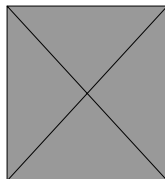


# **TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES**

**How People Like You  
are Healing Their  
Neighborhoods**

**SANDHYA RANI JHA**



*In the spring of 2014, I met with a colleague as I was finishing up my manuscript for my last book on race and faith in America. He asked how I was doing.*

*"I wonder if I'm suffering from depression," I said.*

*"Well, you've been living in the narrative of systemic racism nonstop for the past 6 months," he responded. "I'm not shocked to hear that."*

*That summer I started a little podcast called "Hope from the Hood," telling stories of the good things the small nonprofits I work with are doing. In fact, I was editing my first episode when the idea for this book emerged, and they were both part of the same reality that finally dawned on me:*

*I can't keep living in the morass of how this nation is failing, I thought. I need to ground myself in stories of hope. I need to delve into the possibilities for a better world if I'm going to help build it.*

*This book is dedicated to the people I get to work with on a daily basis at the Oakland Peace Center who remind me not to give up hope. It's dedicated to the people who are actually building what Dr. King called "Beloved Community" brick by brick, garden row by garden row, inmate by inmate, and registered voter by registered voter. We do not look up from our work often enough to realize how much we've done.*

*Look up. People are paying attention. You're making the world people want to live in. Thank you.*

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## The Power of Truth (and Reconciliation)

*“They say war is hell, but I say it’s the foyer to hell. I say coming home is hell, and hell ain’t got no coordinates.”*

—TYLER BOUDREAU, IRAQ WAR VETERAN

*“Today we reap some of the harvest of what we sowed at the end of a South African famine. And in the celebration and disappointment that attends such harvest, we know that we shall have to sow again, and harvest again, over and over, to sustain our livelihood; to flourish as a community; and for our generation to know that when we finally go to rest forever, our progeny will be secure in the knowledge that two simple words will reign: Never Again!”*

—NELSON MANDELA, ON RECEIVING THE OFFICIAL REPORT  
OF THE SOUTH AFRICAN TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION  
COMMISSION REPORT, OCTOBER 29, 1998

Today, there are churches and mosques and synagogues all over the country working to support returning military men and women dealing with the trauma of what they participated in or witnessed in combat.

There are scholars looking into the connections between neuroscience and ritual to provide healing.

There are veterans’ groups creating space for the men and women who fought in battles in Iraq and Afghanistan and Vietnam to talk about the soul-deep burdens they carry.

The U.S. Department of Veterans’ Affairs publicly acknowledges a struggle veterans face known as “moral injury,” and acknowledge it as distinct from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).<sup>67</sup>

<sup>67</sup> According to the National Center for PTSD, there are two potential

Volunteers of America is about to launch an initiative on moral injury.

Before 2010, none of that was true, and moral injury was an almost completely unfamiliar term.

Along with many veterans, Veterans Affairs clinicians and military chaplains who have contributed to more widespread understandings of and work to address moral injury, the Soul Repair Center in Ft. Worth, Texas, deserves credit for the fact that it is now taken so seriously. And the innovative work of Drs. Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini have more than a little to do with that.

### **Why the Soul Repair Center Began**

Few people who have paid attention to the news over the past decade have missed the heartbreaking coverage of the suicide rates and rates of violence among veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. Not all of the violence, self-inflicted or otherwise, was attributable to PTSD, in which a person, when triggered, relives a traumatic moment from their past and cannot escape it. Something else was going on. The need for a Soul Repair Center was very real, but the reasons Brock and Lettini, as feminist theologians and scholars, created it are less obvious until you hear their story.

Brock and Lettini are fairly well known for anti-poverty and anti-war activism. While they both had family connections to people who had served in the military, that wasn't particularly central to their identities or their relationship to one another as colleagues before 2009. How, as people opposed to war, they ended up investing themselves in responding to the needs of soldiers was in some ways a matter of chance.

