

FROM THE EMMY-NOMINATED FILMMAKERS OF "GIVE UP TOMORROW"

ALMOST SUNRISE

HOPE IS ON THE HORIZON



TALKING ABOUT ALMOST SUNRISE

A DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR COMMUNITY AND CAMPUS EVENTS

CREATED WITH GENEROUS SUPPORT FROM

**THE
CHARLES E. KUBLY
FOUNDATION**

A public charity devoted to improving the lives of those with depression

ABOUT THE FILM



Almost Sunrise is a story of resilience and recovery. A feature-length documentary, the film follows two Iraq veterans, Tom Voss and Anthony Anderson, as they struggle with depression upon returning home from military service. Fearful of succumbing to the epidemic of veteran suicide, they both seek a lifeline and embark on a 2,700-mile walk across America as a way to confront their inner pain. The film captures an intimate portrait of two friends suffering from the unseen wounds of war as they discover an unlikely treatment: the restorative power of silence and meditation. A cinematic experience that juxtaposes the internal struggles of its characters against the wide-open spaces of America's heartland, *Almost Sunrise* is also the first film to explore "moral injury:" the profound shame that many veterans feel when their experiences of war violate their moral beliefs, and a possible critical factor in veteran suicide.



MORAL INJURY MAY BE THE
SIGNATURE WOUND FOR
THIS GENERATION OF
VETERANS, BUT HOPE IS
ON THE HORIZON.

ABOUT YOUR SCREENING



Anyone who's been to a movie theater on opening night knows the transformative power of film. Beginning with the rustle of programs and the wafting smell of popcorn, the dimmed lights and the creaking seats, films coax us out of our daily lives and into the lives of others. And when the lights go up and the end credits roll, we often re-enter our own world a little different than we left it.

With just a little preparation, your screening of *Almost Sunrise* can engender the same excitement and anticipation. What's more, it can serve as an opportunity for education and engagement around the issues of moral injury and veteran suicide; a unique forum for community building among veterans and civilians; and a chance to connect real-time with colleagues and neighbors are together working toward a better understanding of how to support veterans' health and healing after their return from war. Use this concise screening and discussion guide

as a framework for making the most of your *Almost Sunrise* event, and be sure to use the guide's final page to collect email addresses and contact information in support of both your organization and the film's ongoing outreach efforts.



