



Questions

By J.A. Moad II
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Last month I was reading Tim O'Brien's novel, *In The Lake of the Woods*, when I was asked to be on a panel as part of **IMPACT 2012**—a summer festival of performance art in New York City. Dedicated to the critical issues of our time, a full week was devoted to shedding light on the challenges facing Veterans and women in America's political climate. I was hoping to attend, but my flight schedule conflicted with the dates. The event was enticing, though, especially considering that O'Brien's book is about a soldier-turned politician, whose career crashes once his involvement in the Mai Lai Massacre is uncovered. Halfway into the novel, I began to feel a sense of responsibility to be in NY for the panel, so I shuffled my schedule and was able to make it. Along with other Veteran writers and poets, I was asked to read some of my work before a revival of *Goliath*, a play written by Takeo Rivera and inspired by an atrocity committed by American troops in Iraq. Following the performance, the other Vets and I took the stage for a question and answer session. I didn't know what to expect from a New York audience.



Everette Cox

I listened in awe as Everett Cox, a Vietnam Vet, read his work on stage. He shared an open letter to the current generation of Vets from Afghanistan and Iraq. Directed toward those who are considering taking their own lives, it was also a reminder that over the last few years the number of Veteran suicides has regularly exceeded the monthly combat fatalities. The letter was a plea for those suffering warriors to pause and question the

impulse to take their own lives. He was asking them to reach out for help in every possible way—to avoid isolation and to take part in the life around them... to grow a garden, to spend time in the presence of children, immerse themselves in nature, help at a food pantry... anything to allow them to reconnect and let the healing process begin. It was a beautiful moment.

As Everett knows all too well, those dark impulses are born of the internal suffering and conflicts wrought by their experiences on the battlefield. The choices they make—those that challenge their own moral foundation—often haunt them for the rest of their lives. As the soldiers in O'Brien's novels and stories make quite clear, when confronted with the savage realities of war—realities often shielded and sanitized for civilian consumption—a soldier relies on discipline, training and their own moral foundation to guide them. But discipline has a way of crumbling all around them in the face of extreme war zone pressures, leaving them to rely on what they've learned growing up in our culture. As *Goliath* would remind all of us in attendance, the life experiences of a young man in America, coupled with training meant to dehumanize the enemy, often works to erode a soldier's moral foundation long before they go off to combat.

As a Veteran, I tend to question the ability of any writer—especially one who hasn't served in the military—to capture the emotional truths and essence of any *war story*. But Takeo Rivera's writing excels at showing us a tragedy in the making—a young man growing up and being molded into a soldier—the embodiment of a nation struggling with identity, masculinity and morality in the context of war. Takeo's work, like all good art, is much more than a war story, though. It's an American story wrought with the conflicts inherent in our nation. The protagonist becomes the artifice through which we gain insight into the making of a soldier in America. As young men struggling to appear strong and superior, many mask their own doubts and insecurities through racial and ethnic slurs or by demeaning women. In *Goliath*, we see an American and military culture where empathy and self-doubt are often viewed with suspicion or as a sign of weakness.

I'd seen a performance of the play a few months before, but like all theater productions, the work is always being tweaked and re-imagined after each performance. Theater, unlike many other art forms, is a living work—one that lends itself to clearer expression the more it's performed. I was impressed when I learned that the cast had reached out to the Veteran community in New York to help them understand the difficulties that soldiers face on and off the battlefield. The work paid off. Alex Mallory, the director, made a few changes since I'd last seen the show, and the new performance was seamless. We were all drawn in by the magic of theater, aware that we were somehow a part and privy to something real and honest taking place before us. Afterwards, the emotional energy from the performance continued to resonate through the audience as the other Vets and I walked onstage for the Q & A.

Unlike the Vietnam Era, where members of the armed forces were often looked upon with contempt, today it seems as if most civilians don't know what to think about us. We are a curiosity in some ways, seen from a distance or on TV. Boxed up in their mind, they carry an uncertain image of who we are and what we're all about. For the most part, their questions reflected this distance, as if the audience was uncertain of broaching uncomfortable or controversial topics. With two women on the panel, I thought for sure they'd get asked about the difficulties of being a female in a combat zone, but they didn't. Overall, the questions made me more aware of that great disconnect between the civilian and military cultures in America. Maybe they didn't know exactly what to ask, or considering the delicate nature of the atrocities in *Goliath*, they were hesitant to examine the motives of those who commit war crimes.



Panelists (L to R): Alex Mallory (moderator) J.A. Moad II, Jennifer Pacanowski, Paul Wasserman, BR McDonald & Nicole Goodwin

By the end, though, a few important questions emerged. A young woman asked about the difficulties of talking to Veterans, wanting to know how to get them to open up. Our answers were all similar: to provide a safe environment for the Vets to talk, and then to wait, and if they open up, to simply listen with patience... listen without questions or any expectations... to understand their need to be around other Vets, to listen in silence and without a hint of judgment... to have them write about the experience or express it with art... and then if you're lucky, they might share bits and pieces of their experiences that touch on the hurt, the contempt, the anger and frustration—feelings that ultimately need a form of expression. Of course, it might take years, or a lifetime, and it might never happen.

As the session came to a close, we took one final question from the daughter of a Navy Captain. Coming from someone immersed in a military culture for her formative years, the question had a certain weight to it. I'm paraphrasing, but this was the gist of it: "Didn't you know what to expect when you joined the military?" I waited, deciding not to be the first to answer, giving those who'd been on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan the first opportunity to speak. I could sense a kind of pent up desire by everyone to answer the question—each of us, in our own way, needing to say,

No, of course not. How could a young kid imagine what combat is like or how they would react to the horrible things they'd seen and done? How could anyone understand the pure hatred and contempt they felt in the eyes of the people they were supposed to be liberating...how could they?