Lettini was living downstairs from some filmmakers who lent her a copy of the 2008 film they had just made, *Soldiers of Conscience*, about soldiers wrestling with issues of conscience

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distinctions: "(1) PTSD is a mental disorder that requires a diagnosis. Moral injury is a dimensional problem - there is no threshold for the presence of moral injury, rather, at a given point in time, a Veteran may have none, or mild to extreme manifestations. (2) Transgression is not necessary for PTSD to develop nor does the PTSD diagnosis sufficiently capture moral injury (shame, self-handicapping, guilt, etc.)," [ptsd.va.gov](http://ptsd.va.gov).

in being ordered to redeploy to the Iraq war, including those who returned to war. Four wound up not redeploying, and though all four applied for Conscientious Objector status, only two received it. The other two went to prison rather than redeploy. Lettini was so moved by the film she discussed it with Brock, who saw it in New York at a Tribeca premiere.

“My experience of watching the documentary made me realize how I had been unconcerned with people in the military and that was strange because people I love serve,” noted Lettini; “emotionally and in my activism, I had real concern for the civilians in Afghanistan and Iraq but had really removed myself from the soldiers.” Lettini realized that her lack of concern for the soldiers was inconsistent with how she functioned as an academic and an activist: in those spheres, she listened to people affected by injustice. She was so upset with the military, though, that she hadn’t thought to listen to the soldiers.

Brock, who grew up in a military family, had already done some theological reflection about the damage war does to those who serve in the military as well as to the civilians who suffer through battles and wars. She had written about it with another colleague, Rebecca Parker, in their book *Proverbs of Ashes*. But she also sensed anew a conversation that people weren’t having with each other.

There had been some media coverage of men and women applying for Conscientious Objector status during this war. For people who enlist in an all-volunteer the military, this process is complex because CO applicants have to prove they have had a major change of mind and heart and now oppose “war in any form.” This means people who want to serve their country but object to a particular war as illegal or unjust must deploy, regardless of their moral objections. (In 1991, 2,500 men and women refused to serve in the Gulf War on the grounds of conscience, and 111 were eventually granted CO status. During the Iraq and Afghanistan wars at the beginning of the 21st century, far fewer people applied for CO status, but desertions increased significantly during that era.)<sup>68</sup>

<sup>68</sup> From the website for the film *Soldiers of Conscience*, “Background: Soldiers at War,” pbs.org.

The question the film inspired was how to foster the conversation that the country needed, a conversation that was more complex than just “are you for it or against it?”

### **One Tool the Soul Repair Movement Used**

Brock has been known to say, “If you want to resolve a conflict between two opposing sides, make sure there are three or four sides in the room.” The great debate regarding the U.S. military tends to be pro-war or anti-war. There are nuances, but it is generally treated as a two-sided debate rather than a multifaceted conversation.

Lettni had used a model called a Truth Commission in her work with the Poverty Initiative at Union Theological Seminary in New York before moving to Berkeley, California, where she and Brock met. The most famous Truth Commission is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, which allowed victims of apartheid to share their stories and have their experiences honored, and offered amnesty to perpetrators of violence in exchange for telling the truth, all for the sake of a post-apartheid South Africa being able to move forward without the weight of apartheid on their shoulders.

Brock, when she was director of a fellowship program for professional women at Harvard, had come to know a member of the South African Commission, Pumla Gobodo Madhikizela, who received a fellowship to write about her experience within months of the commission finishing its work. She had also had extensive conversations in 2006 about how commissions work with her friend Pat Clark, who had served on the 2004 Greensboro Truth and Reconciliation Commission, regarding the Nov. 3, 1979 Klan murder of five anti-Klan demonstrators.

Lettni had co-facilitated a number of Poverty Truth Commissions modeled on a variation of what happened in South Africa, and grassroots truth commissions happening around the world. It was just one tool of many they would use in moving forward their work around what they would eventually call moral injury, but it was an incredibly powerful

tool. This tool, coincidentally, was one she had used at Union Theological Seminary when she got to work with the Poor People's Economic and Human Right's Campaign.

