

Veterans, Disability, and the Power of Literature

Part 1: The Luminous Truth: Contemporary Literature by Veterans

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Barry Whaley:

Good afternoon everybody and thank you for joining us today for the first webinar in our three-part series *Veterans, Disability, and the Power of Literature*. I'm Barry Whaley, I'm the director of the southeast ADA Center based in Atlanta. The Southeast ADA Center is a project of the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University. We're funded by NIDILRR, the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research, a center within the Administration for Community Living, Department of Health and Human Services. The Southeast ADA Center is one of ten centers that make up the ADA National Network. Our purpose is to provide informal technical guidance, training, and information on all aspects of the Americans with Disabilities Act. The Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University is a

leader in the efforts to advance the civic, economic, and social participation of people with disabilities in a global society.

Again, I want to welcome you to today's webinar. Today's episode is "The Luminous Truth: Contemporary Literature by Veterans". Our hosts are Steve Kuusisto and Doug Anderson. Steve Kuusisto is author of the memoir "*Have Dog, Will Travel*", "*Planet of the Blind*", which was a New York Times Notable Book of the Year award winner, and "*Eavesdropping: a Memoir of Blindness and Listening*", and the poetry collections "*Only Bread, Only Light*", and "*Letters to Borges*". He's a graduate of the Iowa "Writer's Workshop" and a Fulbright Scholar. He's taught at the University of Iowa, Hobart and Williams Smith Colleges, and the Ohio State University. Currently, he teaches at Syracuse University where he holds a university professorship in disability studies. He's a frequent speaker in the U.S. and abroad, and you can learn more about Steve and his work at his website StephenKuusisto.com. That's StephenKuusisto.com.

Doug Anderson is the author of three books of poems, of which "*The Moon Reflected Fire*" won the Kate Tufts Discovery Award and "*Blues for*

Unemployed Secret Police” a grant from the Academy of American Poets. He's a playwright as well. His play “Short-timers” was produced at theater for the New City in New York City in 1981. He's also written a memoir, “*Keep Your Head Down: Vietnam, the '60s and a Journey of Self-Discovery.*” His most recent book of poems is “*Horse Medicine.*” His work has appeared in the Massachusetts Review, Poetry, Plow Shares, the Virginia Quarterly Review, the Southern Review, Field, as well as other publications. He has written critical articles for the New York Times book review, the London Times literary supplement, and the Boston Globe. He's taught at Emerson and Smith Colleges, the University of Massachusetts, and the MFA programs of Pacific University of Oregon and Bennington College. He's an affiliate of the Joiner Institute for the Study of War and Social Consequences at UMass Boston, and he is currently helping to design an institute for refugees and veterans at the University of Massachusetts. Doug served in Vietnam as a corpsman with the Marine infantry battalion.

As a reminder to listeners, *Veterans, Disability, and the Power of Literature* contains themes and descriptions of war that some may find

unsettling. If you find this content objectionable, you may choose not to listen. Additionally, this webinar contains some mild profanity that some may find offensive. Finally, the contents of this webinar don't necessarily reflect the policy of NIDILLR, HCL, HHS, Syracuse University, the Burton Blatt Institute, or the Southeast ADA Center, and you shouldn't assume endorsement by any of these entities. So Doug and Steve, welcome to our episode today, and I'll turn the webinar over to you.

Steve Kuusisto:

Thank you so much, Barry. It's wonderful to be here. Hey, Doug!

Doug Anderson:

Hey, Steve! How are you doing?

Steve Kuusisto:

I'm great. We have proposed to talk today about veterans in literature, and before you get worried about literature as a fancy word, we are really talking about the ways and means that human beings have learned to express their stories, bring forward their emotions, and build community through the

art of storytelling and writing poetry. And as Doug and I talked about this many, many times, we began to realize that the stories of veterans, and especially people we might call “wounded warriors”, have a long, long history in the long story of storying, the long history of storying. We thought it would be interesting to talk a little bit today about that history and about those stories, about those poems, as way of really thinking about veterans, writing, culture, healing, finding our ways forward, and that’s sort of how we began this process. Doug is a distinguished American poet and he is also a veteran of the Vietnam War. He has been involved in lots of activities involving disability, culture, and veterans’ issues. I am myself a disabled poet. My disability, blindness at birth, prevented me from ever being in the military, though I once went to a Navy recruiting station when I was 11 and suggested that there might be room for a blind kid in the Navy. They didn’t think that was funny. They didn’t really think that was funny, but I was half sincere, actually.

So, here we are. Doug, do you have some initial things that you would like to throw into the mix?

Doug Anderson:

Yes. I would say that literature is very much on point in this discussion. It's not anything separate. After all, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the poetry of World War I, war is very much the subject of those poets and many other poets, and war expresses -- or poetry expresses very intimately what goes on with veterans of combat. Combat veterans understand a war inside the war that other people don't get if they have not been in it, particularly politicians. And it expresses a part of the self that is extremely intimate and accurate about what happens to human beings during war, physically, spiritually, psychologically, and poetry to me is the best expression of that.

Steve Kuusisto:

I have been thinking a lot about Wilfred Owens' famous poem "Dulce et decorum est."

Doug Anderson:

Great poem.

Steve Kuusisto:

Do you mind if I read it?

Doug Anderson:

Go right ahead.

Steve Kuusisto:

Wilford Owen served in the First World War. This may be the most famous poem to have come out of that war. “Dulce et decorum est”

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling,

Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime...
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,

The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*

Pro patria mori.

