

# SPIRIT OF CHAPLAINCY

NATIONAL VA CHAPLAIN CENTER — HAMPTON, VA

## FROM THE DIRECTOR OF VA CHAPLAINCY

### A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

“To everything there is a season...” wrote the wise writer of Ecclesiastes. As chaplains of the Department of Veterans Affairs, it is our challenge to respond in love and care for the people who go through the seasons of this life. Through physical and mental illnesses, guilt and shame, loss and grief, pain and suffering, manmade and natural disasters; in an increasingly technological society; surrounded by changing cultural norms,

Chaplains are there to provide spiritual care and comfort to those who suffer. We are challenged each day to provide pastoral care for the Veteran, their family members and staff; responsive to the “season” of their lives. We are privileged to minister and seek ways to make our religious values relevant to each generation without sacrificing or compromising individual freedom.

“To care for our nation’s Veterans” has been the core of the mission of the VA chaplaincy. We have built a community that supports each individual chaplain; always remembering that our ministry under God is to the Veterans and their families. We have accomplished much as a Chaplain Service, *(continued on the next page....)*



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### MORAL INJURY AND THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS

Morals are often unspoken, until they are violated. Scott James in “An Introduction to Evolutionary Ethics” proffers, “Part of what makes moral creatures moral, then, has to do with thinking that acting in ways that are forbidden deserves punishment while acting in ways that are (for example) selfless deserves praise.” This might explain why so many Veterans find themselves engulfed in shame whenever they encounter a Moral Injury.

There are many who believe mankind is made up of body, mind and spirit. If this is true, it becomes easier to recognize a Moral Injury can be egregious to each *(continued on the next page....)*

(continued from page 1) part of their person. It can negatively impact the body, plague the mind and damage the spirit.

Moral Injury will often find people expressing different types of negative expressions (fruits) in their lives. I would contend that if the root – or the actual offense/trauma – is not dealt with, then people will be plucking debilitating fruit for the rest of their lives. Relief comes by addressing the root cause.

Please consider the following story as one example. For the purpose of this article, we will call her Amy. I first met Amy in our psych ward, and like many Veterans there, she was initially hesitant to meet with the Chaplain. All she wanted to do during her first day on the ward was to stay in her room and be left alone. I read in her chart where Amy came to the ward because of suicide ideation. She self-medicated with alcohol, which eventually led her to breaking the law. I soon learned her drinking was also having a negative impact on her faith practice.

The following day, Amy agreed to meet for a short visit. Amy slowly began to reveal how she had been a victim of Military Sexual Trauma (MST) while serving in the armed forces. She not only endured the assault, but was impregnated by her assailant. Amy looked like an empty shell as she shared her story. Amy went on to say this was not the first time she had endured such a violation, but had been violated by a family member when she was a child.

I then asked her if she had ever considered forgiving both perpetrators. She asked, “Why would I ever do such a thing?” I told her that it would not excuse what they did; however, forgiving them would set her free from the shame she had been carrying since she was a little girl. Amy then asked me to speak more on this. It was then that I asked what her religious preference was. She said, “Baptist.”

We started from there by recognizing first and foremost that forgiveness is not an emotion. Instead, it is an act of the will. Just as Amy’s God of the Bible chooses to love and forgive her, so those within her belief system must choose whom they will love and forgive. She sat quietly musing over what was said. Amy confided that she did not know how to forgive.

I suggested that we look at some Scriptures for guidance. First, we turned to Proverbs 18:21, “Life and death are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit”. Then, we turned to Luke 6:45, “The good person out of the store of goodness in his heart produces good, but an evil person out of the store of evil produces evil; for from the fulness of his heart, his mouth speaks.” We discussed how each heart is a reservoir that contains our deepest thoughts and emotions; however, our tongue is the tool by which we communicate them to others.

I shared with Amy the challenge with forgiveness is that we must choose as an act of our will to start speaking what we want to be in our heart; instead of what is already in there. Otherwise, we encounter a cyclical roller-coaster of emotions that prevents us from fully dealing with the trauma. I reiterated to Amy that a Moral Injury is shame based, and forgiveness is what breaks the shame; yet, forgiveness is an act of the will.

Amy was encouraged to consider taking some time to think all of this over. I suggested she might use prayer to offer forgiveness. Amy asked if there might be an example of how to employ such a prayer. I offered the following: “Lord, I choose as an act of my will to forgive (name of perpetrator), for (speak to whatever they did that needs forgiving). Amy was encouraged to pray this prayer privately.

She then asked if I might pray for her. When we finished, I looked up and her entire countenance had changed. What had previously sat before me was a woman who looked hopeless. Now she was beaming with a smile that went from ear to ear. It was one of the most transformational events I have ever witnessed. Later in the day, several the nurses on the ward asked what had happened with Amy, because they could not believe what they were seeing.

On Friday morning at our team meeting, Amy’s Psychiatrist shared how her dramatic change might only be a short-lived spike. Nevertheless, everyone was thrilled to learn on Monday morning that Amy had not digressed over the weekend; rather, she had remained steadfast. Her Psychiatrist ended up discharging Amy later that day.

Like so many other Veterans who are cloaked in shame with whom I have worked, forgiveness was the key for them being set free. Each Veteran’s story is different; yet, the process has been the same. Some Veterans needed to forgive someone else, while others needed to forgive God. Many needed to forgive themselves or any combination of the three. My experience has shown me that truly, forgiveness is the most efficacious tool we can use when it comes to Moral Injury.

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