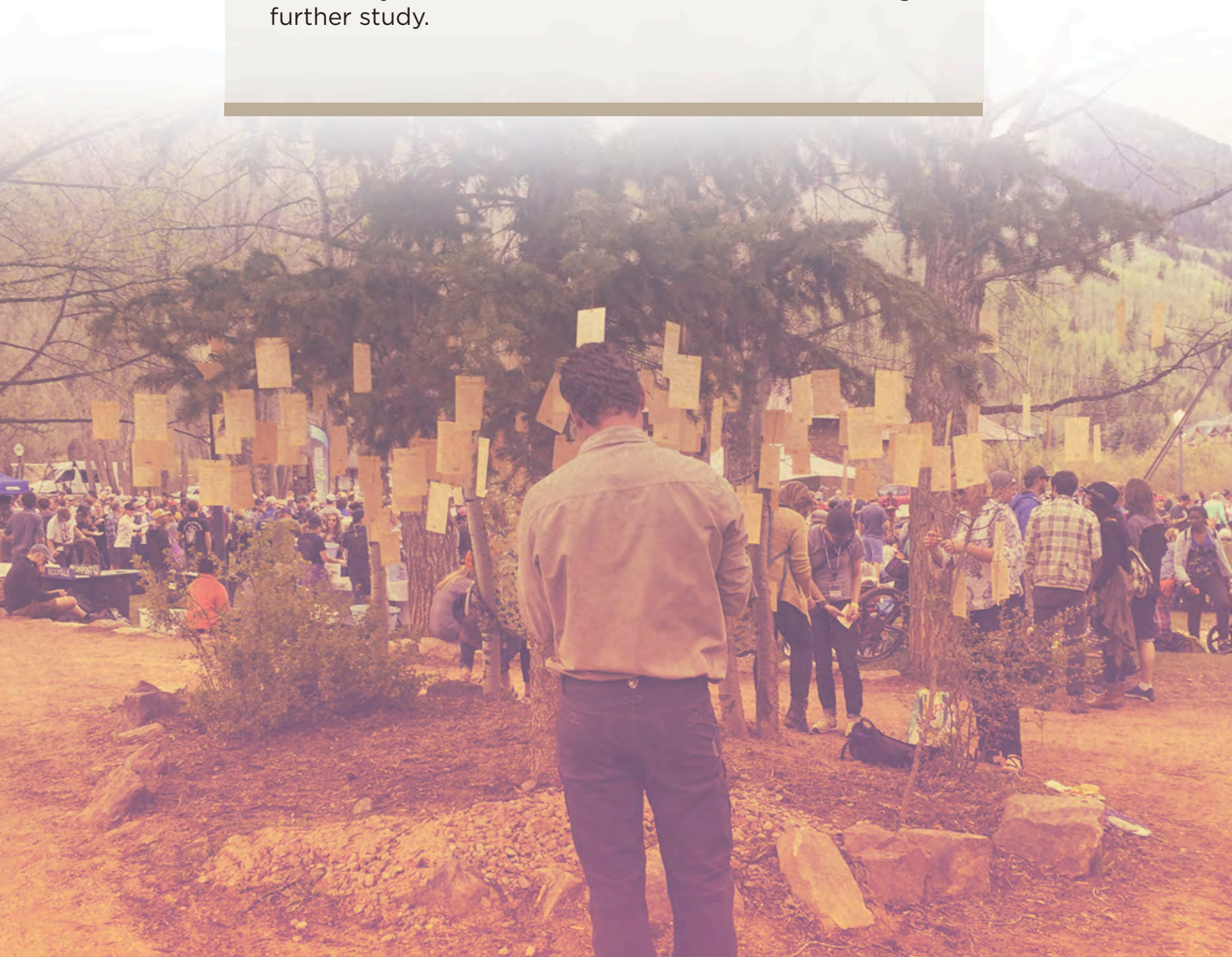
If this is the first time you'll be hosting a public film screening, you may also wish to check out the Working Films Community Screening Guide; or read this advice from a fellow frequent community screening host to learn more about planning and promoting your screening. Looking more broadly, you may also wish to read these excellent tips on how to moderate a dynamic panel discussion, from the *Harvard Business Review*. Or for tips on

marketing, ticket sales, venue selection, broad or other particulars, browse the tools and checklists that many ticket-selling platforms offer, including this one from Eventbrite or these 63 tips from SplashThat. Good luck!

ABOUT THE ISSUES



Almost Sunrise explores the journey—both literal and emotional—that two veterans take to heal themselves from the hidden wounds of war. Read below for a brief primer on the issues the film profiles, and then dig into the linked resources—both primary and secondary—that offer more context for those desiring further study.



POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

Many of us are familiar with the term “post-traumatic stress disorder:” a diagnosis that entered the psychiatric literature in 1980 and has since become part of our common cultural lexicon. Referring to the adverse mental health impacts of witnessing or experiencing what the Mayo Clinic describes as a “terrifying event,” post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, can cause extreme anxiety, flashbacks, nightmares and uncontrollable thoughts in those it affects. Sufferers may also experience physical distress as well, including sweating, a pounding heart and nausea. While once considered a condition unique to military veterans—a close cousin of the World War I-era diagnosis of “shell shock”—PTSD is now recognized as affecting survivors of many kinds of trauma, including natural disasters, accidents, assaults, abuse and terrorist attacks, among other events.



MORAL INJURY

While related to trauma, the concept of “moral injury” is distinct from the clinical diagnosis of PTSD. The Moral Injury Project, housed at Syracuse University, describes the term as referring to “the damage done to one’s conscience or moral compass when a person perpetrates, witnesses or fails to prevent acts that transgress their own moral and ethical values or codes of conduct.” While moral injury may manifest in different individuals in diverse ways, it can be broadly understood as a profound, ongoing, internal battle: an injury to a person’s soul. As journalist Diane Silver has described it, moral injury is “a deep soul wound that pierces a person’s identity, sense of morality and relationship to society.” Only by healing that soul wound can moral injury, in turn, be healed. As a result, veterans suffering from moral injury are often not helped, or not helped enough, by the kinds of therapies and interventions that treat PTSD.