In the poverty truth commissions, there were no experts, no nonprofits; the testifiers were poor people speaking about their experiences and how they came to do their own organizing. That is not so unusual, but the people who were used to being treated as experts (policy makers and directors of think tanks and nonprofits) were designated as commissioners, officially in a listening role. Some people used to being the experts initially resisted this role but came to find it powerful. After the public testimony, commissioners and testifiers would think together about how to work together to create solutions to the problems named. Over time they had learned to include accountability teams to guarantee action after the event ended, and action steps were concrete things that the people who recommended them could be involved with.

The Truth Commission on Conscience in War was no small undertaking. A producer from Luna Productions, Ian Slattery, Lettini, and Brock spent two years planning it and raised thousands of dollars to fund it. They invited organizations from across the spectrum to financially invest in the project in exchange for a seat on the commission. They ended up with 75 co-sponsors, ranging from anti-war organizations to veterans organizations, with a wide range of understandings of war, the role of the military, and the role of the U.S. abroad.

Brock and Lettini taught a seminar class on truth commissions for graduate students across the U.S., and 11 of the 12 students served as commissioners, with the 12th offering testimony as an Iraq veteran. The class, in preparation, was able to interview Rev. Peter Storey, who had been appointed by President Mandela to organize the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa; he talked with them about what it achieved and the things he thought they should have done or done differently. Storey, whom Brock had met in 1993 as he was organizing the



Commission, had offered his help to Brock upon seeing an article about Selective Conscientious Objector status; his own son had risked time in prison for refusing to serve in an apartheid military. Students also heard from Ms. Pat Clarke about what it was like to be a commissioner of color on the 2004 Greensboro Commission.

The testimonies were carefully selected to be diverse, according to Brock: "For a truth commission to work, it cannot be set up as a bunch of political set pieces. The way you can disrupt that is people bringing testimony from a variety of complex positions on an issue, not people who are committed ideologues on an issue but people who are willing to make themselves vulnerable, not to argue but to speak about their own struggles and suffering."

They also spent time preparing the testifiers. "We worked hard to prepare people for the testimony; it can be unethical in such emotionally laden topics, if the person hasn't processed and integrated their experience enough to be on top of the story," noted Brock. "They can become too emotionally exposed and feel like they've been stripped naked in front of a group of people. People mistake that raw emotional exposure for authenticity but I believe it is unkind both to the person exposed and an audience that is put in the role of taking care of or worrying about the speaker, rather than respecting him or her. Remembering can be painful, but if you're harming the person by asking them to tell it, it's not good. If you ask them to tell the story in private multiple times, that's how they get control of it. When done with a lot of preparation and care, sharing the story can be transformative."

When the Truth Commission on Conscience in War finally occurred on March 21, 2010, testifiers included veterans, a Gold Star mother, a VA psychiatrist, an expert on conscientious objection, Muslim and Jewish and Christian leaders, and a former war correspondent. Some veterans were proud of their service; others struggled with it. Five hundred members of the public attended the commission hearing.

One element that created a powerful experience, both Lettini and Brock noted, was the ritual that was embedded in the process. The Commission facilitator, said Brock, explained

that “the people who were testifying were speaking from the heart. Our job was not to judge but to take them into our heart.”

They lit two candles to create a liminal space: white for death and grief and green for life and hope. They made sure the testifiers were emotionally supported. They did not include Q&A sessions, but let the testimonies speak for themselves. After the closing, the candles were put out.

“If I were doing it in a local community,” Brock added, “I would make it longer and would have the second half where people talked together in cross-pollinating ways and were asked to come up with consensus around next steps.”

The 125 commissioners and testifiers had all received materials to read before gathering the next day in private. They were tasked with determining achievable goals that they themselves would commit to moving forward. Brock shared an illustration of how powerful that experience was in creating new channels of communication: “During the speak-out, the head of the Mennonite Central Committee, who was one of the commissioners, said, ‘I think the pacifists need to repent. I have been to a lot of these events with my just war friends and we’re asked to argue with each other. I’ve never been asked to work with just war people. What I realized is we pacifists let the federal government decide who pacifists are. My just war brothers and sisters and we agree on 95 percent of things and argue about the last 5 percent. We need selective Conscientious Objector status, and I can work with them on that.’”