Doug Anderson:

There's so many wonderful details in that poem that are so particular to combat experience.

Steve Kuusisto:

Correct.

Doug Anderson:

People falling asleep, it is very possible to fall asleep between the time you put one foot down, raise the next, and put it down. I have done so. Fatigue of not sleeping three or four nights in a row, of necessity. And then there's this wonderful cinematic thing that he does in there where you view through a green lens. The green lens that he is talking about is the green tinted lens of the gas mask. So he creates an optic through which to intensify these details of a man choking to death on mustard gas. It's really rather brilliant and so true.

Steve Kuusisto:

Yeah, and he says "dim through the misty pains and thick green light of that gas mask, as under a green sea, I saw him drowning." Right, which is such a helplessness. He says, and then that comes forward with him that, horror vision, right, that it will stay with him forever, "in all of my dreams," he says, "before my helpless sight, he plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning." It will never leave him.

Doug Anderson:

No, no it won't. And Owen, by the way, was interned in the CraigLockhart War Hospital in Scotland for shell shock, that's what they called it in those days, where he met Siegfried Sassoon, another war poet who'd been sent there because he'd written a letter to parliament deploring the war, and they couldn't very well shoot him because he was a war hero, so they sent him to a mental institution to park him there until it died down. He and Owen exchanged poems. They were treated by a man named Dr. Rivers,

who was a great compassionate heart and one of the originators of a lot of theory about what happens to combat veterans, which would come to be called posttraumatic stress disorder in our own time. He was neurologically literate and a great psychiatrist and a great heart. Pat Barker's wonderful book, "*Regeneration*", is a novel that puts these real characters in action in the CraigLockhart War Hospital, very much worth a read.

Steve Kuusisto:

It's profoundly worth a read. You actually, as they used to say in the '60s, turned me on to that novel, and it is a really stunning novel, and anyone interested in issues of post-traumatic stress, veterans affairs, the history of medicine, stories, compassion, the novel has all of those things, and one might add beauty. It's a beautiful book.

Doug Anderson:

Yes, it is. Wonderful. And there are two other novels in that trilogy that continue that story. The literature of psychiatry regarding war continues, some of it very brilliant. Jonathan Shay, who is a psychiatrist who has written

extensively about post-traumatic stress disorder, has two books. One is called "*Achilles in Vietnam*", where he uses the story of Achilles and the Iliad to talk about PTSD and moral injury. And the second book is "*Odysseus in Vietnam*", which tracks the homeward journey of the veteran through the character of Odysseus and he does it brilliantly. I think the term "moral injury" comes from his work which, heaped on top of posttraumatic stress disorder, it makes the recovery time much longer and much more difficult.

Steve Kuusisto:

Yeah. I also think that the term moral injury speaks also to how war affects the civilian population.

Doug Anderson:

Absolutely. We don't know that in this country. There hasn't been a war on our own soil since 1865, give or take a few incidents like 9/11. The country, at large, really does not have a three-dimensional understanding of war, does not have an experience of it with their five senses, has not experienced the level of fear that goes with having armed people walking up

and down the streets in your neighborhood and being bombed and shelled all the time.

Steve Kuusisto:

Yes, and it affects the experience of soldiers. I was reading recently some autobiographical writing by American marines who had gone into Iraq and discovered -- they were in an extraordinary series of firefights in which, because of the circumstances, they wound up firing willy-nilly at anyone and very quickly they realized, especially the writer in question, that they could not be, by definition, seen as liberators of Holland or France in World War II as they had been -- that they were in a very ugly, you know, borderless, violent zone, and that women and children were being killed on top of any potential enemies. That's often the circumstance that troops find themselves in.

Doug Anderson:

Always, always, and people assume that when soldiers and marines go off to war that they are kind of like eagle scouts, and they have these rules they abide by, and they are good guys with white hats going to combat the forces of evil, and they themselves do not know wrong. They know who to shoot and who not to shoot. There is never any confusion, never any moral ambiguity, and that things are very clear. In all wars, people end up shooting into areas where they don't know who they are hitting, really. They hit -- they shoot each other. You get short artillery rounds. Planes bomb hospitals by mistake. These things happen, but people don't consider this, and they don't consider the plight of civilians at all. There were four million Vietnamese killed in the Vietnam War, half of whom were civilians. It's a mind boggling number.

Steve Kuusisto:

Yes, and we estimate that at least a million people, civilians, died in Iraq.

Doug Anderson:

I think in the first Iraq war, there were about a million people killed.

Steve Kuusisto:

I think from the context of thinking about disablement of soldiers and veterans, that one of the things that the reason this conversation matters is that, as you say, moral injury is something that you can't blink away. It becomes part of the sustained horror and trauma of experience that comes afterwards.

Doug Anderson:

Yes, very much so. And it's mixed in with PTSD. There's a lot of guilt on top of suppressed memory and the trauma to the individual person. But people shoot people by accident all the time. People go crazy and shoot their own people. Perfectly decent human beings who are subjected to crazy pressure, silly politics, and bad strategy end up in these situations, and ultimately they're the ones who bear the blame for it. They don't see it as a structural problem in war. There is absolutely no reason for modern war. The World War I poets were, I think, the first to finish off the romanticism of war. There is no more romanticism after World War I. The romanticism of Yeats,

the Irish heroes, Tennyson, that's all gone in World War I. This is what the poetry speaks of and has spoken of since.

Steve Kuusisto:

Here's a poem by Brian Turner, who, as you know, is also a veteran and an American poet. This one is called "Phantom Noise."

