

Writing to Bear Witness: A Grass Roots Healing Movement

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During the post 9/11 period, veteran writing programs—led by grassroots movements such as Warrior Writers and the Combat Paper Project—have proliferated across the US. Clinical and anecdotal evidence shows writing is an effective means to address the trauma of warfare, focusing on the unnatural experience of combat, PTSD and moral injury. Most importantly, the writing groups provide an informal, supportive and communal environment in which veterans share stories with each other, and with the civilian population. This essay follows the story of Nathan Lewis, an Iraq War veteran and an influential (and beloved) member of the veteran writing community. It blends journalism, by a writer following the “Solutions Journalism model, with academic inquiry—from the perspective of the soldier/veteran and the journalist/witness. Nathan’s story of war trauma and writing (through multiple interviews) is threaded through seminal moments in post-war literature, trauma theory and the concept of witnessing.

NATHAN’S STORY

Nathan Lewis lifts the lid of a large plastic grey vat. “Shredded uniforms” it says on the outside, in thick black

marker. Inside are the slivered remnants of hundreds of military uniforms, like multicolored confetti: shreds of blue from the Navy, yellow from desert camo worn by the Army in the Arabian Desert, and green from the Marines' woodland camouflage.

Lewis is an Army veteran—he served with Charlie Battery 1st of the 14th Regiment, the 214th Brigade Artillery out of Fort Sill, Oklahoma. He did his pre-deployment training at White Sands, New Mexico, an old military base where General Patton tested tanks. He was trained to become an expert in “Multiple Launch Rocket Systems” artillery.

“We shot cluster bombs,” he says. He spent most of his six-month deployment in Baghdad, but traveled all over Central and Southern Iraq. He was 18 when he entered basic training and 20 when he went to Iraq.

But now, at 33, he is a master papermaker and writer, living in the farmland outside Trumansburg, NY. He is one of the thousands of veterans who report symptoms of PTSD, but Lewis prefers the term “war trauma,” because he feels it's more accurate to his (and other veterans') experience.

He is having trouble inhaling enough air—inflamed respiratory disease, his doctor says. He suspects it's caused by the smoke from “burn pits” that blaze all day at the Army bases in war zones, and the depleted uranium used in U.S. weaponry, which becomes airborne.

Lewis is a longtime member of two sister organizations: the Combat Paper Project and Warrior Writers. He runs five to six writing and paper-making workshops a year, helping hundreds of veterans and military family members in the transition from war zone to home life.

The projects also help these communities tell their stories and communicate their military experience through art, he explains. The veterans he meets at workshops donate huge duffel bags full of uniforms they no longer need or want. “They want us to use them for future projects and workshops; the fibers are added to our collective

lineage. We will never run out of uniforms,” says Lewis. Most of the uniforms are painstakingly shredded by hand, cut with scissors into postage stamp-sized pieces.

Lewis took up papermaking in 2006, and he began taking part in—now hosting—dozens of writing, papermaking and book-binding workshops. “I think I have milked as much therapy out of papermaking and writing as I can at this point. Now I am more focused on the craft of it. I have much more to learn and intend to keep making art that focuses on militarism and my experience in Iraq.”

He is tall and slender, with muscular arms. On his right forearm is a four-inch tattoo of a paperclip, a symbol of resistance in World War II that has now come to be a symbol of non-violent protest. During Vietnam its meaning endured and came to stand for “People Against People Ever Re-Enlisting, Civilian Life Is Preferred.” His studio is full of symbols. Above the vats of uniforms is a heavy chain stretching across the wall; it is decorated, like a charm bracelet, with helmets, boots, beer cans and the empty prescription bottles of painkillers, psychotropics and sleep aids. That was part of a piece of performance art he and two veteran friends put on in downtown Ithaca.

“That is what you carry around with you. Most people got it,” he says.

The Hollander beater—a machine developed by the Dutch in the 1600s, although Lewis’s is from the 1970s—whirs and spins. The uniforms, mixed with water and beaten for two hours, become a clay-colored pulp, like oatmeal.

“I think it is a lifelong thing, you are not going to wholly cure yourself of it,” he says of the psychological burdens he struggles with. “It comes and goes in severity, you don’t totally undo war trauma.”