Now, researchers, social workers, medical providers and veterans themselves are beginning to understand the ways in which moral injury and PTSD differ, and the importance of embracing those distinctions in order to find recovery. Thomas Gibbons-Neff, a veteran and student writing in *Stars and Stripes*, described his own experiences of moral injury as the feeling of having two selves—the first self forged pre-combat, and the “second self” forged by war. “Your war stories become well-rehearsed scripts, and even your traumas, those hellacious days when you bore witness to the young and the dead, are scrubbed and polished and placed in a mental vault that you know how to open—or keep shut,” he wrote.

In *Almost Sunrise*, as in other studies and explorations of moral injury, we see that for many veterans, the journey to healing must include treatment not only of post-traumatic stress symptoms, but also a deeper internal reckoning that allows the veteran to reorient his or her moral compass, forgive him or herself and reconnect to his or her community.

“But moral injury makes it hard to transition from memory to the present; it confuses the old self and the new. If the injury is severe enough, it can be almost impossible to see yourself in the present. Instead, you see the person who was capable of making the wrong decision when, years later, you know you could have made a different one.”

- Thomas Gibbons-Neff
Stars and Stripes



VETERAN SUICIDE AND MORAL INJURY

According to the [Veteran's Administration](#), an average of 20 American veterans commit suicide each day—a number that far exceeds the civilian suicide rate. In 2014, in fact, the last date for which [Veteran's Administration](#) data is available, the civilian suicide rate was 15.2 per 100,000 people. By contrast, veterans took their own lives at a rate of 35.3 suicides per 100,000 people. Rates of suicide among female veterans has risen especially precipitously in recent years, increasing by more than 85% since 2001.

Research on the relationship between moral injury and suicidal ideation or suicide attempts suggest that the feelings of shame, guilt, transgression, betrayal and spiritual and existential distress that often accompany moral injury are especially highly correlated with self-harming thoughts and behaviors. One recent study conducted at the [University of Utah](#) in 2014, for example, found that “military personnel who are troubled by a personal act of commission or omission that is perceived to violate their sense of right versus wrong are more likely to have experienced [self-injurious thoughts or behaviors]” than similar personnel who had not experienced a transgression of their moral code. Older studies conducted in the 1990s also support this conclusion, finding that feelings of combat guilt—and in particular guilt around “morally injurious events” experienced during war—were highly correlated with suicidal thoughts or suicide attempts.



In Almost Sunrise, both Tom and Anthony experience the suicidal ideation common to veterans who suffer from moral injury, and they begin their physical trek across the country in part to seek healing for themselves, and in part to raise awareness about the staggering rates of suicide among US veterans.

COMPLEMENTARY AND ALTERNATIVE THERAPIES

Throughout the last twenty years, Americans—both civilians and veterans alike—have increasingly explored complementary and alternative therapies as treatments for anxiety and depression, among other physical and psychological ailments. Of all Veteran Administration facilities, 89% currently offer at least one alternative therapy, including acupuncture, meditation, relaxation, yoga or other mind-body practices to treat PTSD. Many preliminary studies reveal modest to profound improvements in PTSD symptoms from such alternative approaches, and current research continues to suggest the utility of non-medical approaches in treating the hidden wounds of war. One such *longitudinal study*, published by Dr. Emma Seppala of Stanford University in 2014, showed that breathing-based meditation was successful in significantly reducing PTSD symptoms among male veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, suggesting an ongoing and “critical need to evaluate alternative or supplementary approaches to treating PTSD.”

