

“American Sniper” and Moral Injury

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Clint Eastwood’s powerful film, “American Sniper,” dares to bring to public consciousness the hidden side of war. This hidden side is the tremendous toll war takes on the moral and psychological dimension — the soul — of the men and women who serve on the front lines. The film is based on Navy Seal Chris Kyle’s autobiography by the same title and follows his experiences as one of the most lethal snipers in U.S. military history with 160 confirmed kills.

Posted in Iraq, Kyle, brilliantly played in the film by Bradley Cooper, served

four tours of duty before being honorably discharged in 2009. On coming home, like many returning veterans, Kyle had the difficult task of adjusting to civilian life in Texas as a husband and father to his two children. In 2013, he and fellow veteran, Chad Littlefield, were shot and killed by another veteran, Eddie Ray Routh, while at a practice range. Routh, who had been recently discharged from a mental health facility and been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), had arranged to meet with Kyle, who was trying to help him with his depression. The poignancy of the film was heightened when Routh’s trial began as “American Sniper” was being shown across the country. Routh was convicted of the murders two days after the February 22nd Oscars telecast, and immediately sentenced to life in prison without parole.



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The film brilliantly and poignantly presents the personal turmoil that a soldier faces when holding a life in the crosshairs of his or her rifle. One particularly heart-wrenching scene shows a moment of decision when Kyle has a small Iraqi boy and a woman, who we assume is his mother, in his gun sights. The young boy is given an anti-tank grenade by the hijab-clad woman and begins to walk toward the column of approaching American soldiers. Kyle is praying for the child to stop or at least indicate he means no harm. But the boy doesn’t, and Kyle must do what he is trained to do — shoot him. When the mother then rushes to her child, picks up the grenade and runs toward the soldiers, Kyle must shoot her as well.

We see the anguish that plagues Kyle with each kill. We also see his inability to leave the war behind in Iraq each time he returns home between tours of duty. We then find ourselves asking the question: “Why did he sign up for additional tours of duty when each tour and each time he pulled the trigger seemed to eat away at his soul?” The film leads us to gain an inner glimpse into what really draws young men and women to fight in a very different type of war with a very different type of “enemy.” This is the need to serve and protect. This is especially true for those in special forces such as the Navy Seals. The patriotic mindset together with the sense of belonging and having a shared experience bonded the young men and women and aided them in being hyper-vigilant with each sortie.

While the film is powerful and Bradley Cooper gives a convincing and Oscar-worthy performance, the value of the film is it pushes us to question what really happens to the thousands of men and women who experience war. As we follow Chris Kyle, we realize what he is experiencing is not easily explained as PTSD. During one of his visits home, he is waiting for the mechanic to finish working on his car. It is a simple straightforward scene. However, during the scene, another customer comes up to him eager to shake the hand of a legend. Kyle, though, feels self-conscious and embarrassed by it and clearly wants to leave quickly. In addition, he goes into a protective stance when he hears a car backfire. Are these reactions a symptom of PTSD? Or is something else going on — that being the concept of moral injury?

Moral injury is an attempt to explain what returning veterans are experiencing. Brett Litz, a Boston University clinical psychologist specializing in veterans, defines moral injury as “acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations.” The fundamental distinction between moral injury and PTSD is in the core emotion experienced by the individual.

In PTSD the overwhelming experience is of fear, whereas moral injury is rooted in shame and guilt. This is why returning veterans feel that their souls are in anguish because of what they did. As Ed Tick,

founder of Soldier's Heart, an agency that provides counseling support for veterans, describes it, what soldiers experience is a wound to their soul. Why did Kyle have problems in adjusting to being back home between tours of duty? His soul was in anguish because in the process of killing the enemy, his conscience or his soul, was struggling with his repeated action of consciously killing another human being — enemy or not.

As a human being raised within the Christian tradition, he had been taught throughout his young life, "Thou shalt not kill" — especially pertinent in Kyle's case, who had each individual he shot squarely in his gun's crosshairs. Is it any question, then, that he struggled when he was away from Iraq and back in the safety of home? As an individual with good character, he was feeling either guilt, shame or remorse for having caused another person's death. This is moral pain. So he becomes uncomfortable when that young man approaches him and thanks him for saving American lives because his soul is struggling with this reality. This would also explain why Routh was unable to deal with his depression.

The concept of moral injury and soul wound is relatively new. PTSD has been the diagnosis of choice by the medical profession. However, it is this same medical profession that has raised the question of the effectiveness of the PTSD label now that it is increasingly clear that the medications and therapies designed to address PTSD are not completely effective. Nor does it provide guidance for the veteran's family and community as to how to support their loved one who is experiencing this anguish. When we look at the struggles on the part of Kyle's wife, Taya (played by Sienna Miller), to support her husband when she sees him in obvious anguish, the PTSD diagnosis cannot help her in that moment. After all, while the soldier may be the one who actually experienced war and combat, their families and communities are the reason these soldiers were willing to do this, and when they come home, they are returning to these same families and communities.

As I watched "American Sniper," hard as it was to do so — and not just because of the violence — I could not help but reflect on the part that we all have played directly or indirectly in the wars in the Middle East. More importantly, as a religious educator, it struck me that we need to generate and foster more theological reflection and examination within the wider community on the larger fundamental issues of war. We would do well to ask such questions as: "Can war ever really be 'just'?" "Why must we, men and women created in the image of God, rely on war for our sense of security?" "How do we make sense of the atrocities committed by our soldiers and atrocities committed by 'the enemy'?" Such collective reflections and conversations will also go a long way in supporting the healing process of our returning veterans — men and women like Chris Kyle and many others whose stories we do not yet know.

I hope that "American Sniper" is not relegated to the long list of outstanding Oscar Best Picture nominees (though it surpassed "Saving Private Ryan" as the most successful war movie ever). I encourage people to see the film, but not just to admire the amazing performance given by Bradley Cooper or astounding directing of Clint Eastwood. I recommend it as the beginning of a public conversation that needs to take place. Such conversations are the start of unlearning violence and learning peacemaking as we move toward the Kingdom of God on earth.

"American Sniper," rated R, is currently in theaters. Directed by Clint Eastwood; produced by Clint Eastwood, Robert Lorenz, Andrew Lazar, Peter Morgan, and Bradley Cooper; released by Warner Brothers Pictures. Running time: 134 minutes. Cast: Bradley Cooper (Chris Kyle), Sienna Miller (Taya Kyle), Luke Grimes (Marc Lee), Jake McDorman (Biggles), Kevin Lacz (Dauber), Cory Hardict (Dandridge), Navid Negahban (Sheikh Al-Obodi), and Keir O'Donnell (Jeff Kyle). "American Sniper" received six Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture, Best Adapted Screenplay and Best Actor for Bradley Cooper, ultimately winning the award for Best Sound Editing.

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Photo at top: Bradley Cooper as Chris Kyle in "American Sniper" (courtesy Warner Brothers Pictures)