There is this ringing hum this
bullet-borne language ringing
shell-fall and static this late-night
ringing of threadwork and carpet ringing
hiss and steam this wing-beat
of rotors and tanks broken
bodies ringing in steel humming these
voices of dust these years ringing
rifles in Babylon rifles in Sumer
ringing these children their gravestones
and candy their limbs gone missing their
static-borne television their ringing

this eardrum this rifled symphonic this
ringing of midnight in gunpowder and oil this
brake pad gone useless this muzzle-flash singing this
threading of bullets in muscle and bone this ringing
hum this ringing hum this
ringing

Doug Anderson:

Very powerful.

Steve Kuusisto:

Very powerful. And again, it never leaves you.

Doug Anderson:

There it is, there it is, in absolute clarity.

Steve Kuusisto:

The interesting thing is that going back to your observation about
imagining Achilles as one way of thinking about the warrior and the warrior's
inner life, and then thinking about Odysseus, both stories have something to

do, though differently, about how to go home, how to have a remaining life, how to have a broader experience. I think, in a way, that that's part of what the poetry that veterans have written and have been writing for quite some time takes on, right, that it has to carry this, at the very least, a very dualistic sense of both memory of the battle and then how to live now.

Doug Anderson:

Very much so, very much so. And, you know, you do carry it the rest of your life. The eagle scouts don't come home, get married, get a house with a picket fence up on a hill, and live happily ever after. We become what we do. We become what we experience, and we attempt to integrate this. I no longer believe in closure. It's a silly word. It's a very capitalist idea within the psychiatric profession that you can get fixed. It's a lifelong thing, and you learn to live with it.

Steve Kuusisto:

You learn to live with it, and you also, I think -- I'm guessing here, because I have not served in war -- you also carry a kind of complex deep feeling of 'why me, why did I survive?'

Doug Anderson:

There is that, very much so, and I don't think a week goes by that I don't think about why I'm still alive, and it really doesn't make any sense. You know, I had a tree splinter in front of me one day. I had crawled up to treat a casualty, and we were still under fire, and this tree just splintered right in front of me, and it was a machine gun on the other side of me, the same machine gun that had killed the guy I was working on. And I don't know why it didn't get me. It doesn't make any sense that it didn't get me. It was right there in my face. For some reason, it didn't get me, and there were a number of experiences like this. I don't know how I got home. My wounds were not serious, and I don't know how I got home at all.

Steve Kuusisto:

There's a poem by Yusef Komunyakaa who also, like you, served in Vietnam, called "*Thanks*", and he touches on this. He says:

Thanks for the tree
between me & a sniper's bullet.
I don't know what made the grass
sway seconds before the Viet Cong
raised his soundless rifle.
Some voice always followed,
telling me which foot
to put down first.
Thanks for deflecting the ricochet
against that anarchy of dusk.
I was back in San Francisco
wrapped up in a woman's wild colors,
causing some dark bird's love call
to be shattered by daylight
when my hands reached up
& pulled a branch away
from my face. Thanks
for the vague white flower
that pointed to the gleaming metal

reflecting how it is to be broken
like mist over the grass,
as we played some deadly
game for blind gods.
What made me spot the monarch
writhing on a single thread
tied to a farmer's gate,
holding the day together
like an unfingered guitar string,
is beyond me. Maybe the hills
grew weary & leaned a little in the heat.
Again, thanks for the dud
hand grenade tossed at my feet
outside Chu Lai. I'm still
falling through its silence.
I don't know why the intrepid
sun touched the bayonet,
but I know that something
stood among those lost trees
& moved only when I moved.

One of the things that I think is central to poetry written by soldiers of
combat is that sense of duality, that you're back there, and you're still here,

and then you can add a third thing, how to live and what to do. When I sit down to write a poem, I have a disabled childhood. I had the mysteries of learning to embrace my physical difference, and those things come out in my writing, but I also don't have that thing that you just alluded to and that Yusef alludes to, which is that 'how is it that I'm here?' and 'what moral imperative must I live up to to deserve being here?'

Doug Anderson:

Yes, and I have come to believe it's witness. When I began to write poems about the war, I didn't know I was going to write about the war at all, and I wrote a short story at first, and then I wrote a play that was done in New York, and then I began to write a series of poems, which became the "*Moon Reflected Fire*", and it seemed to be contents under pressure that wanted to get out, that I would put my pen to the paper and they would just happen one after another. As a matter of fact, most of that book happened as a long poem. It's like I had to do it, and I think that's the imperative you're talking about, that some things persist in wanting to be written about, and we

are witnesses, and if we happened to be skilled in language, that's our moral language.

Steve Kuusisto:

Do you have the "*Moon Reflected Fire*" in front of you?

Doug Anderson:

I do.

Steve Kuusisto:

Would you be able to read the poem "Two Boys"?

Doug Anderson:

"Two Boys."

They take the new machine gun out of its wrap
In pieces, the flat black barrel, the other
Parts, delicate in their oil, plastic stock
Like a toy until snapped onto the rest,
Pressed against the shoulder of the corporal
With almost white blond hair. He looks around
For something to sight in on. With a grin

The other, darker one points to three
Children dawdling to school along a paddy dike
The first rounds are high and the gunner adjusts,
Fires again, the children are running now,
The rounds pluming in the wet paddies,
Another click and all but one child has made
The safety of the treeline, the other splashing
Into the new rice, and as the gunner sights in
On him, this eight year old, with wisdom perhaps
From the dead, yanks off his red shirt, becomes
The same color as the fields, the gunner lowering
The muzzle now, whispering a wistful, damn

Steve Kuusisto:

That is witness.

