

J.A. Moad: Listening to those who served

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Whenever I speak on the topic of veterans or war, I always start with the same questions: Has anyone ever served in the military? How about your siblings, parents or children?

A few hands climb into the air, but only a few — a reality reflecting the small percentage of people who understand the challenges faced by veterans. The Minnesota Humanities Center is working to change that, in part through a new law dedicating the entire month of October as Veterans' Voices Month.

Last year on Memorial Day, author and journalist Sebastian Junger called on veterans to tell their stories. He said it was a way of sharing “the moral burden of war” — an effort to reach out to the 99 percent who've never put on a uniform. I acknowledged the importance of hearing veterans' stories, but realized they'd be hesitant to speak to civilians. How could I help to make this dialogue possible?

As a former educator, veteran and the son of a Vietnam vet, I understood that it would require a concerted effort from artists and educators, along with community and government leaders. For me, the solution was grounded in the humanities — a sentiment echoed by the Veterans' Voices program at the Humanities Center.

While in discussions with the Humanities Center and key state legislators (Rep. Jerry Newton, Rep. Bob Dettmer and Sen. John A. Hoffman), we crafted legislation that would dedicate the month of October to teaching and studying the stories of veterans. It would serve as a prelude to Veterans Day, and — with the help of some talented educators and writers in Northfield — we kicked off the project last fall. The results were astounding: The bill unanimously passed both legislative houses and on May 16, Gov. Mark Dayton signed Veterans' Voices Month into law. Minnesota is now the first state to devote an entire month to honor, recognize and celebrate veterans.

It seems all too appropriate that this initiative begins here in Minnesota, a leader in the humanities and the birthplace of Tim O'Brien, one of the greatest war writers of our generation. Much like the post-Vietnam era, we've become a society inured and exhausted by the longest conflict in our history. We hear about Traumatic Brain Injury, Post Traumatic Stress (not a disorder), sexual assault, suicides and a Veterans Administration plagued by failures of past and present policies. But we haven't heard enough of the individual stories. It's time we did.

Veterans' Voices Month is only part of a long-term initiative of the Humanities Center that draws on the power of the humanities to call attention and amplify veterans' stories and contributions. Veterans' Voices is building a network of veterans' organizations, artists and individuals to capture the authentic voices of the men and women who've served and died on our behalf.

While the project here is just getting off the ground, it is part of larger endeavor that's gaining momentum across the country. Over the last few years, I've witnessed the power of honest expression by veterans. Whether it's a production of "The Telling Project," where their stories come alive on stage; a reading by the soldier-poet, Brian Turner; or the Pulitzer Prize-winning exhibit "Always Lost" (currently touring Minnesota), the words and images always resonate through an audience. Veterans' Voices is about bearing the weight of these stories into the present — into classrooms, libraries, community groups, churches and town halls. It's about discovering what we can learn from these veterans. It's the only honest way to share the moral responsibility of war.

J.A. Moad II is a former Air Force C-130 pilot with more than 100 combat missions, who served as an assistant professor of war literature at the United States Air Force Academy. He currently resides in Northfield, flies for Delta Air Lines and is working on a novel about an American military in a not-too-distant future.

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