

POV

Community
Engagement & Education

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Almost Sunrise

A Film by Michael Collins and Marty Syjuco



www.pbs.org/pov

A few years ago, as part of a video project I'd volunteered for, I had the opportunity to interview veterans and hear about their lives and struggles. One particular day, my interview subject casually mentioned, "Twenty-two veterans kill themselves every day." It stopped me dead in my tracks. I thought I had misheard. I didn't. That was a pivotal moment for me in this journey to make this film. I realized right then and there that there was a crisis in this country, taking place right in front of our eyes, one to which many of us, including myself, were blind. In some deep silent corner of that realization, I felt utterly compelled to do something, to act, to serve, to help these people who had sacrificed so much.

Once I had passed the "sniff test" with them, these vets opened up and shared with me some of their most intimate, harrowing experiences, usually those found on the extreme end of the human spectrum. The connection we shared through these exchanges was of an intensity that would knock me off my feet. It often felt as if time itself had stopped. At some fundamental level, I wanted to create a film that would give others a chance to experience that stunning reciprocity, that unbelievable, profound connection. I believe that hearing stories can lead to empathy, which can lead to action.

There's tremendous work yet to be done to help properly care for our returning warriors and all servicemen and women. One of the most important and, indeed, hopeful aspects of the story is the wider acknowledgement that there is such a thing as a "moral injury," a wound that has no outward physical traits but yet can act as the primary unseen force that can destroy a person's life. Veterans and their families are sometimes all too familiar with some of the possible symptoms: substance abuse, alcohol addiction, estrangement, failed marriages, low self-esteem, depression, rage, helplessness and botched suicide attempts. But just by identifying the nature of this injury, we can take the seminal steps toward healing it in appropriate and effective ways. It's clear; we cannot merely medicate our way out of a pain stemming from inner conflict. The only remedy that makes sense is to treat it at the source, which requires one to turn within.

My sincere hope is that, in the midst of this urgent crisis, the film will stir people to consider the significance of including holistic practices, such as proven ancient breath techniques and meditation, in the overall approach to our veterans' wellness. One vet whom I had encountered had reluctantly, skeptically tried a powerful breathing exercise. After a period of time, he was able to come off of his regimen of numbing meds. He says it was like waking up for the first time in 40 years. He advised other younger veterans not to wait so long.

The making of the film has created a tremendous opening for me. I can more deeply appreciate and, hopefully, as a consequence, more deeply convey an understanding: that in embracing the struggles of these men and women, and their families—these very human pillars who endeavor to keep the home together—we are not only helping to lift whole communities, but, in essence, we are lifting ourselves. Truly, there is no "other."

Michael CollinsDirector, **Almost Sunrise****Director Michael Collins.**

Courtesy of Thoughtful Robot Productions



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Tom Voss and Anthony Anderson.

Courtesy of Thoughtful Robot Productions

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 possibly a critical factor in veteran suicide.



Almost Sunrise is well suited for use in a variety of settings and is especially recommended for use with:

- **Your local PBS station**
- **Groups that have discussed previous PBS and POV films relating to veterans and mental health, including *Soldiers of Conscience*, *Where Soldiers Come From*, *Point and Shoot*, *Armadillo* and *Critical Condition***
- **Groups focused on any of the issues listed in the “Key Issues” section**
- **Academic departments and student groups at colleges, universities and high schools**
- **High school students, youth groups and clubs**
- **Faith-based organizations and institutions**
- **Cultural, art and historical organizations, institutions and museums**
- **Civic, fraternal and community groups**
- **Community organizations with a mission to promote education and learning, such as local libraries.**

Almost Sunrise is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people looking to explore the following topics:

- **Combat veterans**
- **Grief**
- **Holistic/alternative treatments**
- **Mental health**
- **Military-civilian divide**
- **Military families**
- **Mindfulness**
- **Moral injury**
- **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**
- **Social cost of war**
- **Social work**
- **Therapy**
- **Trauma**
- **U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)**
- **U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan**
- **Veteran reintegration**
- **Veterans’ suicide epidemic**

USING THIS GUIDE

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection, designed for people who want to use **Almost Sunrise** to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit www.pov.org/engage