Doug Anderson:

It is, and it's also an evocation of how hard and cynical people can get in a war. By the time I got there, the marines no longer liked the Vietnamese at all. They did not distinguish between enemy and so-called friendly, and in a

sense they were right because 80% of the country was pro-communist, something that they didn't bother to tell us when we went over.

Steve Kuusisto:

Right, right.

Doug Anderson:

And this, as you can see, contributed to atrocities.

Steve Kuusisto:

Yeah. Maybe we could talk a little bit about how poetry as an art form helps navigate the way forward when faced with that ineluctable and total reality.

Doug Anderson:

I think poetry can access things that other language arts can't, things that are unspeakable, things that if you attempt to put them into prose or any other kind of discourse just don't work. There's something about poetry that's prior to thought, and I think this is its greatest strength, that you speak under

compulsion, that you must speak, and that somehow because you're not thinking in any conventional sense, the language offers itself to you intuitively, and to me that's the point of poetry. That's the strength of it. And in situations like a war, where much of it is unspeakable, much of it doesn't make any sense at all in rational terms, it's the only language that really works. I mean, how do you talk about these things? I remember when I was being treated for PTSD, the therapist I was working with was telling me that I was talking to her about things that would put most people in a cold sweat, but I was being very matter of fact about it. There's also an understatement in poetry. It does not embellish. I mean, if it's real, if it's real poetry, it doesn't festoon language. It goes for the jugular. It goes for what is true and what is unspeakably original.

Steve Kuusisto:

This is why poetry, of course, makes politicians and certainly tyrants so uncomfortable.

Doug Anderson:

Yes, indeed. It touches a part of their brain that has atrophied from misuse, I think. I think to be a politician or an ideologue, you have to shut down parts of yourself. Here comes art with all of its moral ambiguity, and it surprises, and it creates a certain terror in the back cave of the mind that has fallen into ill use, and I think art in general -- poetry and art in general do this to the conventionally minded. Banksy did a turn on Martin Luther King's -- he wanted to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Banksy did his own version, that art should do that, art should comfort the afflicted and afflicted comfortable.

Steve Kuusisto:

That's correct. And of course the truth is, we go back to the Wilford Owen poem, the translation of the Latin title is essentially that "it is sweet and just to die for your country." And that -- go ahead.

Doug Anderson:

I can't use the full word on a podcast, so I would say that's the most eloquent BS that has ever been written.

Steve Kuusisto:

Right.

Doug Anderson:

Anyone who has ever been in a war knows this.

Steve Kuusisto:

That's correct, that is the stumbling into truth that soldiers have to face, and then the poetry written by veterans continues to torment the public nerve because it tells the truth.

Doug Anderson:

Yes.

Steve Kuusisto:

Do you still have "*The Moon Reflected Fire*" in front of you?

Doug Anderson:

I do.

Steve Kuusisto:

Can you read the poem xin loi [*pronounced zin loy*]?

Doug Anderson:

Xin loi [*pronounced shin loy*]. Xin loi is "I am sorry" in Vietnamese, and we used to use it kind of smirkingly, and we used to use it to suppress our emotions. We would say "xin loi" [*pronounced sin loy*], but it actually, spoken correctly with Vietnamese tones "xin loi" [*pronounced shin loy*]

The man and woman, Vietnamese,
Come up the hill, carry something slung between them on a bamboo
mat,
Unroll it at my feet:
The child, iron gray, long dead,
Flies have made him home.
His wounds are from artillery shrapnel.
The man and the woman look as if they are cast

From the same iron as their dead son,
So rooted are they in the mud.
There is nothing to say,
Nothing in my medical bag, nothing in my mind.
A monsoon cloud hangs above,
Its belly torn open on a mountain.

Steve Kuusisto:

Yeah, there is nothing to say is, of course, the echo that poetry written by warriors has to contend with. There is nothing to say, and then there is everything to say.

Doug Anderson:

It speaks the unspeakable.

Steve Kuusisto:

You travel widely and have worked with veterans, both young and older in creative arts workshop settings. Do you talk about this dynamic of witnessing and uncovering the nothing to say as a sort of method?

Doug Anderson:

Yes, I do, and the way I go about it when I'm teaching vets, or anyone, is that I begin with making lists of things, physical things, that put you in contact with your senses. The sound that a canteen makes when it's half full and sloshing on your hip, the sound of a rifle when it is pointed toward you, and the sound of a rifle when it is pointed away from you, the fact that popping the top on a beer can makes the same sound as the fuse igniting on a thrown grenade. They are approximately the same sound. Smells, what things smell like, what it's like to fight a war in a country where they use human shit as fertilizer, just a preoccupation with things, real things, not ideas. I think Williams said that, "no ideas but in things."

Steve Kuusisto:

Correct.

Doug Anderson:

That's what he is talking about, and to begin with a list of the contents of one's pack or, you know, as Tim O'Brien said, "the things they carry." That's

exactly where it is. You access the unspeakable through the typical, the mundane, the quotidian.

Steve Kuusisto:

It is true also that things, which are nouns, have great power in the minds of others, right, that this is the way poetry gets across between two people. People often ask me, as a blind poet, 'how do you write so clearly about the world?' And I say, "Well, it's trick." I use nouns. Nouns are images, right? If I say strawberry, you see a strawberry. If I say battleship, you see a battleship. If I say tennis shoe, what have you? This doesn't necessarily mean that I have seen them, nor does it mean that I have seen them in the way you see them, and so I bring that up only to suggest that the noun itself as an image is a very powerful thing.