In Almost Sunrise, two alternative therapies explored by Tom and Anthony include their meditative pilgrimage across the country, and the mindfulness-based breathing techniques Tom learns as part of Project Welcome Home Troop’s Power Breath Meditation Workshop. As Father Thomas Keating, founder of Contemplative Outreach, LTD suggests in the film, these approaches offer veterans the kind of opportunity for deep contemplation, inward-looking and self-forgiveness that pharmaceuticals cannot provide. “Antidepressants don’t reach the depth of what these men are feeling,” he says. Veterans suffering from moral injury need, “some other means of calming the mind, of getting beyond the rational mind through a practice.”



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



After hosting a campus or community screening of *Almost Sunrise*, organizers may wish to coordinate post-film conversation in the form of a panel discussion, roundtable, talkback session or a Q&A with a local expert. Use the prompts below to get started, or brainstorm questions of your own, using the ideas below as models.



Discussing Military Service and Combat

- 1.** Why do American men and women join the military? Think not only about the concept of duty or service to one's country, but also the economic, educational or social opportunities that military service might offer.
- 2.** Does anyone in your family serve in the military now? In the past? If so, have you talked with them about their experiences? Why or why not?
- 3.** Before watching the film, were you familiar with the work of Veterans Affairs (VA) health facilities? If yes, did the film accurately portray your thoughts on the institution? If no, what did you learn about the institution and its services, particularly regarding mental and emotional health?
- 4.** Discuss the idea of training for combat versus the actuality of combat. What elements are present during both? What elements are present in one but not the other?
- 5.** In the film, Emmett shares that in combat, an individual is mentally processing things but not actually *feeling* them. Talk about this idea. How might ability to distinguish between processing and feeling affect a servicemember once he or she returns to civilian life?
- 6.** Before Anthony talks about how the stated goals of America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been constantly changing, leading him and other soldiers to ask, "What are we doing? What is the purpose?" How does a sense of "purpose" impact a service member's feelings about war? How might a lack of clarity around a war's purpose contribute to moral injury?

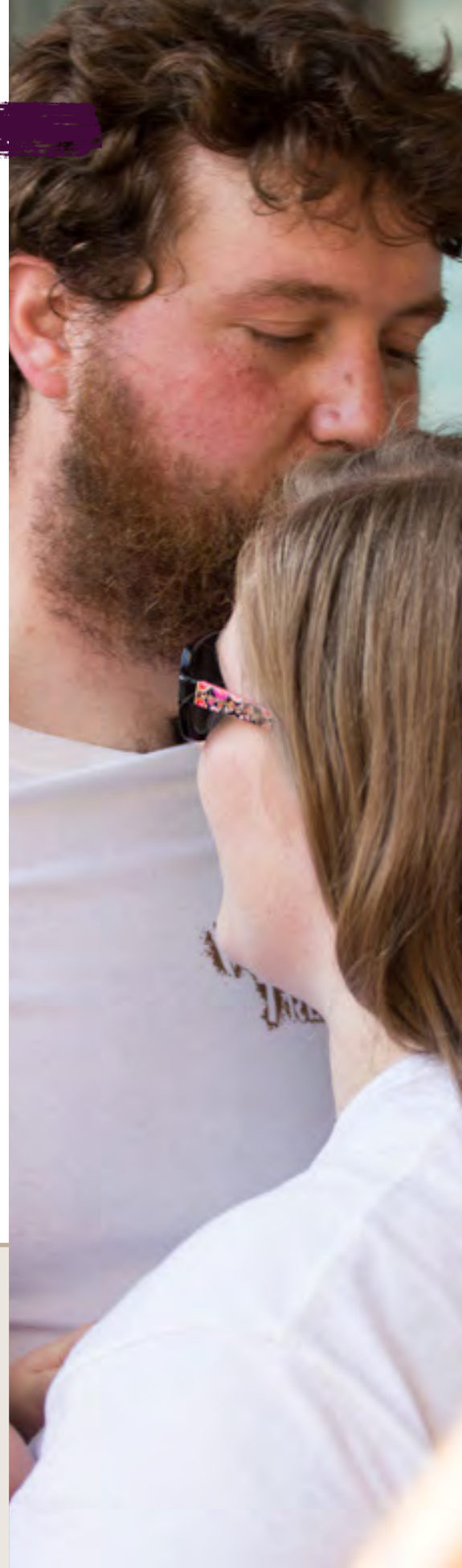
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Discussing Moral Injury