Almost Sunrise explores the journey—both literal and emotional—that two veterans take to heal 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 interested in further study.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Many of us are familiar with the term “post-traumatic stress disorder,” or PTSD. This diagnosis entered the psychiatric literature in 1980 and has since become part of our cultural lexicon. Referring to the adverse mental health impacts of witnessing or experiencing what the Mayo Clinic describes as a “terrifying event,” PTSD can cause extreme anxiety, flashbacks, nightmares and uncontrollable thoughts. Sufferers may also experience physical distress, including sweating, pounding heart and nausea. While once considered a condition unique to military veterans—a close cousin to the World War I-era diagnosis of “shell shock”—

Anthony Anderson kisses his wife Holly and daughter Madeline goodbye.

Courtesy of Thoughtful Robot Productions

PTSD is now recognized as affecting survivors of many kinds of trauma, including natural disasters, accidents, assaults, abuse and terrorist attacks.

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Anthony and Tom during their cross-country trek.

Courtesy of Thoughtful Robot Productions

Moral Injury

While moral injury is related to trauma, it 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 that 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.” Veterans suffering from moral injury are often not helped, or not helped enough, by the kinds of therapies and interventions employed to 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 accounting for those distinctions during recovery. Thomas Gibbons-Neff, a veteran and student writ-

ing 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 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, healing requires not only treatment 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,
The Washington Post

Wolf Walker advises Tom and Anthony.

Courtesy of Thoughtful Robot Productions

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Tom with a monarch caterpillar.

Courtesy of Thoughtful Robot Productions

Veteran Suicide and Moral Injury

According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, American veterans commit suicide at an average rate of 20 people each day, which far exceeds the civilian suicide rate. In 2014, in fact, the last date for which Veterans 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 per 100,000 people. Rates of suicide among female veterans have risen especially precipitously in recent years, increasing by more than 85 percent 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 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” such self-injurious thoughts or behaviors than similar personnel who

In *Almost Sunrise*, both Tom Voss and Anthony Anderson 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 raise awareness about the staggering rates of suicide among U.S. veterans.

had not experienced a transgression of their moral code. Older studies conducted in the 1990s also support this conclusion. Those found that feelings of combat guilt—and in particular guilt around morally injurious events experienced during war—were closely correlated with suicidal thoughts or suicide attempts.



Veterans doing breathing exercises in a group workshop.

Courtesy of Thoughtful Robot Productions

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Complementary and Alternative Therapies

In the last twenty years, Americans—both civilians and veterans—have increasingly explored complementary and alternative therapies as treatments for anxiety and depression, among other physical and psychological ailments. Of all VA facilities, 89 percent currently offer at least one form of alternative therapy, including acupuncture, meditation, relaxation, yoga and 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 the *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 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."



Tom and Anthony at a stop during the trek.

Courtesy of Thoughtful Robot Productions

In *Almost Sunrise*, alternative therapies explored by Tom Voss and Anthony Anderson include their meditative pilgrimage across the country and the mindfulness-based breathing techniques Voss learns as part of a workshop organized by Project Welcome Home Troops. As Thomas Keating, founder of the organization Contemplative Outreach, suggests in the film, these approaches offer veterans the 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 in the film. Veterans suffering from moral injury need “some other means of calming the mind, of getting beyond the rational mind through a practice.”

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Selected People Featured in **Almost Sunrise**



Tom Voss – Voss served on active duty in the United States Army for three years, from 2003 to 2006, including a tour in Mosul, Iraq. He travels around the country giving talks on post-traumatic stress and moral injury and the health benefits of yoga and meditation.



Anthony Anderson – Anderson served six years in the U.S. Army, including two tours of duty in Iraq between 2004 and 2008. Anderson serves as a mentor to fellow veterans, helping them navigate post-service mental health issues; he also leads and participates in national talks to increase understanding of moral injury and to advocate for policies that meet the needs of veterans.



Katinka Hooyer – Hooyer is a medical anthropologist and research fellow in family and community medicine at the Medical College of Wisconsin. She designs interventions for veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder and moral injury and uses interactive art to translate research and share social science knowledge with the public.