Last September, Lewis lost a close friend, Jacob George, who had helped him and many others, confront mental illness. George could no longer cope, and he committed suicide.



Figure 1 Nathan Lewis pictured in his Trumansburg, NY studio. Here he uses a Hollander beater to turn shredded military uniforms into paper pulp. Photograph courtesy of David Burbank.

“I think that veterans commit suicide not just from the horrors and trauma of the military and war,” Lewis said, “but because they return to a society ravaged by a decade and a half of war with no end in sight.” He explained some of the difficulties that come with reintegration:

At the core of it is a distrust and an angry bitterness at society, culture, and country that put me in that position and created the war. When you talk about adjustment issues... that is a really big thing. I feel really betrayed. People are congratulating you and treating you as this wonderful thing, [a hero], and I think of it as something completely different. That is a recurring problem.

More than any other effect from the war, it is this injustice that troubles him the most. That is the root of his war trauma, he says. “I don’t believe the war I participated in was just. It was not even legal,” he says.

Papermaking and writing has helped in many ways. “It is a great expressive tool,” he says. “You are not going to write away all your problems. But this is a good first step. ... It’s a safe space. We don’t judge or critique anyone’s politics, religion, or experience. What do you get out of a writing group? Community, understanding, engagement, all these wonderful things.”

He keeps the door closed while he is spinning the fragments so the noise does not disturb his neighbors. But as the Hollander whirs to a halt, he throws open the doors and starts pouring the pulp into vats and then “sheets”—screens of mesh framed with wood. Lewis works overlooking cornfields, berry farms and dense woodlands. Bees look for a home in the studio rafters. Across the way, a neighbor mows her lawn.

He is making new batches of paper today using one of his favorite techniques: while the pulp is still wet, he uses stencils to form faint images in the paper—it’s called pulp painting. Then, once the paper is dry, he can layer these images with text and ink drawings.

While training at the White Sands Missile Range, Lewis collected remnants of war on walks in the desert, which he removes from an old cookie tin today. There are 50 caliber bullets, his dog tags, which have grown rusty, machine gun belt “linkage” and a “humanitarian service medal” given to him by a friend. There’s another medal for service in the war on terrorism and a plastic toy soldier. He uses them for stencils now. He is known, amongst the paper-making community for his faces using bullet stencils. He carefully presses the bullets into the wet pulp, stands back for a moment, and then wipes his hands.¹



Figure 2 Nathan Lewis uses a variety of techniques when making paper, including “pulp pressing” - using his dog tags and other military paraphernalia to imprint into the wet pulp. Photograph courtesy of David Burbank.

UNMEDIATED STORYTELLING: AN ETHICAL IMPERATIVE

I met Nathan Lewis for the first time in February 2015 when I started a writing project that became one of the most significant—transformative, even—projects of my 17-year career as a journalist. Our meeting was the starting point for a ten-part series about veterans for a small but ambitious local newspaper in Ithaca, *The Ithaca Voice*, founded in 2014 by a young and dynamic journalist, Jeff

Stein. The first time I sat down to interview Nathan, we talked at length about his work for Warrior Writers and the Combat Paper Project. Warrior Writers was founded in 2007 by Lovella Calica in Philadelphia, and since then, the organization has proliferated across the East Coast, along with many other veteran writing groups, such as the Veterans Writing Group in Washington DC, NEA's Operation Homecoming, the IVAW's Warrior Writer Project, workshops at New York University, and the Syracuse Veterans' Writing Group in Syracuse, New York. This year alone, Lewis will have hosted five workshops, some on military bases for service men and women still in active duty.

