

Listen to the Veterans, Part 2. Counsel for a “Non-Religious” Veterans’ Advocate

Colleagues,

In our last post we sent you a review by Ed Schroeder of a book entitled Moral Injury and Just War. As Ed was wrapping his work on that, he was surprised to get the following notice—

“You are invited to view “Is Anybody Listening?” at 5:00pm on Sunday, October 11th at the national office of Veterans For Peace [1404 N. Broadway, St. Louis, MO 63102]. “Is Anybody Listening” is a powerful and moving film that connects the non-veteran world with the experience of veterans, giving the veteran the chance to speak openly about their experience in war. ”

So Ed went and watched, and with him, Marie, his wife; and in the next morning’s wee hours he sent a note to one Paula Caplan, the film’s writer and producer, who was at the screening. You’ll see that below, in a somewhat edited version. Of interest, aside from the issue itself, is how one approaches a conversation with a person of intensely good will who asserts a distance from “religious” perspectives. The need to figure that out becomes ever more pressing in today’s America.

Meanwhile Christ reigns, as we recall with exaltation this Sunday. With that in mind—

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

Dear Paula,

Some musings after last evening’s get-together to view your film.

1. I think I heard you tell us in the post-film conversation

"I'm not religious." Really? Your film begins with a divine imperative from the Bible, "Thou shalt not kill," which becomes an invisible thread throughout the film. Somewhere along the line the word "sacred" popped up; and then came another "religious" item that I cannot remember now. Later in the post-viewing discussion you used "sacred" at least four times about your own experience in veteran listening. Yet "sacred" is the word for God-turf. So what's with "I'm not religious"?

2. Might that be a deceptive catch-all phrase, like PTSD, and equally vulnerable to the kind of critique—rightful critique in my judgment—that you peppered us with about PTSD?

3. To listen to veterans as you urged is to offer them healing, You said so umpteen times. But there's a kind of listening and healing—essential, at least for some—that the PTSD-professionals of the Veterans' Administration don't offer, and can't offer. That's because it happens on sacred God-turf, where V.A. professionals won't go, and can't go. It's against the law!

4. From what we learned last night, your Johnny and Jane listening program doesn't offer this kind of healing either, or at least not yet; though it seems to me that it possibly could.

5.. This brings up the issue of diagnosis, as in diagnosis of the malady, and what sorts of healing are needed. I will be brash enough to say that what we saw and heard from you last evening (first the film, then the speech) under-diagnoses the malady, or at least the malady for some vets, especially those driven to suicide. They have done terrible things, witnessed terrible things, done nothing in the face of terrible things—ungodly, anti-godly things. They've violated not only their own personal sacred-turf, but God's sacred turf too. That's even more drastic, with even more dreadful consequences.

6. The biblical term for a God-turf violator is "sinner." That signals a dilemma deeper than the moral anguish and injury that comes of violating one's own moral code. What's been violated is the primordial "Thou shalt not kill" command, which comes from

God; which means in turn that their malady is playing out not only on the turf of their personal moral code, but on sacred God-turf. And whether they believe in God or not, the message has somehow gotten through to them that they've got a problem with the God whose "order" they have violated by killing. This includes those who may say they are "not religious."

7. The "order" on the God-turf is that human life is sacred. In Biblical lingo: humans are created in the image of God. To destroy a "God-image" brings drastic dis-order into the God-turf, the God-turf where the destroyer exists, willy nilly. Though there is then an "order" for restoring order, when such killing occurs on the God-turf, the turf of the sacred. "They that take the sword shall perish with the sword." And that primordial restoration of "order"—apparently written into human plasma—is now being carried out with their own hand as they use their own sword to bring death-for-death back into equilibrium. In macabre fashion the suicide restores "order." It is not PTSD "disorder" that is often here at work in some tormented veterans, but divine "order" in the human plasma. "I killed a God-image; my own God-image is forfeit. I'll restore order."

8. There are two ways to restore "order" in Biblical theology (Judeo and Christian). One I've just described: death for death. Yes, self-administered death for a killer. That's the "order of God's law" on the turf of the sacred. There is another. It's called forgiveness, the "order of God's mercy" available on the same sacred turf. To restore "order" and have the killer-veteran still alive—even more, "healed"—calls for the "order of forgiveness." That's why the Jewish (!) Jesus is celebrated among Christians. That was his shtik. But even the mercy/forgiveness offered by Jesus—no surprise—has its taproot in the God of the Hebrews, for whom the Hebrew word "chesedh"—mercy, forgiveness—was what distinguished this deity from all the other deities in the ancient Mesopotamian world. "I desire mercy—me being merciful to you—rather than sacrifice—you

doing stuff for me” was his fundamental mantra. Hosea 6:6 et passim. That was HIS shtik! When Jesus wanted to let folks know what he was up to, that was the text he quoted.

9. I’m not trying to dissuade you from your own “I’m not religious” mantra. [Well, maybe I am.] Mostly I’m urging you to be an even better clinician than the super-one I’ve learned that you already are. Push your diagnostic probe to the deepest taproot of the suicidal veteran, the God-turf.

10. And when that turf is presented by the client, someone apart from the client will have to pronounce the forgiveness. The up-till-now “silent” listener—or someone—will have to offer it. Humans cannot self-forgive their God-violation. It must come from the party who was violated. That’s even the way it happens, the only way, when one human has done wrong to another. The “violated other” must speak the forgiveness. In both Hebrew and Christian theology, other humans have been authorized to be God’s spokespersons for healing under “the order of forgiveness.”

11. A key story for us Christians with our “Jewish” Jesus is this one: Some friends bring their paralyzed brother to Jesus, prostrate on his own bed. We’re not told what his paralysis is. Maybe nobody knows. He could have been a soldier, or a murderer. In any case, he’s paralyzed. First words from Jesus: “Young man, you’ll be glad to hear this: your sins are forgiven.” Result? He rises from the bed, and walks away as an upright pedestrian. The bystanders marvel. “Is that what his paralysis was? But only God can forgive sinners. Has God given this authority to human beings?” The answer is Yes. It was patent before, it is now, beginning with Jesus.

12. I ran across a 21st century parallel to that story in the American Bible Society magazine that just showed up at our place. It’s about healing the “moral injury” (aka sin) of a U.S. Navy admiral. A chaplain reports being called into the office of the admiral, a man who orchestrated Navy operations across half

the world. Having found him to be a tough and test commander in all previous encounters, the chaplain was wary. But today the admiral looked weary. He took a deep breath and began to unload the burden from his 34 years of service in the military. "Ordering others to kill had taken a toll in him," explains the chaplain, "it weighed on him very heavily." The chaplain did what chaplains are called to do, which is to hear confessions and offer absolution, God's own forgiveness. "Tell God whatever you want to tell him," he said. At the end of the three-way conversation, we hear these words from the commander: "I feel like I lost 10 pounds. I'm forgiven. It's incredible."

13. So why not put this addendum to your program? Here's a case study to support it. Despite your protestation, you are crypto-religious anyway. So put something like this into your next re-write of chapter six:

"Some veterans may wind up confessing their sins to you. This is more than moral anguish needing an attentive ear. It's a person wanting to hear a word of forgiveness that comes finally from God. To do that, yes, is "against the law," and in more ways than one. But do it anyway. We have it on divine authority that the order of mercy trumps the order of law. If you can't do it yet, learn how. For that you may first have to believe and receive it yourself. But when you are able, then do it. 'Friend, you'll be glad to hear this. Your sins are forgiven. The God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob—and Jesus too—says so.'"

It worked for the admiral. It will also works for folks of lower ranks.

Ed (and Marie too) Schroeder