enemy and out of themselves and soon become mere bodies of instinct and survival. What is often discovered only later, sometimes too late, is that one’s humanity can be quite difficult to recover once it’s been evicted...

Coming home has been more than just adapting to life in the aftermath of war; it has been very much about remaking myself... all of my life’s experiences have shaped my identity and perspectives but war, I think, has made a disproportionate claim on me.” [SR, 76]

CAPTAIN PATRICK RUSHOWICK NOV. 17, 1984 – JUNE 11, 2013
WARRANT OFFICER MICHAEL MCNEIL MARCH 6, 1974 – NOV. 27, 2013
SERGEANT DOUG MCLOUGHLIN FEB. 7, 1976 – MARCH 3, 2013
MASTER CORPORAL CHARLES MATIRU AUG. 2, 1980 – JAN. 15, 2013
CAPTAIN LINDEN MASON JULY 6, 1975 – JAN. 25, 2012
SERGEANT PAUL MARTIN JUNE 27, 1974 – SEPT. 8, 2011
WARRANT OFFICER JOWEL FILS-AIMÉ JULY 6, 1964 – OCT. 2, 2008
PRIVATE FRÉDÉRIC COUTURE JULY 18, 1985 – NOV. 14, 2007
CORPORAL CAMILO SANHUEZA-MARTINEZ MARCH 9, 1985 – JAN. 8, 2014

Some of the 31 Canadian war veterans lost to suicide.

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/investigations/remembering-31-canadian-afghanistan-war-veterans-lost-to-suicide/article32657290/>; accessed 10 Nov. ‘16

*He’s the Universal Soldier and he’s really [not] to blame,
His orders come from far away no more,
They come from here and there and you and me,
And brothers can’t you see,
This is not the way we put an end to war.*

“Rape is a far more common source of trauma for women in war than combat. In the U.S. service rape even has its own acronym, MST, military sexual trauma. Considered an “occupational hazard” for women serving in the military. [SR, 51]

According to Statistics Canada, one in 13 female full-time members of the Canadian Forces has been sexually assaulted in connection with their service in the military.

In 2013 1,400 women reported they had been sexually assaulted, or sexually touched against their will while serving. 1,400 women out of the 8,900 full-time females serving in the Canadian Forces.

<http://www.metronews.ca/news/canada/2014/08/15/one-in-13-women-sexually-assaulted-in-canadian-military-statscan-survey-says.html>; accessed 10 November 2016.

At this point in my research, I needed to take a break.
[“*Keep breathing. It’s the most important part.*”]

My break usually involves murder mysteries. I picked up a book whose 11-year old heroine, Flavia de Luce, had been recommended by an old friend. Set in 1950 England, it included a character who had served in World War II – we learn he had saved the life of Flavia’s father. And this relatively young man most certainly suffers from PTSD – flashbacks, blackouts.

I decided I needed to read about trauma in general. So, I picked up *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* by psychiatrist Bessel Van der Kolk. The first paragraph reads:

“One does not have to be a combat soldier, or visit a refugee camp in Syria or the Congo to encounter trauma. Trauma happens to us, our friends, our families, and our neighbors [BKS, 1]

Approximately every six days, a woman in **Canada** is killed by her intimate partner. Sixty women a year.

Half of all women in Canada have experienced at least one incident of physical or sexual violence since the age of 16.^[2]

67% of Canadians say they have personally known at least one woman who has experienced physical or sexual abuse.^[3]

On any given night in Canada, 3,491 women and their 2,724 children sleep in shelters because it isn't safe at home.^[5]

Then there are the thousands of Aboriginal women, missing or murdered in the past thirty years. [Aboriginal women are killed at six times the rate of non-aboriginal women.]^[9]

It is estimated that, each year in Canada, up to 362,000 children witness or experience family violence.^[67]

According to the RCMP, a child who witnesses spousal violence is experiencing a form of child abuse, since research shows that “witnessing family violence is as harmful as experiencing it directly.”^[70]

<http://www.canadianwomen.org/facts-about-violence>; accessed 10 November 2016.