The series for the *Voice* aimed to address the varied problems facing the veterans of Central New York. In Tompkins County alone (the county in which Ithaca is located), there are nearly 6,000 veterans (five percent of the population); all of them face challenges of reintegration after their military careers. The series was guided by the Solutions Journalism Network, a national organization that promotes, funds, and consults with journalists on work that seeks resolutions to community problems. The idea is that, as journalists, we have a responsibility to research and report on organizations and social services established to counteract the stories of injustice or struggle we uncover. And so the series was divided into five themes, each with two parts: a "problem" within the veteran community and then a "solution," be it a solution in action already or a possibility or plan for the future. The five themes were structured around issues of health (mental and physical), homelessness, incarceration, employment, and the unique challenges faced by women veterans. The series began with a data-focused introduction, announced by the editor as the start of an in-depth series that outlined the alarming statistics—such as high rates of homelessness, unemployment, drug and alcohol addiction, suicide and incarceration for non-violent crimes—that disproportionately affect the veteran population. I then focused on personal stories and those individuals and programs within the community working to solve those problems. As part of the solutions side to the piece, I covered the work of treatment courts in Binghamton, NY and Buffalo, NY (which offer rehabilitation instead of jail time). The Solutions Journalism model seemed to be, for me, advocating a more involved role for the journalist – an ethical drive to not only report on the solutions side to a story but to push

for those solutions to happen. And so, a local veterans' advocate and I lobbied several local judges who were slow to adopt the treatment court model in Central New York. The *Voice* became involved in a local job fair for veterans, providing social networking and publicity for the event; we also worked to establish connections among women veterans in disparate communities. We ran a piece highlighting the work of the Cornell Small Farms Program, led by director Anusuya Rangarajan, which was awarded a \$712,500 grant in February 2015 to help launch 20 veteran-owned farms in Upstate New York and initiate a network connecting them all. Lastly, with the help of a freelance film producer, the editors at the *Voice* and I made a short documentary film about the work of a formerly homeless veteran, Martin Warren, who is now a crisis outreach worker across 13 counties of Central New York, with an organization called Soldier On. The *Voice* concluded that the real victories for the veteran community were taking place outside of public policy. Veterans were not waiting for government programs or funding to catch up to the needs of their community. I saw farms, cooperatives, writing groups, support groups, and other means of connection springing up with no impetus from larger organizations. In the case of writing groups, I was surprised to find that the VA was taking the lead from veterans; a national infrastructure of writing groups already existed, with little or no impetus from the VA.

It also became abundantly clear to me that, for many veterans, bearing witness to the experience of war in a supportive group atmosphere was an essential first step towards healing and recovery—or perhaps even just acceptance. The writing groups that Nathan leads start with a discussion forum where the assembled veterans talk to each other and share their experiences. Many are resistant to writing in the early stages, he says. Yet they come all the same. From that act of talking and sharing there is a logical and instinctive, next step: writing is a “natural, and obvious progression,” says Lewis. This is why grass roots “healing” movements such as Warrior Writers have had such success in forming meaningful connections within our communities and why they have grown at such a fast rate during the post 9/11 era.

Throughout the eight-month period of my investigation, Lewis's insights guided me through the sometimes insular world of veterans and recovery. Although communities—especially in liberal college towns like Ithaca—have learned crucial lessons from the Vietnam era, many veterans still find their homecoming to be a supremely isolating experience. All the veterans I spoke to talked of an overwhelming sense of loneliness when they returned from service. Their civilian communities don't understand what the military experience is like, and often friends want to help but have no idea how to ask. Naturally—and rightly—the veteran community is suspicious of members of the media, seeing their personal stories being spun in ways that make them uncomfortable, or woven into a wider editorial narrative over which they have no control. Seeing one's stories of trauma and recovery in black and white, and in a public forum, can be re-traumatizing. Secondary trauma was the absolute antithesis of everything I wanted to achieve as the orchestrator and writer of this project. If—and this happened on occasion—a veteran told me his or her story of war trauma but decided it would be too painful to see printed, then that story stayed between us. However, most of the veterans I interviewed said that the decision to allow me to share their stories with a wider public was a therapeutic and positive one, especially once we had built a bond of trust.

In Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's seminal work, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Felman writes:

[T]estimony has become a crucial mode of our relation to events of our times—our relation to the traumas of contemporary history...As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory. To testify is to *vow to tell*, to *promise* and *produce* one's own speech as material evidence for the truth—is to accomplish a *speech act*, rather than simply formulate a statement. (5)

Felman points out that “the *appointment* to bear witness is, paradoxically enough, an appointment to transgress the confines of that isolated stance, to speak *for* others and *to* others” (3) —the isolated stance being that of the trauma survivor, for the experience of trauma and PTSD is marked by a solitary, inward turn. Once

the survivor has shared their story (or testimony), Felman suggests that the responsibility or burden becomes a communal one. And with that comes a huge responsibility on the part of the secondary witness bearer (or in this context, the journalist) to both represent the survivor and transmit that story to a wider audience.

