



## **A HOLE IN THE SOUL...**

### **Journal entry 4/15/2020**

If you have been following my posts, I try to post something which hopefully brings some degree of comfort, or encouragement. And when I am not posting those kinds of entries, I seek to post something that might in some way bring understanding. That is what today's post, I pray will provide. I do hope that all of you are doing well and finding ways to mitigate the overlay of stress that this pandemic brings to us each day.

Today I am thinking about moral injury. I have written a bit about this topic in previous posts, as I do quite a bit of research and speaking on that topic to first responders, and Health and Human Service workers.

A few years ago, I was offering a multi-day specialized training at a technical college public safety training center where I am adjunct. I had dismissed the class for lunch and most left the campus to grab a bite to eat. I stayed in the classroom over the lunch hour as I had several messages and emails that I wanted to respond to. There was a police officer who had not gone out to lunch with the others. She sat there in her seat, looking off into the distance. I recognized that look. I had seen it on people, most often victims in the wake of some horrible traumatic event they had gone through. We refer to it as the "thousand-yard stare." As I glanced over at her I could see that tears were streaming down her face. I made the decision to approach her and see if she wanted to talk about it, figuring she would give me the typical first responder reply, "I'm fine" or "I'm good, but thanks for asking". I knelt down in front of her table in the classroom and simply asked: "Do you want to talk about it?" She sat there for a moment and then said: "When I first became a police officer

I was on patrol in my city and I received a call from dispatch that there was a house fully engulfed in flames close to where I was on patrol. Because I was not far from the address, I was the first to arrive. When I got out of my squad car I noticed a large crowd had gathered some distance from the house who were watching in horror the fire consuming the house and shooting out the windows. When they saw me, they said, 'You need to help, there's someone trapped in that house.' The citizens kept pleading with me to go into the house and rescue the person trapped inside. I stood there and felt totally helpless, guilty and ashamed. I did not have the protective turnout gear to go into the house and rescue that person. For me to go into that house in my polyester uniform would have killed me. In a couple of minutes, the fire department rolled up to the scene and were eventually able to knock down the fire. And, sure enough, they brought out the body of someone who tragically had perished in the fire. It was as if someone had stabbed me in the heart and it has taken a long time for me to work through it."

And she is still working through it courageously. She is now a member of her department's peer support team.

Moral injury is sometimes caused in part by a feeling of helplessness to help when that is what you are trained and called to do. There are other factors which can lead to moral injury but the one most evident in dealing with the pandemic comes from feeling helpless to save a life, or to somehow fix the problem when things are out of control.

This morning I read an article in the New Yorker magazine written by Elizabeth Barber entitled: "The Plight of a Hospital Chaplain During the Coronavirus Pandemic". The chaplain she has interviewed for the article is Kaytlin Butler a chaplain at Mount Sinai Hospital which has seen more than its share of COVID-19 patients. In the interview, Chaplain Butler describes sitting with a nurse who was crying for losing so many patients to the pandemic. She asked Chaplain Butler if "she was going to hell for letting her patients die." The nurse was called to heal, to comfort, to encourage and her patients were dying, alone and there was nothing she could do about it. This is what moral injury looks like. And the best way we can care for any and all front-line workers and first responders is not to dismiss what they are feeling but to acknowledge with as much empathy as we can muster how hard this must be for them. Be there to encourage, to support, and thank them for a task that has to be incredibly difficult to do, day in and day out. Stand with them, (as best as

you can from a distance), and listen with understanding. Try not to offer clichés, but simply be there for them. Some of the wounds that are being incurred in the struggle with this pandemic are very deep and leave a hole in your meaning. And healing and hope will ultimately prevail, but we must do what we can to support each other and especially those on the front lines of battle.

*Greg Young, M.Div.*

*Chaplain, FBI*

*Chaplain, Wisconsin State Patrol*

*Debriefing, Multiple Agencies*

*Chaplain, Germantown Police Dept.*

*Pastor, Brown Deer UCC*

*Crisis Intervention, Resilience/Resilient Leadership & Post Traumatic Growth  
Consultant*

*International Law Enforcement Education Training Association Member*

*International Critical Incident Stress Foundation Trainer*

*[criticalincidentresponse@gmail.com](mailto:criticalincidentresponse@gmail.com)*

*[greg@resilientresponse.com](mailto:greg@resilientresponse.com)*

*Website: [resilientresponse.com](http://resilientresponse.com)*