
SEEKING JUSTICE THROUGH MORAL INJURY: A REVIEW OF THE DOCUMENTARY FILM *WHAT I WANT YOU TO KNOW*

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A crowd of new military recruits, right hands raised. United States Army Soldiers, standing at attention. A half dozen of them learning to navigate through a forest in the early morning fog, the ground covered in damp brown pine straw. A different group, in matching tee shirts, carrying a log over their shoulder; their faces sweaty, agonized, but persistent. Two more recruits, in a pool, swimming sidestroke while wearing a helmet and full uniform and carrying an M4 rifle. These scenes of military training that start *What I Want You to Know* are accompanied by the optimistic voices of service members, offscreen, explaining their reasons for joining the military: defending the country, patriotism, service, pride. But that optimism does not last. "What doesn't give me pride is that all our training, everything we're built up to, was wasted or not utilized properly. Life and blood was wasted. It feels like I am repeating what a generation ago did in Vietnam," a voice off-screen says somberly. Just as the tone of the voices shift, so do the images. Bullets fire. Roadside bombs explode. The landscape is dusty and sepia-toned. A half dozen Soldiers walk down a street lined with piles of crumbled concrete and twisted rebar. Their sand-colored camouflage makes them hard to see. The urban landscape they patrol has been transformed into a wasteland.

Much of the screen time in *What I Want You to Know* is occupied by images like these from wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The other parts show the faces of veterans being interviewed about those wars. The remainder of the footage shows clips of politicians and generals — George W. Bush, Colin Powell, Donald Rumsfeld, Donald Trump — giving speeches to rally support for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq — or feeding service members Thanksgiving

turkey as the press snaps photos. The veterans' stories start optimistic but then become jaded and horrified by the wars. Many of the interviewees display signs of moral injury – lasting psychological, spiritual, social, and biological damages from experiencing deeply immoral acts (Litz et al., 2009). The development of these service members juxtaposes with the speeches of the politicians who remain confident about the prospects for winning the wars. With this juxtaposition between the optimistic politicians and despondent service members, *What I Want You to Know* suggests that how a society justifies war is an influence on whether service members experience the psycho-spiritual trauma of moral injury.

Time and again throughout the film, the service members tell us how they lost faith in the mission. "I don't think we knew what we were doing. I don't think the objective was achievable. And worse of all, I think we knew it wasn't achievable and still we perpetuated it." Their quotes reveal a just war ethos – a belief that war can be justified if pursued for the right reasons. Just war philosophy has roots in medieval theologians grappling with how to square pacifist teachings of Jesus with the statecraft and warfare of Christian lords (Rengger, 2010). The theologians said that wars could be just, but only under certain circumstances. The first consideration is *jus ad bellum* – the justice of going to war. Wars should only be started for just causes such as self-defense or to protect innocent life. The second is *jus in bello* – justice in war. Wars should be fought with just means, such as protecting civilians and refraining from destroying civilian infrastructure. A final, more modern, consideration is *jus post bellum* – justice in the aftermath of war (Bass, 2004). Wars should end, and when they do, political and social orders should balance retribution and reconciliation, establishing a basis for sustainable peace (Murphy, 2015).

Existing research that connects just war theory to moral injury has tended to focus on violations of *jus in bello*; actions such as mistreating civilians or other violations of the laws of war (Krauss et al., 2021). Indeed, while violence and destruction is quintessential of war, the Geneva Conventions and national-level regulations provide a code for how service members should act during war, and thus they are a proxy for the morality that service members have about using violence. But focusing on *jus in bello* alone may be misleading if we are to understand what causes moral injury. In *What I Want You to Know*, you will hear about the horrors of war. However, what stands out more is how the service members locate the terribleness of these actions in the context rather than the actions themselves. Service members discuss the corruption of Iraqi and Afghan military partners; the devil's bargains

their commanders made by allying with local warlords who were sexually abusing children. The money-grubbing of corporations that profit from supplying arms to destroy and materials to rebuild. While the service members wanted to do the right thing for people in Iraq and Afghanistan, their stories reveal how the context made many of their actions seem unjustified.

