

Protecting Moral Conscience and Healing Moral Injury

A note from Rita Nakashima Brock, one the organizers of the Truth Commission on Conscience in War

My father was a veteran of World War II and served two tours of duty as a medic in Vietnam. He refused to carry a gun in the latter war, and lately, I have wondered why.

I've wondered as I have spent nearly two years working with three other people in the Bay Area to create the first Truth Commission on Conscience in War (www.conscienceinwar.org). It is holding a public hearing March 21, 4-8 pm in Riverside Church. We seek to protect moral conscience in the military.

Eighty leaders—evangelicals and mainliners, Muslims and Jews, Buddhists, Unitarian Universalists—plus veterans of all military branches, just war proponents, and pacifists, will gather for this unprecedented Truth Commission. They will listen to veterans testify to the moral struggles of serving in Afghanistan and Iraq and hear about the tragedy of moral injury in veterans (who are 20% of the 30,000 U.S. suicides a year).

Currently Conscientious Objectors must object to “war in any form.” However, most soldiers are not pacifists. Instead, they learn about just war from basic training on up, all the way to the elite military academies. They are told that in war, *especially*, keeping a moral compass is crucial.

The moral discernment the military teaches, it also punishes. When soldiers refuse to fight a *particular* war because they deem it unjust, they face sanctions, court martial, imprisonment, and dishonorable discharge. People in military service can only avoid prosecuting a war if they apply for Conscientious Objector status. But objection to all wars is not a just war moral position.

Forcing service members to act against their own moral convictions violates the sanctity of moral conscience.

We hope, via six months of conversations in faith communities that will follow the Truth Commission public hearing, to build momentum for expanding current CO regulations and to help communities address moral injury. We believe the moral consciences those who follow just war must be as respected as the pacifist. To learn more go to www.conscienceinwar.org or to Facebook <http://bit.ly/TruthCommissionPage>.

I never asked my father why he refused to carry a gun in Vietnam. I wish I had. I suspect the veterans testifying at Riverside will give me some possible answers.