During the summer of 2015, I interviewed over 50 veterans and veteran advocates. Nearly all of them talked about sharing their experiences in various contexts: writing came up again and again as a means to do this. And I realized the experiences I was having while listening to them were not just those of a journalist in pursuit of a story, but something much more powerful. In *War and the Soul* (2005), Edward Tick emphasizes the importance of storytelling and listening in the healing process for veterans. He writes, "It is important not only that the veteran tells his story but that he experiences it as being heard... The public platform is necessary for the story to get passed on and become part of the community's collective wisdom and mythic history" (221). The more interviews I conducted, the more I realized that I was bearing witness to the stories of men and women who felt, at large, completely unheard (and certainly not understood) within our community. Just listening to someone's story was an essential act of connection. The journalistic compulsion to complete the story I was writing became intertwined with the surprisingly complex act of sitting and listening. As a secondary witness, I felt an overwhelming sense of duty to that story.

Tick recognizes the role of both psychotherapy and veterans' groups in fulfilling the veteran storyteller's need for an audience or witness, but he argues that "Storytelling at its most effective must go beyond the therapeutic setting and an exclusively veteran audience to take place before members of the general populace" (222). Moreover, he cautions that "Media-carried stories... do not have the same healing impact as personal storytelling. It cannot be overemphasized that, in order to heal, survivors need to gather and share in a living community" (222). Writing the series for the *Voice*, I was acutely aware of the dangers of engaging in this mediated form of storytelling—that, through me, the impact—or healing power—of telling and bearing witness could become diluted or distorted. My role, I knew, was to tell a person's story as simply and directly as possible. I

could describe the objects in Nathan's studio and set the scene of the rural idyll with its buzzing bees and the quiet work of an artist. But when it came to his words—and all the words spoken by veterans—my job was to stand back. The stories needed no embellishment or input from me, other than to set the stage for their telling. Of course, the interview process pulls a story out into the light, and the material needs editing, but the quotes and their context can still remain pure throughout this process. In covering veterans' experiences, this pursuit of unmediated storytelling became an ethical imperative.

“BEING HEARD”: THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNAL STORYTELLING TO REINTEGRATION

During one of these interactions last spring, Eamon Coyne, an Iraq and Afghanistan War veteran living and working in Ithaca offered a post-Vietnam interpretation of his homecoming experience. He'd returned from active duty, completed an MBA at Ithaca College and started his own business—a CrossFit gym with an almost cult-like following in Ithaca. He had been reading the veterans series and—although he doesn't often share his experiences with others, let alone with journalists, he agreed to talk about his feelings of isolation since leaving the military. He had not taken part in writing groups, but he and his fellow veterans talked to each other and recognized that storytelling was a means to adjust to civilian life after serving in the military. At the heart of what he told me was a feeling that his experience was not well understood by the larger civilian public:

I love this country more than I like breathing some days. But the abuse ... Well, it's not abuse exactly, but the operational tempo of being in the military... I was deployed full-time for four years: First combat zones, twice on a boat, six-month deployments, year-long deployments. And if you're not deployed, you're training. So you're always building up and always ready... I was able to see more and more of the war machine, for the lack of a better term. The issue that I'm having—and that a lot of veterans are having—is coming back and trying to reintegrate into a system or into a society ... It's not like Vietnam right? So it's not like they [civilians] disrespect veterans, but the veteran is living in a different relationship with their experience than they were before

they joined the military.

When we spoke, Coyne was eight years out of the military. It's called "separation" when a serviceperson leaves to re-enter civilian life—like the end of a marriage. He was still struggling with the feeling of a previous identity unraveling and a sense of isolation in his new life. There is a sense that our community can never understand what it's like to go to war and isn't much inclined to try:

I'm not a jaded veteran. Like I said, I love this country... but there are definitely some things that can be fixed. And instead of trying to reintegrate people into society as normal operating members of the social machine we need to remember that veterans are learning how to live with their experience ... And I don't want somebody that's never gone to war to feel guilty they have not experienced that. But we as a country, as a whole, as an aggregate, have a really hard time recognizing the impact of sending your kids off to war to fight this unknown thing. I think civilians need to start taking on some of that burden. Does that make sense?