Holly Anderson – As Anthony Anderson's wife, Holly intimately understands the difficulties of being a military spouse. She currently lives in Wisconsin with Anthony and their daughter, Madeline.

Selected People Featured in **Almost Sunrise**



Wolf Walker – Wolf Walker is a Native American spiritual teacher. He incorporates knowledge passed down from the traditional elders of many cultures with that of his own upbringing to help people gain a new understanding of themselves and the world around them.



Emmet Cullen – Cullen is a U.S. Army veteran who fought as a sniper during two tours in Iraq and earned a bronze star with valor in 2006. He now works as a photographer and a high school social studies teacher in California.



Father Thomas Keating – Father Keating is a priest, Trappist monk and founder of the Christian contemplative prayer movement.



Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen or pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion:

- If a friend asked you what this film was about, what would you say?
- If you could ask anyone in the film a single question, whom would you ask and what would you ask them?
- Describe a moment or scene in the film that you found particularly disturbing or moving. What was it about that scene that was especially compelling for you?

Anthony drives home.

Courtesy of Thoughtful Robot Productions

At the end of your discussion, to help people synthesize what they've experienced and move the focus from dialogue to action steps, you may want to choose one of these questions:

- What did you learn from this film that you wish everyone knew? What would change if everyone knew it?
- If you could require one person (or one group) to view this film, who would it be? What would you hope their main takeaway would be?
- Complete this sentence: I am inspired by this film (or discussion) to _____.



Military Service and Combat

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 and social opportunities that military service offers.

Does anyone in your family serve in the military now? Have they in the past? If so, have you talked with them about their experiences? Why or why not?

Before watching the film, were you familiar with the work of VA health facilities? If so, did the film accurately portray your impressions of them? If not, what did you learn about the department and its services, particularly regarding mental and emotional health?

Discuss training for combat versus the reality of combat. What elements are present in both scenarios? What elements are present in one but not the other?

In the film, Emmet Cullen shares that in combat, an individual is mentally processing things but not actually feeling them. Talk about this idea. How might the ability to distinguish between processing and feeling affect a

Tom Voss was 19 years old when he began his military career.

Courtesy of Thoughtful Robot Productions

service member once he or she returns to civilian life?

Anthony Anderson talks about how the stated goals of the wars the United States has waged 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?

Moral Injury

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 between the two?

What kinds of situations do military service members face in combat that might contradict the moral codes of civilian life?



How might military training override the ethical, spiritual or religious “training” we receive as civilians?

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 Voss says that he has thought about killing himself “without ruining [himself] for the funeral for [his] family”?

Do you know anyone who has returned to civilian life from combat? If so, do you recognize in them any of the emotions or behaviors shared by Voss and Anderson in the film? Does learning about moral injury influence how you perceive those behaviors?

Why do you think moral injury hasn’t been recognized as an official clinical diagnosis by the VA? Do you think it should be?

Discuss the pros and cons of the seven-question Combat Exposure Scale that Katinka Hooyer describes in the film. How might measuring combat exposure help returning service members assess their experiences? What does the scale fail to measure?

Tom talks to Father Keating about his traumatic experiences.

Courtesy of Thoughtful Robot Productions

Healing and Recovery

Compare and contrast the benefits of prescribed medication (antidepressants, sedatives) with the benefits of holistic or complementary therapies like meditation or breathwork. What are the shortcomings of each?

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?

How does Anderson’s healing process differ from Voss’s? How are they the same?

Had you heard about the concept of breathwork before watching the film? Have you tried a form of breathwork?

How do Voss and Anderson change 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?



Anthony and Tom discuss their upcoming trek on a morning show.

Courtesy of Thoughtful Robot Productions

While veterans have often experienced traumatic events firsthand, veterans' 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 Hooyer (Voss's girlfriend) and Holly Anderson (Anthony's wife) use in order to cope?

Moral Injury and Spirituality

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"?

In the film, Wolf Walker asks Voss and Anderson each to share a moment from 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

Walker differ from a conventional psychotherapeutic experience? How is it similar?

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

Hooyer says violence is "so un-human, so out of our scope, that you have to be trained to do it"; likewise, Thomas Keating says 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?

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

Voss and Anderson'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?