By the end of the day that incredibly diverse group had put forward the following recommendations:<sup>69</sup>

**To Our Nation’s Leaders** Revision of current U.S. military regulations governing Conscientious Objection to assure greater protection for religious freedom and moral conscience in war through the right to object to a particular war.

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<sup>69</sup> “Truth Commission on Conscience and War: Why we need selective conscientious objection,” Daily Kos, October 25, 2010. <https://www.dailykos.com/story/2010/10/25/913576/->

**To Religious and Community Leaders** Education of our larger communities about criteria governing the moral conduct of war, about the needs of veterans and their families, including healing moral injury, and about the importance of moral conscience in war.

**To Our Communities** Education about and support services to address moral injury and other needs of those serving in the U.S. military and veterans of military service and their families.

While the commission continues to wait for a change in Congressional leadership that would allow a conversation about the first point, the second was first implemented by Lettini and Brock in their 2012 book with Beacon Press, *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury After War*. In addition, the Soul Repair Center was among the most substantive actions regarding the second and third points.

And here is where this notion of a truth commission is relevant to anyone seeking to address a major issue of conflict in a community: "I think one very interesting thing that happened is this," notes Lettini:

We brought together people who stand in very different places in relation to the military and to war. I remember facilitating some moments and having to be firm that we were not there to make statements about the military; we had to create a context where there was enough respect that we could really work together and recognize the common concerns so we could address them. The situation had been heated because after so much apathy, finally people were mobilizing against these particular wars. But the people we brought together and who kept working together were people who didn't like to work together: pacifists, former military that were now pacifists, some vets who had criticisms but were not anti-military. This forced us to change the spirit of our engagement. Sometimes groups would say

“why don’t we make a statement against the war” or “why don’t we write something to the military” but as a group we needed to try to really take the ideas of everyone to the table to be more effective. This allowed difference to be there but use it to be creative.

That spirit carried from the Commission to other places we had the conversation. Part of the work was we also presented every year to the American Academy of Religion, so there started to be more conversation. And pacifist feminists began to engage womanists who had kept it private that they were former military or had family in the military; there was a coming together across these divides because we didn’t jump to name calling. The building of relationships because you stay in conversation and knowing you’re different but you keep working together created a context for these conversations to continue through the Soul Repair Center and through AAR and in many other places.

And here’s the key part: we intentionally came together across major difference not to convince each other but to be effective around common issues. And by doing that, people would have the conversations, and a lot of transformation happened because of that culture. People moved because the conversation didn’t start with us trying to persuade each other... and therefore people were persuaded.

At the beginning of the Truth Commission, the honorary host, Col. (Chaplain) Herman Keizer, Jr., a Vietnam War veteran, had talked about how violating one’s conscience was a form of moral suicide. In reflecting on what worked in the Truth Commission model, Brock noted, “we had clear common ground as starting places. We benefited from people who cared about veterans so they could listen to ones whose views were not theirs, and they cared about people’s consciences being honored.”

### **Where They Are Now**

The Soul Repair Center has trained dozens of faith communities to do the work of talking about moral injury and creating a welcoming environment for veterans wrestling with that issue. They have done work to help the general public understand both the individual and social dimensions of moral injury and its distinctions from PTSD. They have helped communities learn how to support veterans dealing with moral injury, and they have trained clinicians and military chaplains about it. Over time, the institutions designed to support our returning military will be able to provide support for the WHOLE person, the physical, psychological *and* spiritual person.

Community is being built because of this opportunity for people to name their experiences, to finally have language for the things they were encouraged simply to suppress. "It opened conversations that were not happening," says Lettini. "Veterans' communities are having conversations about spiritual issues now that they have the terminology, allowing people to really talk about their experience. Religious leaders are talking about caring for the whole person; military chaplains and anti-war clergy are finding common ground out of a shared compassion."

Brock and Lettini have also experienced this work around moral injury showing up beyond the military community. Lettini has found it to be meaningful in conversations with activists in order to go past rudimentary conversations about burnout and get to issues of where people are carrying harm around with them in the midst of their work. Brock recently received a call from the police department in Perth, Australia, because they recognize that police carry moral injury with them simply because of all they have to witness and handle on a daily basis, even in a city like Perth where police are not armed and rarely involved with issues of police brutality.