Some scholars of posttraumatic stress disorder have talked about what they call the “combat paradox.” They note that the mindset that helps people survive during combat is maladaptive for life after military service (Castro et al., 2015). For example, the hypervigilance that is symptomatic of posttraumatic stress disorder is adaptive in combat: Stay alert. Don’t let your guard down. It could kill you. But after leaving combat, hypervigilance can make veterans jumpy, untrusting, never wanting to put their back to a door and suspicious of other people. *What I Want You to Know* shows us how the combat paradox works in the case of moral injury. Some scenes show how wars can make people barbaric, forcing otherwise good people into unjust actions. In one scene, service members curse people they just shot, yelling in celebration, although the dead did not appear to be combatants. Of course, it is hard to tell who they were shooting at. Guerillas purposefully blend in among non-combatants. During this scene, the interviewee explains how the only way to survive in type of guerilla combat is to turn off the internal doubt; to stop questioning the morality of actions and simply stay alive. For service members who survived the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the problems surface when they return home. The morality and norms of civilian life come back to them, and they are forced to contend with the horrors of war.

However, while the film suggests that service members must deal with the morality of these actions in combat, they can tolerate them as long as the overall purpose of war is valid. This is the sentiment of the quote by Jonathan Shay, the forerunner of moral injury research, displayed in the film: “Veterans can usually recover from horror, fear, and grief once they return to civilian life, so long as ‘what’s right’ has not also been violated (Shay, 1994).” In other words, the morality of *jus ad bellum* can protect people from being injured by the moral ambiguity of *jus in bello*. Ultimately, the veterans in this film make the case that “what’s right” was violated in Afghanistan and Iraq, focusing on the lack of purpose for these wars. Many of the interviewees thought the war had begun for good reasons: rooting out terrorism and responding to the September 11th attacks. Yet their experience on the ground revealed these campaigns to be aimless quagmires, and this contradicted the politicians’ insistence that the wars had a purpose and were being won. With no viable theory of victory, the service members’ actions in battle had no upside and only the potential for harm.

Throughout *What I Want You to Know*, we see how the loss of a purpose for fighting tips the moral scales. The ability to maintain a sense of morality within war is directly connected to the overall justification for war. Without it, morality is lost, replaced by a sense of betrayal and deep mistrust and regret. "I lost my sanity. I lost my innocence. I lost my soul, for what? I was sent there on a fraud. So I was betrayed by my country. I was betrayed by my government, and I was lied to." What the film does best, in my estimation, is show this arch for service members of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, asking them about themselves before September 11, 2001, their reasons for joining the military, the campaigns they took part in, and their return home. Through their stories, we see the rise and fall of their moral expectations and how this fall is tied to war's lack of justification.

While I encourage readers to go watch the film themselves, I worry this is preaching to the choir. The Peace and Justice Studies Association, after all, is comprised of members committed to peace. But films like *What I Want You to Know*, films that center the stories of veterans with moral injury, have a potential to bridge two audiences: an audience that has the upmost respect for service members and sees little problem with the post-9/11 wars; and an audience that abhors those wars and in part blames service members for them. Neither viewpoint is entirely correct. Like all individuals, service members should be responsible for their actions. But like all individuals, our experiences are structured by cultures, economies, and politics that are larger than us; that determine the choices we think we have and what we think is moral. If you watch *What I Want You to Know*, I hope you will recognize the blame is much larger than the individual service members, although many of those individuals likely do feel guilty and blame themselves for a host of actions and inactions on the battlefield. While they recognize their moral injuries as a collective problem, that does not seem to displace the guilt they suffer, perhaps because the public seems to have moved on from caring about the post-9/11 wars, even as the psychological and physical wounds of these wars continue to affect service members.

It may seem too late to give a strong moral justification for going to war in Afghanistan and Iraq. However there still may be a way to create *jus post bellum* – to build a just peace in the aftermath of war. By and large, few attempts have been made to do so. The United States has never held to account the leaders who advocated for those wars without a true plan for victory; never pushed for reconciliation with leadership in Afghanistan and Iraq; never wanted to build relationships with the people of Afghanistan and Iraq. It is still possible to tip the

moral scales, and perhaps even bring some relief to morally injured veterans. I suspect this is why these service members participated in making the film: to make some sort of good come out of the military service. The onus for making that good is now the responsibility of us the viewers.

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