Doug Anderson:

It is indeed.

Steve Kuusisto:

And then if I use it in the context of trying to uncover or react to the nothing to say, that is the dilemma of the warrior, then those nouns take on a doubling power. Rice, water, mouths, a tank, a hinge, whatever you put in your poem stands out even all the more. There's a tremendous dynamic to those nouns.

Doug Anderson:

A tank runs over a Buddhist graveyard, and the skull is suddenly visible. Simple, but in its context, evocative of everything that you don't want to know about and yet must know about.

Steve Kuusisto:

The world is never the same after that, absolute transformation.

Doug Anderson:

War changes brain chemistry, permanently, and your nervous system suddenly is much larger than it ever was, which isn't always good. It extends out beyond your body. It's sensitive to things that ordinary people aren't troubled with, and it's with you the rest of your life. There are some people who think that you should get over it. Nobody gets over it. Denial is not a river in Egypt. You carry this stuff the rest of your life, and if you don't learn how to live with it, if you don't make friends with it, if you don't call it by its true names, it eats at you. It disempowers you.

Steve Kuusisto:

Well, and that's a disabling circumstance, isn't it? I mean, in your memoir, which I recommend to all listeners, "*Keep Your Head Down: Vietnam, the '60s, and a Journey of Self-discovery*", you say early in the book, "Since Vietnam, I have acquired a second self that lies dormant until he is needed. I call him snake brain. Since the beginning of the Iraq war, he's come alive. He is an early warning system for some seriously bad behavior. Snake brain is good at sniffing out sham but not so good at affirming things. Sometimes he takes

over the whole mind, and I need someone to point this out.” It’s really kind of a neurological hijacking, as the psychologist Daniel Goldman would call it, that you fall into a fight or flee state of heightened consciousness, and that seems to be one of the dynamics of war trauma.

Doug Anderson:

That’s very much the case. It comes over you. Vietnam veterans have contributed a lot to medical psychiatry. Something happened to them that was different from other wars, which is not to diminish the horror of other wars at all, but to say that it was suppressed in them. They were sort of like early rape victims who were told to shut up. It was a politically unpopular war. It was a war that we lost. Nobody wanted to talk to veterans when they came back. They were an inconvenience. People with PTSD were an inconvenience. They wanted them to go away. They did not want to hear their witnessing at all. So a lot of people sat on it. And this is -- it came out later, in many of them, in not healthy ways. You have the situation back in the late '60s, where a Vietnam veteran drove his jeep through the glass doors of the Veteran

Administration hospital, because no one would listen to him about what he was feeling.

Steve Kuusisto:

Right, right.

Doug Anderson:

And it's like, what does it take to reach people about this? So what happened was the VA was absolutely not ready to deal with the huge numbers casualties that came back from a war they didn't expect to last ten, 15 years, and they were in particular not able to handle posttraumatic stress disorder. The contributions that vets in their difficulties and in their desire to heal themselves or to make themselves heard are immense. The therapists, the more enlightened therapists who came up after them were able to process this with the vets, and now the VA, which was totally incompetent in this area originally, has developed a very fine treatment program for posttraumatic stress disorder, in particular at the unit at Leeds, Massachusetts, the hospital there where they have a six-week inpatient program that is really dynamite,

excellent therapists. Much has been learned about neurology because of this. So you look at veterans as people who have contributed greatly to a body of healing knowledge. That in itself is a wonderful thing. That's witness turned to creativity. That's terror and fear turned into creativity.

Steve Kuusisto:

Yeah, and it's also interesting to me that there's a neurologist named Fredrick Foot who has been making poetry a required course of treatment in military hospitals.

Doug Anderson:

Wow.

Steve Kuusisto:

And I have been reading about him. I don't know him, but he's been doing some extraordinary work. He writes poetry himself, but then he sort of says that what happens to you is you become emotionally AWOL after the trauma of war, and that essentially poetry is like -- it's like the bricks and mortar of rebuilding the self. It's also interesting to me, you allude to the fact

that nobody wanted to hear from the veterans from the Vietnam War. I think veterans still struggle with this, because they are very -- their very arrival home speaks against certain dominant images of whatever war. At the same time, historically Americans have had a very complicated relationship with disability itself so that if you come home as a wounded warrior, this is doubly difficult. Not only is it the case that people don't want to hear the stories, but they also don't want to see what you look like, right? There's a famous book in disability studies called "*The Ugly Laws*" by a professor of disability studies at University of California at Berkeley. Her name is Susan Schweik. Many people don't know that into the late 19th century and well into the 20th century, hundreds of cities across the United States passed ordinances prohibiting disfigured or disabled people from appearing on the public streets. So the idea was that people would be put into asylums or special hospitals, behind the hedge row, behind the iron fence, kept out of public sight, and that's a dynamic and powerful and true fact of history. The whole business of returning to the nation from which you come and then reentering the public sphere is doubly difficult if you are in any way nonnormative, right, whether

you're psychiatrically nonnormative or you're missing limbs. Finding your way into the public square is extremely tough, and again to kind of go back to your earlier point, veterans have led the way in breaking down those barriers. I think of the work of Vietnam vets who came home and really did some of the vital work that led to the ultimate adoption of the Americans with Disabilities Act. If you read Ron Kovik's great book "*Born on the 4th of July*", those veterans came home and found that they couldn't go any place because the environment wasn't accessible, and they fought hard to say this isn't just, it's not right, we are here, deal with us, right?

