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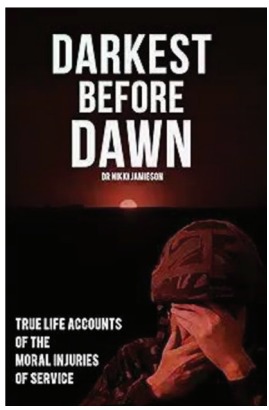
Review



Jamieson, N. (2023). *Darkest Before Dawn: Australian Veterans' Accounts of Moral Injury.* Canberra: Amazon Books Australia, 141 pp. (pbk). ISBN: 9781962464482.

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(Note: A similar version of this review was previously published in the *Australian Army Chaplain Journal* 2024. See Bakhurst and Carey, 2024).

Nikki Jamieson's *Darkest before Dawn* is a thought-provoking and vividly honest blend of lived experience, research and fearless accounts of moral injury in the military. The fourteen-chapter book (plus an epilogue) gives a voice to veterans whose military experience is a far cry from the inspiring and meaningful career which they had been promised and for which they had hoped. This text pungently addresses the long-term consequences when a lack of support and poor-quality restitution is experienced by military personnel (and their families), given military encounters that deeply affect one's view of the world and/or ourselves.

Jamieson begins the book with the story of her son, Daniel, whose alleged experience in the military contributed to his death by suicide. We are taken on a journey from Daniel's early years, as a young child playing battle games with action figures and dreaming of one day becoming a soldier, to his entry into the army as a young adult and the crushing disappointment he experienced when the military was not what he was led to believe it would be. Parallel to the biography of Daniel, the reader shares in the experience of Daniel's mother (Nikki Jamieson, the book's author), who

felt powerless to help Daniel, or to intervene in very rigid and hierarchical military processes. Daniel's story thus sets the scene for the book and provides in basic terms an understanding of the moral injury at its core – when our reality is misaligned with our identity, morals, values and expectations.

Defining Moral Injury

The definition of moral injury is, in fact, a hotly debated topic, with many key experts and researchers in the field providing different appraisals of what it means to experience moral injury (see, for example, the definitional review by Hodgson & Carey, 2017, or Griffin et al., 2019). Jamieson presents moral injury as an outcome when we "do not have the authority or the tools to act in alignment with [our] moral values" (p. 23). In other words, moral injury occurs when what we believe does not actually align with what we do (or what we don't do). When our value system is violated, behaviours such as anger, withdrawal and shame result.

Moral injury is a syndrome. However, that is only now becoming increasingly recognized and is still not yet fully comprehended by some healthcare professionals, nor by some managers within institutional sectors who lack the ability (whether due to ignorance or cognitive apathy) to look beyond post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Interestingly, the Australian Defence Force (2018/2021) was arguably one of the first organizations internationally to proactively develop and authorize the first consensus definition of moral injury based on the expertise and research of Shay (2002), Litz and co-workers (2009), Jinkerson (2016), along with Carey and Hodgson (2018):

> Moral injury is a trauma related syndrome caused by the physical, psychological, social and spiritual impact of grievous moral transgressions, or violations, of an individual's deeply held moral beliefs and/or ethical standards. Moral injury is due to: (i) an individual perpetrating, failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about inhumane acts which result in the pain, suffering or death of others, and which fundamentally challenges the moral integrity of an individual, organization or community, and/or (ii) the subsequent experience and feelings of utter betrayal of what is right caused by trusted individuals who hold legitimate authority.
>
> The violation of deeply held moral beliefs and ethical standards – irrespective of the actual context of trauma – can lead to considerable moral dissonance, which if unresolved, leads to the development of *core* and *secondary* symptoms that often occur concurrently. The core symptoms commonly identifiable are: (a) guilt, (b) shame, (c) anger, (c) a loss of trust in self, others, and/or transcendental/ultimate beings, and (d) spiritual/existential conflict including an ontological loss of meaning in life. These core symptomatic features influence the

> development of secondary indicators such as (a) depression, (b) anxiety, (c) re-experiencing the moral conflict, (d) social problems (e.g., social alienation) and (e) relationship issues (e.g., collegial, spousal, family), and ultimately (f) self-harm (i.e., self-sabotage, substance abuse, suicidal ideation and death) (ADF, 2021).

