Rebuilding the Moral House of Peace
By Rita Nakashima Brock, Director of the Soul Repair Center at Brite Divinity School
Canadian Memorial United Church and Centre for Peace
Vancouver Canada

On the ninety-eighth year after Armistice Day, in the eleventh month, the sixth day

Text: Haggai 1:15b-2:9 NRSV

Haggai 1:15- 2:9

In the second year of King Darius, in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month, the word of the LORD came by the prophet Haggai, saying:

2 Speak now to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people, and say, ‘Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing? Yet now take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the LORD; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the LORD; work, for I am with you, says the LORD of hosts, according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear.

6 For thus says the LORD of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land;

7 and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the LORD of hosts.

8 The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the LORD of hosts.

9 The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity, says the LORD of hosts.

Let’s be honest, how many of you have read anything in the prophet Haggai recently? I confess, I probably haven’t paid any attention to it since I was assigned it in a college class forty-seven years ago. But it was in the lectionary for this week, and the passage caught my eye.

It caught my eye for two reasons. First reason is that the time period of the text is quite precise: “the second year of King Darius, in the seventh month, on the twenty-first day of the month,” nearly as precise as “the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918,” or Armistice Day of WW I. You Canadians will mark it on it Friday as Remembrance Day and we in the US will mark as Veterans Day

The second year of the reign of Darius would have been around the year 520 BCE, and in that year, the very elderly remnant of the wars between Judah and Babylon had already returned to the devastated villages and cities of Judah, along with some of the children, grandchildren and great grandchildren of the exiles. The people in Judah who had not left were not necessarily welcoming or happy to see these strangers arrive, reminders of the traumatic past.

The land, too, was different: both scarred from war and indifferent to war. The desolated fields of ruined soil were dotted with the hovels of survivors. But the flesh of the dead had long ago become grass, and the blackened remains and stony rubble of the cities were overgrown with shrubs and trees. Life had returned in its own way without them.

1 I first heard this metaphor of a moral house used by Dr. Zachary Moon, a US Navy reserve chaplain and professor of pastoral theology at Chicago Theological Seminary, in January 2014 at a Soul Repair conference on moral injury held in San Diego, CA.
For several days near the end of April in 2014, I visited the Beaches of Normandy, Utah, Omaha, Gold, Sword, and Juno. My father fought there in the U.S. Army 1st Infantry. When he fought, my mother’s family, which lived two hours from Nagasaki, were the enemy.

In Normandy, remnants of the war litter the fifty miles of beaches, and the viewing slits of gun bunkers still open seaward toward the ill-fated landing boats of D-day. The ground beneath my feet rumbled restlessly with the ghosts of those who crossed those wet sands seven decades ago, and I thought about the price paid by the victorious survivors who carried home memories so terrible, many like my father never spoke them aloud.

The week I walked those beaches, a 59-year-old Belgian reserve soldier I met near Bayeux told me of the mass grave of 86 German soldiers just discovered in Belgium. As he noted, the war lives on in the soil of Europe, long beyond the time of winners and losers and the generations who fought. The forensic work to find the families and send those 86 lost boys home is going to take years.

For those who survive, the journey home can also take years. Their bodies may be here, but their minds and hearts often wander the battle fields. Many are so devastated that they return as the walking dead, haunted by the horrors they cannot integrate into their former life at home.

Every society manages our relationships to mortality and the overwhelming power of grief with assiduous care, we sanitize or sequester death and corpses with elaborate rituals and fierce taboos. But war explodes these careful boundaries, and it wounds not only the bodies but also the humanity of those we send to fight.

The invisible wounds I speak of are not terror and the nightmares of fear, which are bad enough. Fear is, of course, inevitable in war, and overwhelming fear can leave behind post-traumatic stress. But something deeper, something even more devastating than fear is also an invisible wound of war: that wound is called moral injury, the violation of conscience.

Moral injury comes in the aftermath of surviving; it’s the long slow burn of remembering and not wanting to remember. Desperate to forget and trained to endure inner conflict with stoic resolve, the survivors of war often immerse themselves in intense work, drinking, and other avoidances to manage the guilt and grief that haunt their sleep. Still, the specters of hungry prisoners return in eruptions of grief in the middle of a morning shower. The acrid traces of burned and blackened cities smolder under the mounds of paperwork on a desk. And the empty eyes of staring unsaved children float above alcoholic stupors.