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 service member during combat?



A photo of Anthony on active duty.

Courtesy of Thoughtful Robot Productions

Veterans and Society

Reentering civilian life after deployment has a direct impact on a veteran; it also affects family relationships. Think about the way Voss and Anderson interact with their families. Do you see similarities? Differences? How do their relationships differ from your relationships with your family?

Discuss the camaraderie that Voss and Anderson 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?

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?

Think about spouses, significant others, children and parents of service members. How might these different family members experience the return of their loved ones in unique ways? Which of their experiences might be similar?

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?

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?

Additional media literacy questions are available at:
www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php



An Abraham Lincoln impersonator welcomes Tom and Anthony.

Courtesy of Thoughtful Robot Productions

- **Seek out military veterans in your family or community and discuss the concept of moral injury with them. Ask whether this diagnosis was commonplace when they first returned from service and whether it was or would have been useful for treatment and healing. Consider sharing audio or transcript excerpts of these conversations with local media outlets or online publications.**
- **Locate a support group for combat veterans in your area and convene a discussion between veterans, mental health providers and community members about how the healthcare system can better serve veterans. Create a list of policy recommendations about services for veterans and submit it to your local, state or federal legislators.**
- **Katinka Hooyer's participatory performance project engaged the public in a discussion of moral injury. Using this as a model or inspiration, create your own visual or performance art installation that prompts a discussion of mental health issues in your community.**
- **Research employers in your area that recruit and hire former military service members. Create a pamphlet about PTSD and moral injury among veterans that includes proposals for how to make the workplace more supportive of people suffering from these conditions.**
- **Partner with yoga, power breath or meditation/mindfulness instructors and encourage them to research treatments for moral injury. Consider holding a fundraiser, or encourage the instructors to donate free workshops so that you can provide alternative therapies to veterans in your area.**



FILM-RELATED WEB SITES

ALMOST SUNRISE

<http://sunrisedocumentary.com>

The film's website includes information on the film team, film subjects, educational screenings, the "Moving Mountains" impact campaign and more.

Original Online Content on POV

To further enhance the broadcast, POV has produced an interactive website to enable viewers to explore the film in greater depth. The **Almost Sunrise** website—www.pbs.org/pov/almostsunrise—offers a streaming video trailer for the film; an interview with the filmmakers; a list of related websites, articles and books; a downloadable lesson plan; and special features.

Organizations

DEAR VETERAN

dearveteran.com

A public art project that allows civilians to express gratitude for veterans, Dear Veteran was created by Katinka Hooyer.

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR HUMAN VALUES

iahv.org

The International Association for Human Values offers stress-reduction programs to veterans suffering from moral injury and/or PTSD.

PROJECT WELCOME HOME TROOPS

projectwelcomehometroops.org

Project Welcome Home Troops offers meditation and breathing workshops to veterans to improve their mental health.

RESILIENCE CENTER FOR VETERANS AND FAMILIES

<https://www.tc.columbia.edu/resiliencecenter/>

The Resilience Center for Veterans and Families, housed at Columbia University, provides research and psychological services for veterans and their families.

STOP SOLDIER SUICIDE

<http://stopsoldiersuicide.org>

Stop Soldier Suicide provides free resources and support to veterans and their families as part of its mission to eradicate soldier suicide.

STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA

<http://studentveterans.org>

Student Veterans of America provides resources to help veterans achieve academic success.

VETERANS INTEGRATION TO ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP (VITAL)

<https://www.nyharbor.va.gov/services/vital.asp>

VITAL, under the auspices of the VA, helps veterans integrate into academic settings by providing various resources, including healthcare and counseling.

VETERANS TREK

<http://www.veteranstrek.org>

Created by Tom Voss and Anthony Anderson, Veterans Trek seeks to improve veterans' quality of life through meaningful educational and outdoor activities.



Publications

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 catalogue of scholarly references on moral injury (<http://moralinjuryproject.syr.edu/academic-references/>), which includes not only academic works, but also broadly accessible discussions of moral injury in popular press and books.

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Front cover: At the start of their trek at the Milwaukee War Memorial, Tom Voss hugs his girlfriend Katinka goodbye.
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