It did make sense. In fact, it's a point that Tick makes when he argues that "veterans' stories need to be told in a way that transfers the moral weight of the event from the individual to the community.... Otherwise, a survivor might endlessly repeat the details of an event but not experience the release of related emotions, the accurate reordering of history, or the making of meaning" (223). And it further drove home why Lewis's work—and his colleagues'—was so important to the veteran community. Writing groups have helped thousands of veterans, who like Lewis and Coyne, struggle with the aftermath of wartime deployment to process and make meaning out of their experiences.

Lewis talks not only of war trauma, but of "moral injury" too—the daily guilt he says he carries for being part of a war he quickly ceased to believe in. While PTSD and moral injury have become common terms in the therapeutic environment, moral injury is only just gaining recognition in mainstream media and popular culture. In 2014, Syracuse University launched the "Moral Injury



Figure 3 The detritus of warfare: Nathan Lewis collected shell casings, medals and other military objects while on pre-deployment training at White Sands, New Mexico. Photograph courtesy of David Burbank.

Project” to raise awareness regarding this crucial aspect of veterans’ experiences. In April of 2015, the university co-sponsored its first conference on moral injury with LeMoyne College, led by a team of faculty, veterans, psychologists, artists, and spiritual leaders. Then in April 2016, Le Moyne College hosted the project’s second annual conference called “Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Moral Injury and Military Veterans.” The panel, led by Pamela Johnson, a professor of the School of Social Work at Syracuse University, addressed how moral injury is currently being defined and addressed. In the simplest terms, the “injury” occurs when a service man or woman either performs an act that goes against their own moral code, or witnesses a trusted ally, commander, or system (such as a nation’s war mission as a whole) break that code (Johnson). In my interviews with Vietnam veterans this moral code came up again and again. Deeply patriotic young men had fought in a war that caused them to lose all sense of trust in the US military system and the government’s global ambitions at that time. I realized, as I sat with a man who cried bitterly about his experience in Vietnam; that it was this betrayal that was the war trauma he could not recover from. It took very little to bring him to tears when discussing his broken sense of patriotism—even 40 years later—he added. In the opening

lines of Jonathan Shay's *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* moral injury is traced back to the *Iliad*. Shay writes, "Homer emphasizes two common events of heavy continuous combat: betrayal of 'what's right' by a commander, and the onset of the berserk state" (xiii). Lewis told me that the topic of moral injury is a common one in all the writing groups he runs. For veterans, it is not a new term, nor a new experience.

Much of the healing process for veterans is interwoven with the communal nature of the groups Lewis runs (many of which are closed to civilians)—where veterans read out their work and comment and discuss. Theirs is not the kind of writing process want-to-be novelists dream of: a cabin in the woods, splendid isolation alone with one's budding creative genius. No, veteran writing is intrinsically about the communal act of writing, reading and sharing. Veterans I spoke to pointed to the communal nature that is intrinsic to the military experience. Service men and women work in carefully structured teams, not alone. Says Lewis:

It's really nice to be in a room of other folks. Of course, it's made a lot easier being in a room with those who have been in the military. Picking up the pen for the first time and not coming at it from a craft or competitive side was important for me. For sure, we are competitive in a way: we are determined to write something and use it for a wider purpose. Someone will read something that just blows you away, it is so good. And everyone gets that was an awesome piece, right? Other folks want to do that, too. That is incredibly inspiring.

After several weeks of working on the series, an Ithaca-based Vietnam veteran invited me to a regular breakfast group that he and other Vietnam combat veterans had started decades ago. This is where it became clear that the healing movement was based in grassroots organization and informality: Five men, a weekly breakfast, and a lot of shared stories. It was a mark of acceptance—trust, even—to be invited to sit with them one morning.

