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For Many Returning Vets, 'Moral Injury' Just As Difficult

By Rachel Martin (Host)
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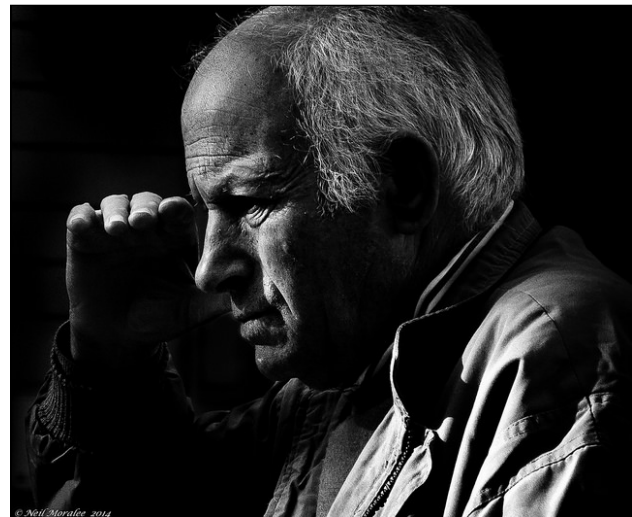
In 2013, Timothy Kudo, a former Marine captain, wrote an opinion piece for The Washington Post about grappling with "moral injury" as a veteran who has killed during wartime. In this article, Kudo shares his experience with NPR's Weekend Edition Sunday host Rachel Martin. As you read, take notes on the ways Captain Timothy Kudo describes how he experienced war and its aftermath.

[1] **RACHEL MARTIN, HOST:** Here at home, a former Marine captain named Timothy Kudo left Afghanistan in 2011. But not a day goes by without remembering one, specific incident. It started like this.

TIMOTHY KUDO: These men, on a motorcycle, came up over this hill right above us — a tremendous position, tactically.

MARTIN: Capt. Kudo and his troops held their fire. They weren't sure yet if they were in danger, but it looked like the men might be holding guns.

KUDO: We sent warnings. We shot smoke grenades off to the side, to let them know like, go away — in case they were civilians. And these men just keep coming.



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[5] **MARTIN:** Then, lights flashed from the motorcycle, just like the muzzles of a gun. Capt. Kudo's soldiers fired at the two men. Both died immediately.

KUDO: We went up to the motorcycle, and it turned out to be two civilians. They had sticks in bindles, like you'd see in old cartoons about hobos. That's what we thought were the weapons. And it seems like the muzzle flashes were just light glaring off the chrome of the motorcycle.

MARTIN: Marine Capt. Timothy Kudo was deployed in Iraq in 2009, and then to Afghanistan in 2010 and 2011. He's now a graduate student at NYU. But as he wrote last week in *The Washington Post*, coming to terms with an experience like his is a major challenge for veterans. The Department of Veterans Affairs has recognized the issue, calling it a, quote, "moral injury."

Immediately after Capt. Kudo's incident with the men on the motorcycle, he said his priority was to get his own men to safety.

KUDO: We'd still been under fire recently, and so we tried to get out of the position as quickly as possible because where these men were was in a very exposed position. And the safety of the Marines that I was in command of was definitely something that was at risk, and that we were trying to manage. But at the same time, it seemed like the men were trying to get to their home — is what we later found out — which was right behind us, when this firefight was going on.

[10] And the people in that home, in that compound in Afghanistan, were their family. And they rushed out of this building, and that was men — their fathers, probably, or uncles — as well as women. And I remember — you know, in Afghanistan, everyone wears a burqa. And so this was the very first time in my life that I had seen an adult Afghan woman's face — because they didn't care, at point. They were running to their — what I'm assuming are their children or grandchildren, to collect the bodies and have a Muslim burial before the sun went down.

MARTIN: This happened in a war zone and presumably, you'd prepared for this in whatever way it's possible to prepare. But when did that incident, and others that you were involved in, when did those start to take on different meaning for you?

KUDO: You know, in Afghanistan, you have to keep going. The next day is a different fight. There's more men at risk — there's always men at risk. And so you can't dwell on these issues. You have to move on, and especially as a leader of Marines; they're looking to you, in many ways, for the strength to keep going. And if you show doubt, they're going to have doubt in the mission, and the entire thing falls apart.

So while we were over there, there really wasn't time to even think about these issues. And when I came back, you know, they kind of simmered. And every day, I think about what happened over there. But the ability to really come to grips in depth with it, wasn't something that I was able to do till much later on. Because in many ways, when I first came back, I didn't want to think about it in depth. You know, I just wanted to be back here with my friends and my family, and re-enter society as best as I could and get back to my old life

MARTIN: Why couldn't you just put it away?

[15] **KUDO:** Because it's not something, I think, you ever put away. You know, since writing in *The Washington Post*, I've received letters and emails from veterans from World War II to Korea to Vietnam to the First Gulf War, to now. And they all talk about this idea that it's something that they carry with them for their — entirety of their lives. And it's not to say that they're damaged, or that's the only thing that they think about, or that they can't move on in some ways. It's not something that you ever forget; just like any tragedy or trauma that you encounter, lives with you forever.