Doug Anderson:

Absolutely. When I did six months training at Great Lakes Naval Hospital prior to being transferred to the marines, a nurse told me the following story. They had gotten together a bunch of badly wounded vets and taken them to the Ice Capades in Chicago, because they had been in the ward for a while and really had to get out. Some of the guys had to be rolled in on gurneys. There were people with parts of their face missing. There were

people with limbs missing. There were people who had to be hooked up to IVs, and they took them on a bus to the Ice Capades, and immediately the security people and the manager of the event came out and said 'you can't be here, you are upsetting the audience.' This was in the early '60s, the early part of the Vietnam War. There you are, and there's two levels to this. One of it is sheer cowardice, that people can't look at suffering, and the other is politicians have a great investment in you not knowing things, you not knowing the consequences of war, because how else can they get people to sign up? How else can they get the public to love war for this or that cause? The invisibility of war vets, of course, is the invisibility of disabled people.

Steve Kuusisto:

Yeah. And I'm just reminded through that story of an ugly moment with the rock band the Beatles, who were performing somewhere in 1965-ish, still in their early celebrity, and the management of a particular theater where the Beatles were performing brought people in wheelchairs down front so that

they could be close, and John Lennon, who was not a particularly nice guy, seeing these disabled customers down front, began mimicking them.

Doug Anderson:

Uh-oh.

Steve Kuusisto:

Yeah, and you can actually see it on film. It's preserved, so it's not just cowardice, it's also a kind of adolescent contempt. People who find themselves suddenly disabled are often stunned by that dynamic that they have to cross that distance in order to reclaim a place in the public square. I like to think that because of the work of veterans and really committed disability rights activists, both at the United States and abroad, that we are turning a corner in this. It's still a rough road to hoe, and it can come up in poetry, I think, in a particularly poignant and powerful and affirming way.

Doug Anderson:

This is ugly and we are still growing our hearts as a species, and I am heartened that we continue to do this, that we have more consciousness now than we did, all kinds of disabilities, all kinds of disabilities. Nobody wants to know this, and yet it's imperative that we enlarge ourselves to accept this as a part of being human.

Steve Kuusisto:

And I think this is what veterans who write poetry and warriors can teach us, right, that this idea of still growing our hearts, which may sound sentimental, but I don't think it is. I think that Hemingway was right, that we grow strong at the broken places if we are lucky enough to get the emotional and physical supports that we need to go on with life. Let me read a poem by Sam Hamill, who was a wonderful American poet. He died recently. He was also a Vietnam veteran. He came home. He founded a really important American poetry press, Copper Canyon Press. He became a Buddhist, a serious one. This is a poem of his called "True Peace", and it references Thích Quảng Đức, a Buddhist monk who became world renowned when he

immolated himself with gasoline on a street in downtown Saigon in 1963. This poem also references a historical fact, which is to say that when they attempted to cremate the remaining -- the remains of Thích Quảng Đức, his heart did not burn, and it is preserved, actually, in a memorial in Vietnam. They consider it a sacred relic. "True Peace."

Half broken on that smoky night,
hunched over sake in a serviceman's dive,
somewhere in Okinawa,
nearly fifty years ago,

I read of the Saigon Buddhist monks
who stopped the traffic on a downtown
thoroughfare,
so their master, Thích Quảng Đức, could take up
the lotus posture there in the middle of the street.
And they baptized him there with gas
and kerosene, and he struck a match
and burst into flame.

That was June, nineteen-sixty-three,

and I was twenty, a U.S. Marine.

The master did not move, did not squirm,
he did not scream
in pain as his body was consumed.

Neither child nor yet a man,
I wondered to my Okinawan friend,
what can it possibly mean
to make such a sacrifice, to give one's life
with horror, but with dignity and conviction.
How can any man endure such pain
and never cry and never blink?

My friend said simply, “Thích Quảng Đức
had achieved true peace.”

And I knew that night for me true peace
for me would never come.
Not for me, Nirvana. This suffering world
is mine, mine to suffer in its grief.

Half a century later,
I think of Bô Tát Thich Quang Đức,
revered as a bodhisattva now—his lifetime
building temples, teaching peace,
and of his death and the statement that it made.

Like Shelley's, his heart refused to burn,
even when they burned his ashes once again
in the crematorium—his generous heart
turned magically to stone.

What is true peace, I cannot know.
A hundred wars have come and gone
as I've grown old. I bear their burdens in my bones.
Mine's the heart that burns
today, mine the thirst, the hunger in the soul.

Old master, old teacher,
what is it that I've learned?

Doug Anderson:

I miss Sam so much.

Steve Kuusisto:

Yeah, me too.

Doug Anderson:

The Vietnamese aristocracy, our allies, were very cynical about the immolations of the Buddhists. They referred to them as barbecues. There's a demonstration of the closing of the heart that happens either out of cowardice or intent when confronting this.

Steve Kuusisto:

I think one of the great dangers for human beings is abstraction. I have thought about this for years, right, that we are symbol making creatures, a concomitant and powerful dynamic of language, but it's not metaphors that kill us. It's not analogies. It's the ability to abstract things and make of them something other than what they are, right?