War can so change people that they no longer recognize who they once were and what it was like to feel “at home.” Though they may look forward to being home and be grateful to return, ordinary life can also seem shallow, gray and empty after the drama, purposefulness, and camaraderie of war. Being immersed in carnage, they return numb, desolate, disillusioned, or ashamed. But even as they long for the battlefields, their sense of meaning and faith may have been wrecked by what they failed to do or did too much, by what they witnessed or tried not to see.
Hidden guilt, shame, betrayal, grief, remorse, or self-loathing are signs of a wrecked moral house. Our moral house is the one we grew up with, the one others made to shelter us so that we might grow up good and safe and loved. As we move into a wider world, sometimes we face the storms of new moral challenges and have to learn from our failures and mistakes. Our house may need some repair, remodeling, or a new room here and there, but its foundations and basic structure remain our shelter throughout our lives, even if it might get considerable remodeling and look completely different after decades of life experiences.

But what if a catastrophic event, like a hurricane or war, completely wrecks our house? What is our shelter from the terrible winds that will blow?

This brings me to the second thing in this text from Haggai that caught my eye. His strange words of comfort:

Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Is it not in your sight as nothing?

Haggai is speaking to the few survivors of the destruction of Jerusalem 66 years after their city and temple were leveled, telling them to remember that temple as nothing. They lived almost their whole lives as captives without their country. Then they were finally able to return from the Babylonian Exile to rebuild that Temple.

What might it have felt like for the exiles to return to the home that they had fought for and, after so long, had become just a ghostly nostalgic memory of lost glory?

Michael Yandell was an ordinance disposal specialist for the U.S. Army and served six months in Iraq. He has spoken at a number of Soul Repair conferences about his moral injury. At one of those conferences in October 2014, he said:

For me, moral injury names the disillusionment, the erosion of my perception of my place in the world. It is the removal of [my] spiritual and emotional foundations … It is having been a part of something like war, which is so much bigger than me, but feeling personally responsible for the consequences of it – long after I have distanced myself from war. It is a feeling of intense betrayal: the betrayer and the betrayed are the same person – my very self.

What began to erode for me in Iraq in 2004, and what I continue to be disillusioned with over time, is my younger self’s perception of “good” and “evil.” This disillusionment is not altogether a bad thing, but it is the best way I can describe “moral injury:” it is a painful transition from a world and way of being in the world which makes moral sense, to a world that does not....

I know plenty of people who feel terrible about our involvement in these long wars. However, the veteran, or at least I, cannot quite clearly distinguish the war as something “out there” or in the past – it is like something I own personally. Sometimes I feel that it is not only by my own actions, but by the war as a whole with which I am condemned. And I do not mean I am condemned in some cosmic sense – I mean that I condemn myself.

It is the paradox of having the war as such a formative experience in my adult life and my refusal to acknowledge that the war can be a part of my self that morally injures me.
Of course the war is a part of me. I cannot avoid it. I cannot escape my experience. And yet who I am rejects what war is – and what I was in the war. This creates the most surreal experience of being uncomfortable in my own skin.

What happens to people in war is not just that they violate values they grew up with. It is that military training and war distort the moral will. In war, killing is valorized, aggression and invulnerability are good character traits, and service to others includes obedience to authority without regard for self preservation. As Michael Yandell notes, once the war is an experience, it cannot simply be excised. It is forever a part of the veteran’s identity and memory:

It is important that I reemphasize what exactly it is about war that I categorically reject. It is this unleashing of “good” and “evil” as fundamental ways of understanding human beings. It is the notion that we can place ourselves on a moral high ground, and having done so, completely disregard any moral obligation to avoid violence and death dealing. It is the laying flat of all the ways of valuing life that we hold dear with the expectation that we will be able to rebuild those values later.

The fact is, it is nearly impossible to rebuild and reclaim all that is lost in war. …there are as many meanings for the name veteran and the experience of moral injury as there are veterans who experience it. I cannot speak or write for those who are silent; no one can. However, I can I encourage you—every once in a while—to let the news networks lie dormant. Take a moment to separate yourself from all the meanings that are thrust onto us from so many sources. Let your mind wander; let your eyes and ears drift back over the past … years or so and over all that has transpired. What was there before, and what remains?

What remains for Haggai and his people? He offers this reminder of an ancient divine promise:

[T]ake courage, all you people of the land, says the LORD; work, for I am with you, says the LORD of hosts, according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear.

In some ways, this might seem like such a small promise. It speaks of an abiding inner reality that can get you through the worst things that might happen, but it offers no protection from those tragedies. How would such a promise sound to people who might have felt abandoned by God? What of people who prayed for deliverance, only to witness so many they loved die in battle or in captivity? They might have lived with trauma inside them so long, that there was no room for spirit. Could they even feel that inner sense of being loved?