MARTIN: The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, as you write, has actually identified this as an issue that's faced — what you're talking about; the idea of grappling with the moral questions of war. And they call it a moral injury. What does that term mean for you? Is that an accurate descriptor for what you went through?

KUDO: I don't think it is. I think that the immorality of war is something that is real. And it's something that all veterans face, at some point in their lives. And it's not something that you can or should treat, necessarily. Now, if it's debilitating, if it's causing people to commit suicide, if it's causing people to not be able to function in their lives, then there is absolutely a kind of physical and psychological injury component to it.

But the morality that we have experienced over there — whether we deal with that through ethics or through religion — is something that we shouldn't just get rid of, and we shouldn't ignore; that these are real questions and war is evil and yet sometimes, it is necessary. And so as we go forward, we have to be prepared for that contradiction.

MARTIN: Do you think, in the end, you were prepared as well as you could be?

[20] **KUDO:** No, absolutely not. You know, I think that it's very easy to go out on the first patrol because you don't really know what you're experiencing. And then you see the bombs exploding, or you see people getting killed. And to go out on the second patrol, that's the hard part. Anybody who told you that they knew what they were getting into, you can't know. It's impossible. It's an unbelievable, absurd and unreal situation. And once you've experienced it, there's nothing like it.

MARTIN: Have you personally reconciled your experience?

KUDO: I haven't. I think this is not something that I'm ever going to reconcile personally. And a lot of people have directed me to faith, as an answer to this. And I believe in that, in many ways; that in the reality of our world right now, the people that I've killed, they can't come back, and they can't forgive me. And maybe their families could, but they probably won't. And I can't forgive myself because that's kind of a false platitude. The harm wasn't done to me; it was done to these other people. And I do believe that in some time, maybe after this life, that there is a possibility for that. And that's the essential nature of faith, to me. But that's the only real option for this. And so you just keep pushing, and you try and make it the best for the rest of your life. And I think you also realize that despite what you've done, you're more than your worst action. And so realizing that on a day-to-day basis, too, is an incredible part of moving forward and trying to create good in the world.

MARTIN: Former Marine Capt. Timothy Kudo. He spoke to us from our bureau in New York. Capt. Kudo, thanks for making the time.

KUDO: Thanks. I appreciate it.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best describes Capt. Timothy Kudo's reaction to the experience with the men on the motorcycles?
 - A. Capt. Kudo does not regret taking action to protect his men from the two armed enemies, but he is still saddened over killing another human being.
 - B. Capt. Kudo feels guilt over choosing to protect his troops over the two civilian motorists caught in their crossfire.
 - C. Capt. Kudo did not think much about killing the two innocent civilians while in Afghanistan, but later he could not stop thinking about it.
 - D. Capt. Kudo quickly accepted and moved on from killing two innocent men in Afghanistan because doing so helped save his troops' lives.

2. PART B: Which of the following quotes best describes how the experience with the men on the motorcycle affected Capt. Kudo?
 - A. "Immediately after Capt. Kudo's incident with the men on the motorcycle, he said his priority was to get his own men to safety." (Paragraph 8)
 - B. "This happened in a war zone and presumably, you'd prepared for this in whatever way it's possible to prepare." (Paragraph 11)
 - C. "The next day is a different fight. There's more men at risk — there's always men at risk. And so you can't dwell on these issues." (Paragraph 12)
 - D. "It's not something that you ever forget; just like any tragedy or trauma that you encounter, lives with you forever." (Paragraph 15)

3. PART A: Which of the following best explains the concept of "moral injury"?
 - A. A "moral injury" is the equivalent of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and can affect both civilians and soldiers.
 - B. A "moral injury" is the struggle a soldier faces when grappling with the morality of what they have done in war.
 - C. A "moral injury" is the specific struggle a soldier faces after killing another human being in a battle.
 - D. A "moral injury" is the question soldiers ask themselves when they think about what they are fighting for.

4. PART B: Which of the following best summarizes Capt. Kudo's opinion on the phrase "moral injury"?
 - A. Capt. Kudo resents this term; he does not believe there is anything morally wrong with him or other soldiers.
 - B. Capt. Kudo thinks this term only applies to veterans who are specifically struggling with thoughts of suicide.
 - C. Capt. Kudo thinks it's an inaccurate phrase because war at its core has immoral elements that everyone experiences and cannot heal from.
 - D. Capt. Kudo thinks it's an inaccurate phrase because a soldier is not allowed to dwell on ethics in combat, making it wrong to discuss their trauma in moral terms.

5. How does the following quote from paragraph 22 contribute to the development of central ideas in the passage? "And so you just keep pushing, and you try and make it the best for the rest of your life. And I think you also realize that despite what you've done, you're more than your worst action."