All types of child abuse were associated with the full spectrum of mental disorders, including suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts,
<http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/one-third-of-canadians-have-suffered-child-abuse-highest-rates-in-the-western-provinces-study-says>; accessed 10 November 2016.

That is a lot of trauma.

Van der Kolk reminds us, we human beings “belong to an extremely resilient species. Since time immemorial we have rebounded from our relentless wars, countless disasters [both natural and man-made], and the violence and betrayal in our own lives. But,” he warns us, “traumatic experiences do leave traces”.

We see those traces in our families. In our neighborhoods. We see the traces “on our minds and emotions, on our capacity for joy and intimacy, and even on our biology and immune systems.” [BKS, 1]

*["Keep breathing. It's the most important part.
You kick, and then you glide...
You kick, kick, and then you glide."]*

I picked up another murder mystery, set in 1886 England. This story turned out to involve a child molester who, along with two adult witnesses who did nothing to care for the child. They all got their comeuppance. [They are made to commit suicide by swallowing an overdose of chloral hydrate.]

Abuse, trauma, is not new news. [Van der Kolk tells us: “Sophocles was a general officer in Athen’s wars against the Persians, and his play *Ajax*, which ends with the suicide of one of the Trojan War’s greatest heroes, reads like a textbook description of traumatic stress.” BKS, 334]

*["Keep breathing. It's the most important part.
You kick, and then you glide...
You kick, kick, and then you glide.
Keep breathing. It's the most important part.
It's all in the rhythm, it's all in the rhythm,
it's all in the rhythm of the heart."]*

How do we respond?
How do we address this issue of trauma? Of being at war – with ourselves, with each other?

Victims of trauma or not, how do we repair our souls?

For me, it’s often with a song.

*["Keep breathing. It's the most important part.
You kick, and then you glide...
You kick, kick, and then you glide."]*

Reading all these grim statistics, these heartbreaking stories, learning of the reality of abuse and its aftermath – that’s all important stuff.

Language is mostly a left brain, frontal cortex, sort of activity. For me it was also activating my medial prefrontal cortex – the part of the brain behind the eyes, and the part of the brain that processes and organizes the emotions.

In *The Body Keeps Count*, psychiatrist Bessel Van der Kolk turns to neuroscientists who are discovering how language, emotions, and our survival mechanisms interact.

Learning facts, or talking about our experiences, are left brain activities, up in our frontal cortex.

If you're a survivor it's important, sharing experiences with a support group. Language is important to name our core feelings. "I was raped." "My parents called it discipline, but it was abuse." "I'm not making it since I got back from Iraq." [BKS, 234]

If you're the supporter of a survivor of trauma, it's important to learn about what's is happening to that person.

Though talk therapy, or support groups, can help us recall emotional memories, language cannot separate our emotions from our spontaneous reactions. Cannot touch our emotional scars.

There is no direct pipeline between our upper cortex, our thinking brain, and our brain stem, our spontaneous reactions of flight/fight/freeze, our basic survival instincts that arise from our lower reptilian brain.

If we have experienced trauma, we may suffer from traumatic stress – a timeless reliving of the event, a spontaneous re-experiencing of images, sounds and emotions connected with the event – flashbacks, and a disconnect between what is occurring in present time and our emotional reactions.

If we have suffered trauma, we need to seek professional help – wise counsel – to navigate our bodies and minds that are so desperately trying to fight our way through life. Or flee from life. Or sink into invisibility and immobility to handle these overwhelming emotions. Fight. Flight. Freeze.

Group support. Individual counseling. Drug therapy. Also available are some unique, alternative ways to reconnect, like EMDR, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing. [BKS, 250]

We need to learn various ways to reconnect with our bodies in the here-and-now and our emotions in the here-and-now. We need to once again experience our bodies and our world as safe and secure. Need to move from the instinct to survive to a nourishing life in which we can thrive.

One of those ways to reconnect: soul repair.

For all of us, a daily dose of soul repair is also needed. Every day another story of injustice, of grief, of suffering and pain.