The veterans' writing groups that have sprung up across the country, all informal in nature, tend to use some version of the typical MFA creative writing workshop model. Says Lewis:

Sometimes people don't want to read their work aloud but they are encouraged to. Maybe three or four out of the group will say, 'No, I'm not going to read.' Then one by one they will fall. The whole stereotype of the touchy-feely writer, I think people who live, or have lived, in the military find it hard at first. It's as if writing [about trauma] is a betrayal, but then when people do it, they start to feel like the whole burden is being shared. We are all bearing witness. That starts to feel really powerful.

WRITING AS THERAPY

Lewis points to the increase in evidence-based treatments for war trauma. In fact, writing has been shown—dating back as far as Freud's theory of “scriptotherapy”—to be useful in clinical settings. Patients can examine anxieties and abuse (Freud's patients dealt with childhood and sexual abuse, rather than war trauma but the principle still applies) in the written format that are otherwise unspeakable. Exposure therapy—retelling in writing and then in a workshop forum with other veterans—turns a traumatic event over and over until it loses its hold. James Pennebaker, arguably the godfather of the writing-to-heel movement, conducted a series of studies, starting in 1983 that examined the impact of writing about what he calls “emotionally significant” issues. “What we found in that first study was that writing about a traumatic experience was associated with improvements in physical health,” he said in a 2013 interview (Hurley Moran). “People in the experimental group went to the student health center at about half the rate as people in the control group.” The studies became a book, *Opening Up by Writing It Down: How Expressive Writing Improves Health and Eases Emotional Pain* (first published in 1990 and now in its 3rd edition).

In response to the rise in writing groups, the VA commissioned a study in 2015 to examine the effects of participating in “expressive writing” exercises on veterans struggling with reintegration into civilian life. “Randomized Controlled Trial of Online Expressive Writing to Address Readjustment Difficulties Among U.S.

Afghanistan and Iraq War Veterans” was authored by Nina Sayer, Siamak Noorbaloochi, Patricia A. Frazier, James W. Pennebaker, Robert J. Orazem, Paula P. Schnurr, Maureen Murdoch, Kathleen F. Carlson, Amy Gravely, and Brett T. Litz. In the study—led by Sayer of the Center for Chronic Disease Outcomes Research, with both the Minneapolis VA Healthcare System and the departments of medicine, psychiatry, and psychology at the University of Minnesota—nearly 1,300 returning veterans reporting reintegration problems were given daily 20-minute writing assignments. (Pennebaker’s original 1983 study used daily writing doses each 15-minutes long.) The subjects were asked to “write about their deepest thoughts and feelings concerning a significant life event” (382) The study found that “expressive writing, a simple, resource-efficient intervention that can be implemented online without clinician involvement, may be a promising strategy for improving symptoms and functioning among combat veterans who experience reintegration difficulty” (389). Sayer and her co-authors concluded: “Online expressive writing, a simple, resource-efficient intervention that can be implemented online without clinician involvement, may be a promising strategy for improving symptoms and functioning among combat Veterans who experience reintegration difficulty” (389). Expressive writing was found to be more effective than factual writing (or no writing at all) in reducing physical complaints, anger, and psychological distress, all associated with PTSD. This was the first time writing was studied at the VA specifically as a way to help veterans cope with reintegration. “What does it cost to start a writing group?” asks Lewis. “absolutely nothing. What can you gain from it? Everything.”

Other well-known survivors of war trauma have spoken openly about the role writing has played in their healing process. Kurt Vonnegut wrote of his survival—hiding in a meat locker three stories underground, where he was being held a prisoner of war—of the bombing of Dresden in 1945. Between the American and British air forces, who conducted the bombing raids, 135,000 civilians were killed. When Vonnegut returned to the surface “all organic things were consumed,” he said in a 1974 interview with Joe David Bellamy and John Casey. “We walked for miles before we saw anybody else” (163). *Slaughterhouse-Five* is a response to what he witnessed. In the book, he uses the genre of science fiction—and specifically the trope

of time travel—to frame the fractured memories, flashbacks, and loss of chronology that are common with PTSD.²

In the interview with Bellamy and Casey, Vonnegut describes the nature of memory after a traumatic experience, and his compulsion to write:

...I came home in 1945, started writing about it, and wrote about it, and *wrote about it*, and WROTE ABOUT IT. This thin book is about what it's like to write a book about a thing like that. I couldn't get much closer. I would head myself into my memory of it, the circuit breakers would kick out; I'd head in again, I'd back off. (163)

