

Reading, Writing and Talking War – Are We Ready?

Posted on November 4, 2013 by J. A. Moad II

I'd like to say thank you to everyone who's encouraged me and lent their time, energy and wisdom to help get this project off the ground. I decided to entitle the initiative, **Reading, Writing and Talking War**. I wasn't sure what to call the project until I found myself on a layover in Manhattan at the end of September. I had an impromptu meeting about doing a reading and highlighting the initiative at the [Veteran Artist Project](#). Afterwards, I was walking back to my hotel, tired, but energized from the conversation, thinking about Veteran's Day and what matters most to me about this initiative. It was a perfect night, alive with the noise of the city, the taxis and cars, people talking across tables at outside cafes, and others on cell phones as they walked up and down the streets. I thought about the most important thing that could come from all this, and realized it's the most simple thing of all: talking about war—discussing it in all its varied manifestations. Sharing ideas, stories, experiences and thoughts in search of a greater understanding is what it's all about, after all. If we don't all come together into some greater dialogue to embrace this whole process, then it's just another project out there—another *thing* meandering into obscurity or dying on the vine no matter how much we believe it should bloom.

Soooo, here we go. While I don't know where it will lead, I do know that the seed has taken root here in Minnesota. First, at Arcadia High School in Northfield, MN, where an imaginative teacher, Joe Pahr, and sixteen students signed up to read and engage War Literature for the entire month of October. I was honored to be a part of it. What emerged was a little bit of poetry, music, art, and a touch of the theatrical to bring life to all the pain and sadness engendered by war. These kids were beyond amazing, giving themselves over to the power of the words on the page. The writer, Ben Percy (of [Red Moon](#) fame), and I each showed up to discuss our own short stories assigned to the students. We talked about the repercussions of war on the personal and societal level, our creative process and the importance of reading. But the truth is, we didn't need to be there. The literature spoke for itself—the stories, poetry and essays of war have a power all their own.

The class started off by reading *How To Tell a True War Story* by Tim O'Brien's, a Minnesota native. It set the stage for the semester, and each work was viewed through his lens: does the truth of war come through in the various writings? They took Brian Turner's poem, *2000 lbs* about a suicide bombing in a busy market of Iraq and acted out the parts of each person involved. The students embraced the work, and as Joe Pahr wrote, "They have come to see that war is not a black or white issue. They have developed empathy for the range of emotions experienced by the soldiers, the victims, the friends, and the families."

While the students were reading and discussing the works in a classroom, I was taking part in [The Telling Project](#) in Minneapolis. Five other Veterans from Minnesota and I performed on stage at the Guthrie Theater in The Dowling Studio. Our stories were woven together by Jonathan Wei to create a powerful narrative that we shared with both civilian and military members of the community. It was fitting that we performed on the stage of [An Iliad](#), a rich and forceful, one-man show that recounts the story of Achilles and Hector in the siege of Troy.

We had an amazing group of Veterans, both male and female, ranging from the Vietnam Era to the present. I was honored to work alongside such a talented and gutsy group of people and help to create something powerful and engaging for the audience. Early on as we worked together to find a proper way to start the production and reach out to members of the audience, I realized the best way was to ask them a simple question: *Are you ready?* It was the lingering question in the back of my mind ever since I first came up with this idea in May—how do we make Americans ready to hear the stories of their Veterans and help bridge the military-civilian divide? It's a question that's been with me for several years.

Like many initiatives out there, *The Telling Project* is a key part of bridging this divide. There are many other groups working to help make this happen, groups including *The Veteran Writing Project*, the *Warrior Writers*, *The Veteran Center for Performing Arts*, *Society of Artistic Veterans*, and of course, [The Veteran Artist Program](#) which is hosting a week long event this week in New York. I'll be there on Friday night, Nov 8th, reading and discussion this project along with several other writers and veterans.

In the end, I realize that it will take many voices coming together to help keep an initiative like this alive, to give it momentum and staying power. But the truth is, I already feel like it's a success. When I was given insight into the thoughtful and creative responses of those sixteen kids in Northfield—kids who created art, music and poetry in response to what they'd read... well, that seemed like success to me—real success.

When the other Veterans and I asked the audience at the Guthrie if they were ready, several people responded with a clear, 'yes,' and one or two asked us, (the performers), if we were ready. We were, of course, but it wasn't easy for everyone to share their stories or open old wounds that may never heal. After the performance, many in the audience stayed to ask questions, several of them moved to tears by what they'd seen, and I realize right then that they are ready, too.

After more than a decade of war, Americans are beginning to understand the importance of sharing these stories, a need for creating a greater dialogue, and of the consequences of too much silence. When it comes down to it, though, the question itself is irrelevant. We may not all be ready to share our stories or to listen just yet, but we must find a way to get there, step by step. If we, as a society, send our young off to war, we must make ourselves ready to listen and hear what they have to tell us. We owe it to each other and to everyone who's ever put on a uniform, past, present or future, to serve and fight on our behalf, to make ourselves ready. We need to be ready. We have to be ready.

Until Next Time,

J.A. Moad II



About J. A. Moad II

J.A. Moad II is a former Air Force C-130 pilot with over 3000 flight hours and 100 combat sorties. He served as an English Professor at the United States Air Force Academy and as a fiction editor for the War, Literature & the Arts Journal (WLA). He writes online essays for WLA and is engaged in a program to make October Veterans' Voices Month across the country. His short stories, poetry and essays have appeared in a variety of journals and anthologies, including winning the 2014 Consequences Magazine Fiction Award. In addition to writing, he has performed on stage at the Library of Congress and The Guthrie Theater as part of the Telling Project - giving a voice to the Veteran experience. He currently resides in Northfield, MN where he flies for Delta Airlines and is editing on a novel about an American military in a not too-distant future.

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