Perhaps even Haggai knows more is needed. He piles on the comfort. He offers extravagant hope next:

For thus says the LORD of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the LORD of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the LORD of hosts.

---

2A video of his testimony can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ex_2pS6Ekkk.
We know how true this hope is. The temple does get rebuilt to an even greater glory than the old one, though the living exiles did not live to see it. But we also know how ultimately hollow this promise is.

We live in the aftermath of the destruction of that second, even more glorious temple in 70 CE. In that year the Roman general Titus marched into Judah, leveled its towns, and destroyed the temple and city of Jerusalem. On these ruins the Romans built a pagan city and forbid all Jews to enter on penalty of death. Within a hundred years, the Roman governor there had never heard the name Jerusalem. Two thousand years of conflict and war mark that tiny area of land that was once called Canaan, and then Israel, then Judah, and then Palestine and many other names, until, full circle, we are back to Palestine and Israel.

We know how impotent the temples of empire, wealth, and privilege are against the moral catastrophes of war. The collapse of the Ottoman empire, and a whole series of empires in WW I, and the holocaust and then the utter devastations of WW II wrecked the moral houses of the West, and now we live with new insurgencies, drone warfare, and globally connected terrorism that erupts unexpectedly like a spreading termite infection in our new moral house.

Imperial wealth and riches are cold comfort for moral injury. Something more is needed. The comforts and promises that Haggai describes are addressed to all the people, many of whom will never share in any of the promises. So why must they also rebuild a moral house?

War is not possible without civilian demonization of the enemy. Otherwise, who would send their sons and daughters to fight? We must consider what it means to be raised in families and communities and to believe that because we are beloved of God, our good intensions make it possible to inflict violence and destruction on other human beings we define as evil. Once made evil, it is no easy matter to erase hatred and enmity for our adversaries.

As those who serve in the military know from experience, the society and relationships we live in are major factors in shaping our values and behavior. When these become dysfunctional, they cannot be changed by sheer acts of personal will. It takes a whole community, intense ritual training, and a long time to change.

Moral injury is not a personal disorder of a few veterans; it is the normal response of moral people to experiences of violence that cannot be integrated or understood, that shatter moral foundations, and that require long processing and reflection to understand and integrate so that hope for the future can be restored and life to flourish. This processing is not something anyone can do alone, but with honest friends and a better society that we make together, it is possible.

And that brings me to Haggai’s final words of comfort, which in English, sound appalling.

The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity...

Is prosperity really the antidote to war? Returning to a good life after you fill your larder with gold and silver? I think not.
The United States, with the prosperity it has accumulated since WW II, has sent our military into conflicts every year, save one during the Carter presidency. The places we’ve gone to war span the globe: Korea, Vietnam, the Cold War, Bosnia, Desert Storm, and now the so-called War on Terror.

But maybe we can give Haggai the benefit of the doubt. The Hebrew word translated as prosperity is *shalom*. What were the translators thinking? Can we please translate it as *peace*.

But if it speaks of peace, perhaps Haggai’s pronouncements about the Temple mean something deeper:

> I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the LORD of hosts. The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the LORD of hosts.

Maybe the shaken nations whose treasure is gathered as splendor is something beyond wealth. Perhaps the silver and gold of God are not wealth but something infinitely more rare and precious: divine peace. The house of shalom is the dwelling place that no catastrophe can destroy because it is the people’s house where the splendor of peace is found.

But the moral house of peace must be built on a foundation of Remembrance. Remembrance not only of the victories, or the casualties and the tragedies of wars past and present. We must attend also to the cost of war on its survivors, the price paid by veterans who cannot come home and take their own lives, or drink to oblivion, or work too hard and die too young, or spend their entire lives feeling unloveable and unloved because of what they carried home from war.

The moral injury of veterans belongs to all of us. Attending adequately to their recovery is a responsible way to welcome veterans home, with respect. If we help carry the memories, we will be better people for the struggle and better able to understand what peace requires of us.

Because after all the acrid clouds of smoke and cordite,
After all the killing and rivers of blood,
After all the wasted fields and forests,
After all the craters and burnt cities,

> After all the din and destruction, …

> All there is is sorrow
> All there is is courage
> All there is is compassion
> All there is is wisdom
> All there is is persistence
> All there is is hope

The sun and sky endure,
the sand and restless seas remain,
the tiny, persistent grasses and poppy fields return,
and all the new children are born.

And all there is is this precious treasure, this simple divine presence, this abiding love we share. May it be so—soon.