But there's another element to the work around soul repair that needs to be recognized in order to do justice to the veterans, something that the veterans Brock and Lettini interviewed for the book *Soul Repair* knew intimately: "Moral

injury,” notes Lettini, referencing her learning from those interviews, “is not just about the veterans; it’s about the whole society. One of the things that upsets the veterans we work with is that society doesn’t acknowledge that. Our lack of willingness to acknowledge the damage we caused as a society is actually reinjuring to the veterans. We live in a culture that relies on the profits from war. Unless the whole society takes on the burden and tries to make repairs, the soldiers cannot take on the process of healing and neither can our society. The situation of injustice is what creates the trauma of moral injury.”

Too often, the burdens that returning military face are medicalized and organized on a paternalistic dependency model. The work around moral injury challenges that individualistic approach and a long secular tradition of regarding guilt, shame, and remorse as neuroses to be overcome. We do the people who serve in the military a disservice if we regard moral injury as a disorder and only take it as far as caring for the well-being of each veteran. It requires that we talk about who we are as a society and what costs we are willing to inflict on others to maintain our society as it currently exists with war.

The good news is that many veterans are willing to be part of shaping us into a society that doesn’t cause people in combat to do things that violate their core self-identity as spiritual beings, and into a society where the people risking their lives can determine whether a cause is worthy of giving their life for. “At the center of this conversation,” says Lettini, “are people who both perpetrated and were victims of war. That opened my eyes in a whole new way; I didn’t really want to see the complexity of who the soldiers were. They are agents of social transformation; that is the hope. It can be that the people most directly involved can be the ones who help us to transform it, even in the military.”

### **LEARN MORE**

To understand more deeply the nuances of moral injury, read *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury after War*, Rita

Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini, Beacon Press, 2012. You can also visit [brite.edu/programs/soul-repair](http://brite.edu/programs/soul-repair) to learn more about how you can be trained directly in soul repair work to bring back to your community.

To hear the stories from returned soldiers about the difference between PTSD and moral injury, read the powerful storytelling of David Wood in *What Have We Done: The Moral Injury of Our Longest War*, Little, Brown and Company, 2016.

If you're interested in thinking about the societal shifts that may have influenced our current military policies in ways that remove average Americans from a direct relationship to people in our military (and to the unsavory things done in our name), consider reading *Drift: The Unmooring of American Military Power*, Rachel Maddow, Broadway Books, 2013.

If you are interested in learning more about truth commissions, Brock made an important point about their process in distinction from the South African process: "We were not a truth and reconciliation commission. They had state authority. They could grant amnesty to perpetrators. They had three committees: screen and review (what would go before commission), determining which testimonies would be granted amnesty, symbolic recompense for loss. For example, a teacher who loved to sing was killed; they made one of his songs the national anthem. Some who were involved in the South African TRC felt the reconciliation piece was naïve, that the truth commission was a success if it was able to prevent a civil war, and reconciliation could not be achieved so easily."

Bearing that in mind, a classic text on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission is Bishop Desmond Tutu's *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Image Press, 1999. Canada's TRC on the treatment of indigenous peoples has also been written about with a specific eye to the role of art (in parallel with Lettini and Brock's reflections on the importance of ritual in their own commission); that book is *Arts of Engagement: Taking Aesthetic Action In And Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016. A more wide-reaching text that covers

40 different truth commissions following atrocities is the book *Unspeakable Truths: Transitional Justice and the Challenge of Truth Commissions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Priscilla B Hayner, Routledge Press, 2010.

Because the truth commission model can help a community delve into complex issues in meaningful, bridge-building ways, it is worth looking at an active truth commission related to an issue true to most communities: poverty. Scotland has a Poverty Truth Commission whose work might offer wisdom in thinking through how to create something on a local scale. Information can be found at [FaithInCommunityScotland.org/poverty-truth-commission](http://FaithInCommunityScotland.org/poverty-truth-commission). The Mississippi Truth Project also offers these questions to help think through how a local truth commission might look: [MississippiTruth.org/documents/ten-questions.pdf](http://MississippiTruth.org/documents/ten-questions.pdf)