Doug Anderson:

I always wondered, a critical theory really took over English departments, and which amounts to abstracting the emotional content of

literature, of distancing from it, and one day I had this thought that what if you -- what if you drove a truck over an academic's foot. Would he call it a signifier? I went to graduate school. I learned all of this stuff. It was interesting, but it's limited. It's limited. It's applying a -- it's trying to hammer a nail with a banana. It's the wrong technique, and abstraction, it's like ironically Stalin said, "The death of a million men is a statistic. The death of one man is a tragedy," because perceived as an individual, perceived as individual suffering, it's possible to grasp suffering, but perceived as a statistic or an abstraction, then it -- that's the art of euphemism. That's the art of new speak and double speak, to take things as complex and heart growing as human experience and to turn it into abstractions. But they have never smelled the blood. They have never seen somebody's life pumping out through an artery, and you can't do anything about it. They have never smelled burning flesh. I absolutely agree with you that abstraction is one of the worst possible things that we can do to reality.

Steve Kuusisto:

Well, that's right, and of course, as you know, because we are friends, I travel everywhere with a seeing eye dog, and people see me on the streets, and they see that dog, and they see me, and they think, 'oh, here's a man who must be homeless, or here's a man, you know, or here's a man who must -- he needs pity.' I have had people walk up to me and want to pray for me. Right? And this is one of the things that abstraction does, is that you see someone, and you symbolize them immediately according to some kind of outworn, old-fashioned and unreflected symbolism, and then you're not seeing the real person at all, and so this is one way that bullies and tyrants can separate people from people, right? We'll claim that they are the alien other, and they are not worthy of us, or it's a way to drive a wedge between citizens whether you're black or white or yellow or what have you. And then there's the dynamic of the able-bodied versus the disabled, and those old out worn ideas that the disabled need to be hidden. If they are here on the street, they need our pity. The idea that I might have a job and actually live in the world and pay taxes and be just like everyone else is foreign if you're abstracting the sight of someone who is different, right?

Doug Anderson:

Yes.

Steve Kuusisto:

And it seems to me that one of the things that veterans do in their poetry that is so powerful is that they come back and they see the world with very clear eyes. It may not be a preferred condition, but it is a condition, and so I found this poem, for instance, by someone I don't know, but I love this poem, Jenny Linn Loveland, who I believe served in the Air Force in the Middle East. She's younger than us. This is called "Driving."

whenever I see a yard
not fenced in, freshly trimmed, I notice the fire-red
hydrant, talons out stretched all directions
flashing flags
whenever I hear sprinklers
tick and pulse, the stop-start whir of scythes
bicycling against tall grass mowed
that thrum

I taste lush green shadows the hoses
left, breathe the newly sliced grass, filaments
rising, the dandelion manes shorn, and the summer's flotsam
malingering behind the wheel

I succumb

to scalding air-soaked deserts, molten
carpets of tar and dark odors where F-16's
metal blades blasting night, shift orange
flicking Bedouin shadows,

all mirage

whenever I see a yard unfenced,
I clench, keep to the wheel and drive
through worry, past
the tread marks, past
grit and sweat, past
the neighbors sipping beer.

Doug Anderson:

That is wonderful. I am very happy to be introduced to this poet.

Steve Kuusisto:

Isn't that great?

Doug Anderson:

Truly wonderful.

Steve Kuusisto:

That is an evocation, it seems to me, of PTSD and of the tremendous, vital, profound state of fight or flee and memory and trauma that can happen so quickly.

Doug Anderson:

Wonderful. What's the name of her book? Does she have a book?

Steve Kuusisto:

I don't know. I found this while poking around on the interweb, as my son would say, and I'm going to learn more so that we can get this up on our website with permission and recommend her work.

Doug Anderson:

Excellent, excellent.

Steve Kuusisto:

But I think when I talk about people wanting to pray for me, a disabled person that, that's part of the dynamic of being physically different, that whether it is an invisible disability or a visible one, you are different, and you are going about your ordinary business, when within seconds everything has been transformed. I could be walking down the street, thinking very sunny thoughts when, I don't know, suddenly I'm accosted by someone who sees me as an avatar of pity and wants to pray for me or wants to give me money. I have had people offer to do that. Or, I don't know, I'm going into some business, a restaurant or something, and somebody who doesn't know the law will walk up and say 'you can't come in here because of the dog', and I have to explain that, 'no, the dog can go anywhere,' and this turns into a five-minute debate while I'm standing in the doorway of the shop, and you think back ten minutes ago, I was feeling great. So there's kind of a daily hit-or-miss dynamic where at any moment you can be transformed, and I would think that this is something that really happens with PTSD.

Doug Anderson:

PTSD is something everybody can have, and maybe this is why they are so afraid of it. They put you over there on the other side of the line, in Other Land, if you claim to have it or if you seem to have it or if you're medicated or if you're on a pension or whatever, but they don't understand how easy it would be for them to just step over that same line. It could happen in an instant, in an instant. So they are denying their imagination. They are denying their human empathy when they do this. And it's cowardice. It's cowardice. They don't want to deal with it. I lived in New York for eight years, and I learned how people edit reality, just how many people you can step over in the street and not notice or go on about your day. The mind is always editing, editing, editing, looking for what is desirable and avoiding what is averse. It's one of the major things in Buddhist practice, is to notice that faculty of the mind, that device that thinks into what is desirable and what is averse, and it's so limiting. It's so limiting. It's like cutting yourself in half. You see only half the world.