Jamieson presents perhaps one of the most succinct explanations of the difference between moral injury and PTSD. While post-traumatic stress is related to fear and anxiety regarding what might happen in the future, moral injury relates to our current sense of identity and how this has changed following a morally injurious event. She suggests that moral injury may be the missing link when treatments for PTSD are ineffective, or when symptoms of post-traumatic stress are addressed, but veterans are still left with an untreated moral injury which impacts their sense of identity and meaning, and continues to impact their quality of life.

Lived Experience Narratives

The multiple lived experience narratives in Jamieson's book derive from interviews conducted with ex-serving Australian Defence Force (ADF) members completed as part of Jamieson's doctoral research. The book weaves effortlessly between the voices of veterans and Jamieson's explanations of military life and institutional processes that often contribute to feelings of helplessness, moral injury and suicidal distress. The initial stories speak to less extreme circumstances of moral injury, but which nonetheless can have a sizeable impact on one's sense of identity, often with catastrophic consequences.

One example is Shannon, a career soldier whose medical discharge and the subsequent lack of purpose and meaning post-discharge from the military led to his death by suicide less than a year later. Life in the military was all that Shannon had ever known, as was the sense of belonging that he developed over 30 years of service. To have his sense of identity and his community taken away from him was too much for him to bear. The importance of community and relationships with others is a repeated theme throughout the book, and Jamieson reiterates the important role of relationships in both the prevention of and recovery from moral injury.

Subsequent stories become more distressing, and readers are cautioned to progress at a pace that protects their own mental health and to seek help if needed, as some narratives involve multiple attempts of personnel trying to end their lives. There are stories of bullying, sexual trauma and orders that go against basic human intuition. Many of the narratives are

centred around the role of commanding officers and the expectation that orders must be followed, regardless of whether these align with a member's ethics or morals. Readers are led to consider an impossible question, one that no doubt military personnel are faced with regularly in their line of duty; namely, "where is the line drawn, when an order is given that clearly goes against societal norms, ethics, or morals, but you are trained to obey orders, without question or delay?" Or, "what does one do when a commanding officer gives an order that is clearly unethical, but you feel powerless to protest?"

The story of Sally is particularly distressing (especially for any female reader), as she was sexually assaulted by an officer, and in her pleas for him to stop still addressed him as "Sir". She is later discharged upon reporting the assault, and her senior officer protects the perpetrator from career-limiting sanctions. Similarly, James's story of being forced to conduct weapons drills with an injured hand, causing permanent and irreparable damage that resulted in a prescription pill addiction, alcoholism, and his inevitable medical discharge and subsequent suicide.

The idea of following orders without delay is based upon a warlike scenario, when your actions may contribute to the greater good but also can mean making sacrifices that are not aligned with human instinct – for example, the order to shoot and kill – but how does this translate to being on home soil, in training or living on a base? Is the order of a commanding officer not to be questioned when it clearly goes against reasonable human behaviour? What if the person you are trained to trust, cannot be trusted? One can only imagine the torment in years to come, questioning why they obeyed an order, and the inevitable torture of guilt-ridden hindsight; particularly acute, given the time (and often too much time) to consider how they might have acted differently, how they might have prevented the outcome if only they had tried harder or acted faster … and yet loyalty prevailed.

As noted previously, Jamieson's account is honest and, in parts, scathing of both the role and systems of the Australian Department of Defence and the Department of Veterans' Affairs in contributing to (or failing to prevent) moral injury and suicides in the ADF community. There are recurring themes of these systems letting members down: "two of the biggest systems involved in such betrayal are the Department of Defence and the DVA. We continue to hear about how these 'systems' and people have damaged and destroyed lives" (p. 81). She describes "a system that perpetuated an unconscionable level of incompetence, ill-preparedness, and obfuscation" (p. 80).