Soul Repair:

Bessel Van der Kolk tells us that in this repair work “The body is the bridge.” [BKS, 239]

In soul repair, what we seek is connection and balance.

How do we experience soul repair?

- Through connection – connection with someone who will listen to us, hold our hand.
- ✚ Through our pets. Sometimes trying to connect with a person is too intimidating. An animal, especially a dog or a horse, will show unconditional regard and appreciation for our caring touch. Animals as therapists.
 - Connection with something bigger than ourselves. A congregation of faith. A civic or humanitarian cause. A set of values, ideals, hopes, dreams.

We repair our souls, reconnect with ourselves and the world, find a balance:

- ✚ Through a connection with nature. Gardening. Birdwatching. Maple-syruping. Hunting, fishing.
 - Through art – the scrape of pencil on paper, the swish of a paintbrush, the cutting, or shaping of form and color. Music – playing an instrument, singing – especially in a group. [A group called MusicCorps helps “wounded warriors” play music and recover their lives.] Drumming – just beating on something. Dance – rhythmic movement. Theater - learning to call up, and use, and control emotions.
- ✚ Through physical activity. Hiking. Biking. Canoeing. Swimming. Running. Walking.
- ✚ Through laughter.

We repair our souls through basic spiritual disciplines, spiritual practices. In this respect the East has gotten many things right.

- Like Tai Chi. Martial arts that incorporate self-discipline and physical release.
- Prayer
- Like breathing. Slow breathing. In and out. Maybe counting; maybe not. But always noticing our breath. Inspiration – breathing in – triggers our sympathetic nervous system. It helps

us rev up, start a project, get on with life. It literally gets our heart beating just a little bit faster. Expiration – breathing out – triggers our parasympathetic nervous system. Our heart slows. We calm ourselves.

[*“Keep breathing. It’s the most important part.
You kick, and then you glide...
You kick, kick, and then you glide.
Keep breathing. It’s the most important part.
It’s all in the rhythm, it’s all in the rhythm,
it’s all in the rhythm of the heart.”*]

Ellen Bass writes:

How long can a body withstand this? You think.
And yet you hold Life like a face between your palms,
a plain face, with no charming smile or twinkle in her eye,
and you say, yes, I will take you
I will love you, again.

[*“Keep breathing. It’s the most important part...
It’s all in the rhythm, it’s all in the rhythm,
it’s all in the rhythm of the heart.”*]

Seamus Heaney tells us:

**History says, don't hope
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime...**

**... hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that further shore
Is reachable from here.
Believe in miracle
And cures and healing wells.**

May we learn, and practice, ways to heal ourselves, each other, our world. No storm can shake our inmost calm.

May it be so. May we make it so. Blessed Be. And Amen.

Reading #1: “History and Hope” by Seamus Heaney

[Seamus Heaney, 1939-2013, grew up in Northern Ireland an Irish poet, playwright, translator and lecturer; received the 1995 Nobel Prize in Literature.]

Human beings suffer,
They torture one another,
They get hurt and get hard.
No poem or play or song
Can fully right a wrong
Inflicted and endured.

The innocent in gaols
Beat on their bars together.
A hunger-striker's father
Stands in the graveyard dumb.
The police widow in veils
Faints at the funeral home.

History says, don't hope
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.

So hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that further shore
Is reachable from here.
Believe in miracle
And cures and healing wells.

Call miracle self-healing:
The utter, self-revealing
Double-take of feeling.
If there's fire on the mountain
Or lightning and storm
And a god speaks from the sky

That means someone is hearing
The outcry and the birth-cry
Of new life at its term.

Reading #2: “Love Life Again” by Ellen Bass

[Ellen Bass, 1947-, an American poet and author; co-wrote *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*]

The thing is
to love life
to love it even when you have no stomach for it,
when everything you've held
dear crumbles like burnt paper in your hands
and your throat is filled with the silt of it.
When grief sits with you so heavily like water
more fit for gills than lungs.
When grief weights you like your own flesh
only more of it, an obesity of grief.
How long can a body withstand this? you think.