- 1.** Were you aware of the concept of moral injury before watching *Almost Sunrise*? Were you aware of PTSD? Having seen the film, how would you describe the differences?
- 2.** What kinds of situations do military service members face in combat that might compete with the moral codes of civilian life? How might military training override the ethical, spiritual or religious “training” we receive as civilians?
- 3.** How does it make you feel to learn that, on average, 20 veterans a day commit suicide? What feelings come up for you when Tom says that he has thought about killing himself “without ruining [himself] for the funeral for [his] family?”
- 4.** Do you know anyone who has returned to civilian life from combat? If so, do you recognize in him or her any of the emotions or behaviors shared by Tom and Anthony in the film? Does learning about moral injury influence how you perceive those behaviors?
- 5.** Why do you think moral injury hasn’t been recognized as an official clinical diagnosis by the VA? Do you think it should be?
- 6.** Discuss the pros and cons of the seven-question Combat Exposure Scale (CES) that Katinka describes in the film. How might measuring combat exposure help a returning servicemember assess their experiences? What does the scale fail to measure?

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Discussing Healing and Recovery

- 1.** Compare and contrast the benefits of prescribed medication (anti-depressants, sedatives) versus the benefits of holistic or complementary therapies like meditation or breath work? What are the shortcomings of each?
- 2.** After watching *Almost Sunrise*, do you think differently about the widespread use (and abuse) of alcohol and other recreational drugs by veterans seeking an outlet for their feelings of anxiety, trauma or guilt?
- 3.** How does Anthony's healing process differ from Tom's? How are they the same?
- 4.** Had you heard about the concept of breathwork before watching the film? Have you tried a form of breathwork?
- 5.** How do Tom and Anthony change as we witness their journeys from the beginning of the film to the end? What kind of physical changes do you observe? What evidence of emotional healing do you perceive?
- 6.** While veterans have often experienced traumatic events first-hand, veteran's families may also undergo stress, depression and anxiety as they cope with the return of veteran family members. What did you observe among the tactics Katinka (Tom's girlfriend) and Holly (Anthony's wife) use in order to cope?

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Discussing Moral Injury and Spritual Recovery

1. Some researchers and journalists exploring the concept of moral injury describe it as a wound to the “soul” or the “conscience”—words that are often part of a religious or spiritual lexicon. How might a veteran’s spiritual or religious beliefs influence their moral injury—and healing? What role, if any, do you think religious or spiritual beliefs or rituals play in shaping an individual’s moral compass? How might they assist in “moral repair”?

2. In the film, Wolf Walker asks Tom and Anthony to share a moment during their military service that haunts them. Why do you think he asks them to recall these dark memories? How does that act of remembering with Wolf Walker differ from a conventional psychotherapeutical experience? How is it similar?

3. Discuss Katinka’s theory that love is the opposite of war. Do you agree? Do you think love is a spiritual experience? A moral one?

4. Katinka’s performance includes a statement about violence being “so un-human, so out of our scope, that you have to be trained to do it;” likewise, Father Keating lets us know that veterans have a hard time forgiving themselves for actions they have committed on the battlefield. Do you believe combat is an un-human experience? How does military training dehumanize those who go through it? Why do you think veterans find self-forgiveness so challenging?

5. Father Keating references the words “pilgrimage,” “guilt,” and “forgiveness” when speaking about moral injury in the film; all of these words have spiritual, moral or religious connotations or origins. How do you think the term “pilgrimage” relates to Tom and Anthony’s trek? How does the moral injury from which many veterans suffer relate to religious ideas about “guilt” and “forgiveness?” Do you think organized religion can play a helpful role in healing veterans who experience moral injury? Why or why not?

6. Many veterans are ashamed or embarrassed to ask for help. How does the stereotype of being a “strong” or “invincible” member of the military reinforce the fear of admitting vulnerability? How might this stereotype help a servicemember during combat?