Jamieson's transparency is refreshing, and ultimately reflects the views of others in the Defence and veteran community. Indeed, it was admirable of the Assistant Minister for Veterans' Affairs, the Hon. Matt Thistlethwaite

MP, to speak at the launch of Jamieson's book at Australian Parliament House (despite Jamieson's raw and honest criticism of the government), so as to prioritize the need to share veteran voices and raise awareness of this important issue. Jamieson's text was also presented to the Commissioners of the Royal Commission into (Australian) Defence and Veteran Suicide.

Moral Injury Recovery

The focus on recovery from moral injury commences at Chapter 10, in particular the process of validation, acceptance and reconciliation. Again, Jamieson emphasizes the importance of connection and community, particularly with others who have similar experiences and who can relate. The shift in identity following transition from the military to civilian life brings with it a host of challenges, made more difficult for those with moral injury, given that the capacity for trust has often been destroyed. Maintaining and forming connections with other veterans, who share a language and understanding that civilians might not possess, assists in validating the experiences and feelings of those recovering from moral injury.

Acceptance and reconciliation involve veterans accepting and making meaning of their experience and reconstructing a new identity post-service. Jamieson is quick to state that this process does not always equate to healing; like many mental health syndromes, moral injury may be something you learn to live with and manage, rather than something from which you heal. Recovery instead pertains to rediscovering purpose, growth, transformation and moving forward with life, rather than allowing the past to consume you — but clearly, similar to post-traumatic stress, one needs help in the process of recovering from moral injury. However, given the complexity of moral injury, it should be obvious that it requires a multidisciplinary holistic approach utilizing a bio-psycho-social-spiritual paradigm and the combined effort of the medical, nursing, psychology, social work and chaplaincy professions.

Jamieson describes the purpose of this book as being to give hope and light to those who might be trapped within the darkness of moral injury. For those who shared their stories, who set out to serve their country and were let down by the system, they continue their service now by sharing hope and helping others to walk forward through their experiences. Jamieson includes herself in this sentiment, stating that while this work has been extremely personal and has taken a large mental toll, it provided her with purpose following the death of her son and drove her to enhance her knowledge and awareness in this space. She reiterates the importance of lived

experience in driving successful outcomes, but only "if listened to, embedded, and responded to appropriately" (p. 115).

Critique

One criticism to note is that while the book alludes to the path forward from moral injury and the prevention of moral injury, few details are provided here. Evidently, this work is yet to be done, and Jamieson rightly calls for more support and research into moral injury. However, there seems to be an important element missing here. She states, "we then explored how so many individuals, our everyday heroes, have taken their experiences and turned them into something extraordinary" (p. 118). However, only very briefly at the end of the book do we hear about how those who shared their stories came out of the darkness and moved forward with their lives. More focus here might be warranted, particularly for those who might be struggling themselves and are in need of hope and motivation to keep going. Similarly, in a summary of research on the nervous system and how trauma is stored in the body, Jamieson states that "we can develop simple skills and techniques to address our nervous system when it's in overdrive" (p. 119), and yet again few details are provided here.

Future Considerations

Clearly, this first text by Jamieson sets the stage for a second book to further address the above issues. Given the increasing recognition of the link between moral injury and suicide (Bryan et al., 2018; Jamieson et al., 2023; Khan, Griffin, & Maguen, 2023; Schafer, Melia, & Joiner, 2024) and the fact that the ADF has now started to address moral injury through its chaplaincy "moral injury skills training" (MIST; see Carey et al., 2023, 2024; Hodgson & Carey, 2024), we very much look forward to a second text by Jamieson exploring the longer term outcomes of those she has interviewed and the resources or programmes they have engaged with, if any, to assist with their moral injury.

For *HSCC* readers who would like to read more about the lived experiences of moral injury, we also recommend reading the review of Dean Yates's autobiography (2023), *Line in the Sand: A Life-Changing Journey Through a Body and a Mind After Trauma* (Carey, 2023). Also worth reading is Cronshaw's review of *Moral Injury: A Handbook for Military Chaplains* (2023).

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