I spoke of my own naive sense of moral certainty as a boy steeped in adventure novels and movies of my childhood—the belief in doing the right thing and a longing for exciting experiences that often guides our impulses to join the Armed Forces. Like many kids, I once believed in the notion of might for right, wanting to be a modern day knight of the Round Table, a heroic pilot like Han Solo and the guys in Top Gun all wrapped up into one. And, at a more fundamental level, like so many boys, I wanted my own father to be proud of me. That was the moral foundation on which I'd built my own wide-eyed vision of the future—a fifteen year-old boy sending off for an application to the Air Force Academy without a clue of what that future would entail. No... despite the fact that my father was a Vietnam Vet who saw combat on the ground, I didn't know what to expect. But maybe we should know. Maybe, we all *need* to know.

Back home, a few weeks later, I picked up *In the Lake of the Woods*, and I couldn't put it down. The story echoed the difficult truths expressed in *Goliath*. I realized how each story's protagonist was the by-product of a previous war—boys that didn't live up to the expectation of their Veteran fathers. Fat and nerdy or sensitive and romantic, they bore the burden of proving themselves in their own generation's wars. To cleanse themselves of those weaknesses, young men like them become vulnerable in a combat zone as they wrestle with their own demons. In a place where death and killing become an every day reality, it's easy to understand how soldiers can be broken and swayed to take part or be complicit in atrocities—those young boys and men trying to prove themselves in a culture that demands loyalty and strength above all else.

While teaching a book on involving war crimes to cadets, there was always a solemn distance from which they were able to observe the atrocities. Early on in the readings, they tended to frame the indiscriminate targeting of civilians, the mutilation and desecration of corpses, the torture and the rapes as the acts of crazy soldiers, a few bad apples or due to poor leadership. But, of course, as *Goliath*, *In The Lake of the Woods* and much of the literature of war reminds us, that's not the case. Slowly, and often reluctantly, the cadets began to see beyond those first assumptions. Eventually, the discussion would come around to the tipping point for soldiers, into what psychologists refer to as the *berserk state*—the point where a soldier goes over the edge, disengaging from their own moral foundation completely. I would always pose a question to those cadets. Sheltered inside their world of certainty and comfort, I would ask them, can you envision yourself in that state? When you look in the eyes of the mirror... can you imagine going there?

Ever since that night in New York, I've been asking myself a lot of questions—ones that we, as a society engaging in wars more often than we may want to admit, need to ask. Should those citizens who sign up to fight, know as much as possible about what to expect before they go off to war? If so, then maybe we should ask those teen-aged kids and young adults who volunteer and fight on our behalf, if they know what lies ahead. Before they're tasked with the burden and responsibility of fighting, maybe it's only fair we ask them a few questions like these to see if they know what to *expect*:

- Are you aware that if you take part in combat, it's highly probable that you will suffer a form of mental trauma that will linger with you for the rest of your life?
- Do you know what friendly fire is?
- Do you realize that you'll be trained to dehumanize the enemy, which may make it easier for you to kill on the battlefield? But unless you're a sociopath, it will not help you bridge the internal struggle that will haunt you for the rest of you life.
- If you are injured severely and survive, you may never be able to work again, possibly lose all your limbs and be in the care of someone else for the rest of your life, okay?
- Do you understand that since resources are limited, the VA will get to you when it can, maybe in a few months, and maybe when it's too late to help you? Hundreds of thousands are already in line ahead of you, and they've been waiting months and years for results.
- Do you know what Traumatic Brain Injury is?
- Have you ever seen a corpse toasted beyond recognition or been to a burn clinic?
- Can you imagine that you and those who serve alongside you will likely compromise their integrity at some point and possibly more than once?
- Do you realize you'll be more likely to be homeless and have difficulty finding good employment than your peers?

- Are you aware, that your experiences will fundamentally change you forever, and that integrating back into society may or may not be possible?
- Do you currently sleep with a knife or gun under your pillow or on your nightstand?
- Can you accept that you'll be held accountable for everything you do, and that the enemy and people you're supposed to be helping may not hold themselves to any standard of decency, and, oh... you may not know who exactly the enemy is, okay?
- Do you realize, that when you come home, you'll never feel quite safe again?
- If you're a woman, the odds are that you'll endure some form of sexual trauma during your time in the military. And it happens to men, too, so you'll need to watch your back.
- Are you prepared to carry with you forever, the images of dead women and children, the pieces and parts of friends, or the disemboweled body of someone you tried to save?
- Are you aware that you'll be expected to do things you weren't trained for, with limited resources to accomplish the goal, and no matter how hard you work, the odds are that your effort will be in vain and some of your closest friends will die?
- Do you understand that the anger you'll experience at yourself, your nation, your spouse and the people you once held dear, may become quite common?
- Can you imagine that the relationships you have after coming home will pale in comparison to the ones you make on the battlefield?
- Are you aware that the composite experiences you take part in may play like a quiet movie in the back your mind over and over again for the rest of your life?
- Do you realize that these are just a small sampling of questions to help you understand what's ahead?

Yes, just a few questions, so they'll know what to expect, to be privy to what the art, literature, and psychology of warfare has taught us over the years. I don't know if the questions would even matter, but I feel compelled to ensure that the next generation of young boys and girls knows what to expect of the next war (and all the new wars ahead—wars waiting out there for us like great beasts we'll be forced to slay). And what about a society and nation that's become increasingly distanced from those who fight on their behalf? Are we all ready to accept the responsibility of knowing what's ahead, to care for a generation of broken men and women, and provide the resources to help them cope with challenges ahead? Are we prepared to help them with *all* the battles that await them?

Are we?

It seems like a question worth asking...