Discussing Veterans and Society

- 1.** Reentering civilian life after deployment has a direct impact on a veteran him or herself; it also affects family relationships. Observing the way Tom and Anthony interact with their families, do you see similarities? Differences? How do their relationships differ from your relationships with your family?
- 2.** Discuss the camaraderie that Tom and Anthony experience during their trek. How does their friendship—and other relationships forged during their trek—mirror experiences they had while deployed? How do their trek experiences differ from their experiences in war?
- 3.** What kinds of challenges—economic, emotional, physical—might the families of veterans face while their loved ones are deployed? How can civilians support veterans and their families?
- 4.** Think about spouses, significant others, children and parents of servicemembers. How might these different family members experience the return of their loved ones in unique ways? Which of their experiences might be similar?
- 5.** Why do you think some veterans feel isolated when they come home? Having watched *Almost Sunrise*, how do you think those feelings of loneliness could be prevented or remedied?
- 6.** How might civilians assist families whose loved ones are deployed? When they return as veterans, what activities can civilians participate in to be more active in the process of reentry and reintegration?

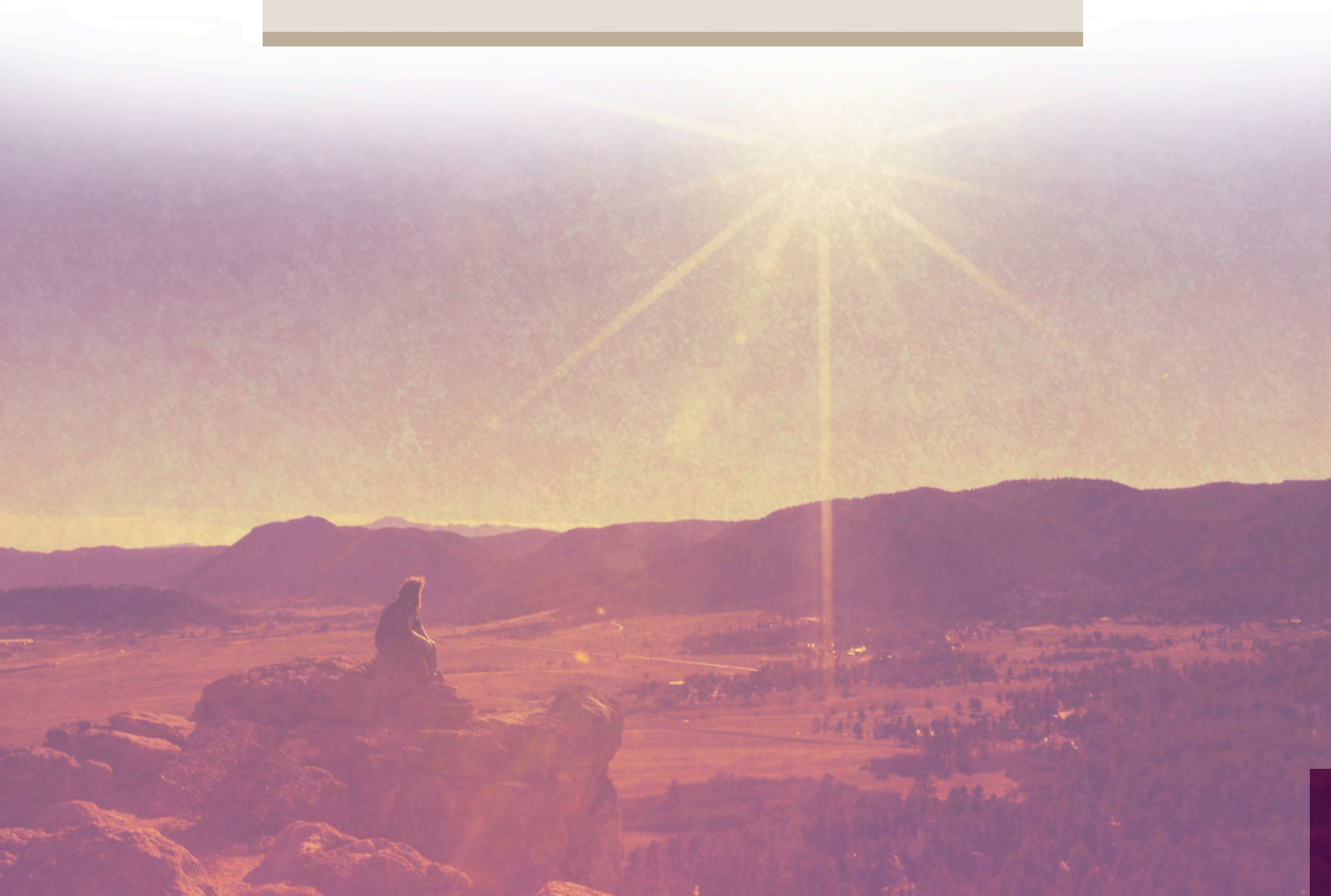
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FURTHER READING