In another interview with Robert Musil in 1980, which appeared in *Nation* magazine, he said the following about the compulsion to write about trauma:

...It seemed a categorical imperative that I write about Dresden... I *had* to say something about it. And it took me a long time and it was painful. The most difficult thing about it was that I had forgotten about it. And I learned about catastrophes... that there is some device in our brain which switches off and prevents our remembering catastrophes above a certain scale... (230)

Lewis talks of the depiction of war trauma in novels like *Slaughterhouse-Five* as satisfyingly accurate depictions of how traumatic memory functions. “That’s exactly what it’s like,” Lewis says. “The memories. One day, 12 years ago feels real close. Like it’s breathing in my face. Other times it’s an arm’s distance away and other times it’s a mile away. That’s the reality.” Countless other veterans share similar stories: traditional therapies used to treat war trauma do not work. Psychotherapy, sedatives, psychotropics, sleeping pills: the veterans I spoke to said they were not a solution to war trauma. They point to the fact that while the medical term is PTSD – which stands for post-traumatic stress *disorder* – many veterans do not consider their condition to be a disorder, but instead a natural human reaction to

the unnatural conditions of war. "I don't believe we are disordered," says Coyne.

Journalists, too, when working in extreme conditions, may find themselves affected by post-traumatic stress, and other reactions to the unnatural experience of war, such as moral injury. In his memoir, *Dispatches*, Michael Herr writes hauntingly of his own imperative to communicate his experiences as a reporter in Vietnam:

After a year I felt so plugged in to all the stories and the images and the fear that even the dead started telling me stories... However many times it happened, whether I'd known them or not, no matter what I'd felt about them or the way they'd died, their story was always there and it was always the same: it went, 'Put yourself in my place.' (31)

Both Herr and Vonnegut's roles as primary witnesses of war trauma complicate their roles as writers. Vonnegut, in his interviews, talks candidly about the journalistic and writerly imperative to record. His role as witness was first and foremost as a soldier in, and a survivor of, the Second World War. Yet, when he came to write about the experience from some considerable chronological distance (*Slaughterhouse Five* came out in 1969, 24 years after the bombing of Dresden) he turned to a blend of journalistic instinct and novelist's ingenuity. The passages in the novel that deal with the very real events of Dresden are, arguably, the moments when the soldier-witness becomes the journalist-witness. This is an ongoing discussion amongst war correspondents who experience danger and the threat of death alongside veterans, and yet are expected to also embody the role of impartial recorder of events: War correspondents such as Herr often experience their own kind of moral injury as they grapple with multiple roles—complicated further by an editorial imperative to catch the fickle attention of their editors and readers. That moral quandary is supported by the web of self-reflective reasons to be there in the first place: the pursuit of truth? The uncovering of atrocity? Voyeurism? Careerism? Addiction? Or all of the above? Nonetheless, both Vonnegut and Herr shared a sense that writing could restore a focus on the experiences of the common soldiers whose viewpoint provides an essential, but frequently ignored, component of the

meaning of war. That viewpoint is an important counterbalance to the propaganda often used to justify and garner support for US military actions.

The networks that veterans like Lewis are forming in this post 9/11 era are allowing the public more and more opportunities to bear witness to the direct testimony of the veterans' experiences of war. This unmediated storytelling—which is therapeutic in both the artistic process, and in the end result—comes from writing, but it also comes from visual art and performance art too. For Lewis, the means of production—the act of papermaking and the labor and artistry that involves—are as important as writing: most recently his hand-made paper artwork has been displayed at The Brooklyn Museum in New York. His prose and poems are regularly published in the handsome annual *Warrior Writers* books. Yusef Komunyakaa, the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and Vietnam veteran, has praised the work therein, saying the community “cultivates a needful dialogue” for those “amidst the process of confronting themselves as a means of returning from the war” (qtd. in Calica and Basl 1).



Figure 4 For Lewis, the means of production—the act of papermaking and the labor and artistry that involves—are as important as writing. Here he uses his dog tags as part of his papermaking process. Photograph courtesy of David Burbank.