For further reading and resources on moral injury, veteran suicide, veteran reintegration and complementary and alternative therapies for veterans, peruse the resources below. Viewers may also wish to consult the [Moral Injury Project's](#) catalog of scholarly references on moral injury, which includes not only academic works, but also broadly accessible discussions of moral injury in popular press and books.



NEWS ARTICLES

Veteran Suicide Special Report, *The San Diego Union-Tribune*
By Jeanette Steele (2016)

Healing a Wounded Sense of Morality, *The Atlantic*
By Maggie Puniewska (2015)

When Veterans and Civilians Listen to Each Other, *Psychology Today*
By Sam Osherson (2014)

A New Theory of PTSD and Veterans: Moral Injury, *Newsweek*
By Tony Dokoupil (2012)

Beyond PTSD: Soldiers Have Injured Souls, *Truthout*
By Diane Silver (2011)

A Warrior's Moral Dilemma, *The Huffington Post*
By David Wood (2014)

Tyler Boudreau: One Marine's struggle to define moral injury, *WBUR* (Boston's NPR)
By Martha Bebinger (2013)



RADIO AND PODCAST

Beyond PTSD to Moral Injury, *On Being*
By Jeff Severns Guntzel (2013)

Moral Injury: The Psychological Wounds of War, *Talk of the Nation*, NPR
With Neal Conan, Tyler Boudreau, Dr. Jonathan Shay, and Rev. Rita Brock

ACADEMIC STUDIES

Breathing-based meditation decreases posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms in U.S. military veterans: a randomized controlled longitudinal study, *Journal of Trauma and Stress*
By Dr. Emma Seppala (2014)

Combat-Related Killing: Expanding Evidence-Based Treatments for PTSD, *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice*
By Shira Maguen & Kristine Burkman (2013)

Moral injury and moral repair in war veterans: A preliminary model and intervention strategy, *Clinical Psychology Review*
By Brett T. Litz, Nathan Stein, Eileen Delaney, Leslie Lebowitz, William P. Nash, Caroline Silva & Shira Maguen (2009)



GOVERNMENT RESOURCES

Moral Injury in the Context of War
United States Department of Veterans Affairs,
National Center for PTSD

Veterans Affairs: Better Understanding Needed to Enhance Services to Veterans Readjusting to Civilian Life
United States Government Accountability Office

Facts About Veteran Suicide
United States Department of Veterans Affairs
Suicide Prevention Program

Complementary and Alternative Medicine for PTSD
United States Department of Veterans Affairs,
National Center for PTSD

BOOKS

What Have We Done: The Moral Injury of Our Longest Wars
By David Wood (2016)

Afterwar: Healing the Moral Wounds of Our Soldiers
By Nancy Sherman (2015)

Warrior's Return: Restoring the Soul After War
By Edward Tick (2014)

Mindfulness-Oriented Interventions for Trauma : Integrating Contemplative Practices
Edited by Victoria M. Follette, John Briere, Deborah Rozelle, James W. Hopper & David I. Rome (2014)

Soul Repair: Recovering From Moral Injury After War
By Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini (2013)

Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character
By Jonathan Shay (1994)

ALMOST SUNRISE

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