For Lewis, writing has offered a path to peace and meaning. “In terms of being mentally stable or emotionally stable it can be hard. But now I have this sense of driving purpose. Writing groups provide meaningful communities. If I never got my chance to tell my story, find people who cared and listened, I don’t know...” he trails off. “It means something to do things that feel good. Writing feels like I am helping dismantle this machine.”

CONCLUSION

Since the *Voice's* veteran series concluded in the fall of 2015, I have stayed connected to the veterans I met and remained deeply invested in their stories. I came to think of projects like Warrior Writers and Solutions Journalism as the *new* New Journalism—veterans speaking directly to the public about their own experiences of war, either through their own writing projects or in the context of news pieces that grant them substantial space to tell their own stories in their own words. Tom Wolfe wrote in his 1973 anthology of New Journalism that journalists in the “new form” have gravitated towards “that rather elementary and joyous ambition to show the reader *real life*—‘Come here! Look! This is the way people live these days! These are the things they do!’” (Wolfe 33).

The Vietnam era formed the backdrop for the development of New Journalism—with its innate realism and activist imperative. Likewise, Solutions Journalism has developed in a post 9/11 world and takes on a similar role when it comes to this social imperative. The New Journalist movement’s impetus is paralleled by the social responsibility that marks Solutions Journalism. Writers like Vonnegut and Herr became literary beacons for the anti-war movement of the late ’60s and early ’70s. Activism and the use of writing as a tool to record personal acts of witnessing became one and the same. Fast forward to 2016 and Solutions Journalism calls for a similar model, one that incorporates storytelling and social justice. But there is also a value in veterans’ own writing communities that non-veterans cannot replicate in other settings, no matter how vital wider community involvement in veterans’ reintegration struggles is. I asked Lewis about the connection between the writing of his Vietnam-era predecessors and veteran writing groups today. He said:

Some of the first, some of the most complete accounts of war and some of the best writers of poetry about Vietnam were published by Vietnam veterans. I think they set a precedent to write about war. They got a lot of people who wouldn't necessarily be writers, just like those involved with Warrior Writers, to write about war – people who wouldn't necessarily identify themselves as writers.

There is a quiet activism in the work that Lewis does. It's not explicit, but his desire for peace comes to define him as much as his written work where writing, recovery and activism co-exist. I asked him how politics plays a part in the workshops, especially when he hosts writing groups on military bases with active service men and women participating. Not everyone who teaches and writes with him defines him or herself as a peace activist, he says. They focus on the coming home process, on atonement, and on not dehumanizing but humanizing the enemy. It is a deeply personal communal experience and yet one that is not wary of other military service personnel. "People would think that because you are a peace activist, you are really critical of the veterans. But no one ever levels that charge," he says. Ready access to self-expression within a writing community that accepts all political viewpoints marks an evolution of the peace movement. Every veteran is respected; their only task is to write.

This is why many of the writing workshops are closed to civilians. Within the non-military community the individual experience—and story—of each veteran often gets lost, scooped up and incorporated in a wider, societal narrative. "There's definitely a lack of ... of understanding," says Coyne. As civilian members of society we are missing both a connection and a responsibility: a call to bear witness, with all the healing potential that such a collaboration holds. Coyne speaks of the continued gulf between civilian and military experience. He, of all the veterans I interviewed, left me with the most poignant reflection on the importance of the simple act of storytelling:

You asked me a question earlier about what the civilian population needs to know, what they can do, how they can help veterans. As a veteran, I don't want anybody's sympathy. When people thank me for my service on Memorial Day, it makes me insane. I want understanding and I want people to understand that they'll

never understand, and to be okay with that. If we're able to create an environment of support, then the stigma could change. Sometimes we just want to tell our stories and be heard.

NOTES

- 1 This is an excerpt from a ten-part series I authored on veterans, which ran in the *Ithaca Voice* during the summer of 2015. I retained full rights to this material. The series deepened my commitment to veterans' issues and led me to reexamine my own journalistic ethics in bearing witness to veterans' stories.
- 2 Vonnegut was never diagnosed with PTSD – a study by the VA notes that PTSD was not used as a term until 1980 (Friedman). <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/PTSD-overview/ptsd-overview.asp>

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