Steve Kuusisto:

It's interesting to me, it's not just seeing only half the world, but if that kind of normalizing dynamic takes hold, we encourage people to only live in a small part of the world, and that again is one of the important and powerful dynamics of poetry as written by veterans that they are resisting by the very act of telling their stories. They are resisting being shoehorned into a small world. That is not easy to do. And it is not work that you can put down. You don't say, 'well, I have achieved my place in the world now. Now I'm here,' because the physical difference and the dynamics of being physically different -- again, invisible disability or visible -- it never goes away. Disability never disappears. The guide dog school from which I have received my four guide dogs has an interesting exercise. Young guide dog trainers who hope to become fully fledged senior guide dog trainers are encouraged, I suppose, to live wearing a blindfold for a month, never taking it off. And they live at the school. They live in a dormitory along with the blind people who are training with their guide dogs, and they learn how to walk into doors and have a blue egg on their forehead. They learn how to crawl along the floor, looking for the

dropped aspirin. They learn to fumble for the light switch and the electrical outlet and all of the foibles that are really daily realities of living without sight. And if you live with it for a month, you actually learn a lot. I have often thought, well, I don't like those half a day events where people do this, but I might go for a national disability month where all of the able-bodied people have to live for a month and do everything that they do. That would seem to me useful and I know that there are headphones and audio tracks you can wear that reproduce the experiences of profound paranoia and there are baffling kinds of devices you can wear to eliminate your sense to feeling, and they like the narrative where you get over it right away, so that permanence of disability is -- that's a difficult thing.

Doug Anderson:

I mean, you're writing about such wonderful things as people, sighted people with blindfolds crawling around, looking for an aspirin. I mean, that's such a wonderful image. I know you have written about this a lot, but that just struck me as something that you could put in a poem quite easily.

Steve Kuusisto:

Yeah, well, and of course it's the ridiculousness of living daily with some kind of alternate condition, right, that you drop the aspirin, and suddenly what seemed like a promising morning is suddenly rendered ridiculous, right?

Doug Anderson:

Yep.

Steve Kuusisto:

I once got a big laugh when I had to give a talk at an agency that serves the blind in San Antonio, Texas. I was in a room full of, oh, about 200 blind people, and I said, 'you know, there's really nothing funny about being blind,' and they are all going, 'yeah, yeah, you're right.' And I said, 'but there are funny things that happen because you're blind.' And I said, 'for instance, this morning, my dog took my Prozac pill, and I took her heartworm pill.' Yeah, it's not the disability that's funny, but it's the circumstances that can, in fact, be funny. On the other hand, living with traumatic brain injury or PTSD, and these are conditions that veterans really struggle with and these are not funny

circumstances, and I think that the art of poetry and autobiography and memoir writing and the kinds of workshops that people have been doing, as I say, this neurologist and poet Fredrick Foote has been promoting, it seems to me that one of the big values of art therapy, if we want to use that term, it restores to us a sense that we have some control over this. Does that make sense?

Doug Anderson:

Yeah, it makes a lot of sense. It makes a lot of sense. I have got to read this guy, the hijacking phrase is very good. When I wrote my memoir, I tried to find survivors of my platoon, and there weren't a lot, because after I left the battalion I was in, they moved up north and were on a really nasty operation called Badger Tooth, and my whole company took horrible amounts of casualties, and my platoon was almost wiped out. There was a guy in the platoon who, in our lack of imagination, we called Chief, because he was Native American, and you called all Native Americans chief. You know the game. He had been shot in the head and left for dead.

Steve Kuusisto:

Oh, my god.

Doug Anderson:

But he survived, and he went home, and he stayed in the Marine Corps for a while, and he got married. He had a family. And then he finally got out, and he -- when I talked to him on the phone, he says "I can remember everything up until the moment I was shot. But if you call me tomorrow, I won't remember having had this conversation."

Steve Kuusisto:

That's a profound disability.

Doug Anderson:

Yeah. So with his loving family and his own ingenuity, he is able to forecast his days by writing down and organizing what he is going to have to do, and then reading it back. But just the incredible amount of thinking and strategizing to live a life after this, extraordinary guy. His real name is Gene Reid.

Steve Kuusisto:

Yeah. I think that when you're dealing with traumatic brain injury, you have to learn how to construct your minutes, and that that is something that our society, our schooling, our teaching, our social services, we are in the infancy of learning about that kind of trauma.

Doug Anderson:

Yeah.

Steve Kuusisto:

Yeah. Let me read a poem by Bruce Weigl. This is called "Her Life Runs Like a Red Silk Flag." Again, for our listeners, he also served in Vietnam, and in this poem he has gone back as an older man. He's gone back to Hanoi in 1990.

Because this evening Miss Hoang Yen
sat down with me in the small
tiled room of her family house
I am unable to sleep.

We shared a glass of cold and sweet water.
On a blue plate her mother brought us
cake and smiled her betel-black teeth at me
but I did not feel strange in the house
my country had tried to bomb into dust.
In English thick and dazed as blood
she told me how she watched our planes
cross her childhood's sky,
all the children of Hanoi
carried in darkness to mountain hamlets, Nixon's
Christmas bombing. She let me hold her hand,
her shy unmoving fingers, and told me
how afraid she was those days and how this fear
had dug inside her like a worm and lives
inside her still, won't die or go away.
And because she's stronger, she comforted me,
said I'm not to blame,
the million sorrows alive in her gaze.
With the dead we share no common rooms.
With the frightened we can't think straight;
no words can bring the burning city back.
Outside on Hung Dao Street

I tried to say good-bye and held her hand
too long so she looked back through traffic
towards her house and with her eyes
she told me I should leave.

All night I ached for her and for myself
and nothing I could think or pray
would make it stop. Some birds sang morning
home across the lake. In small reed boats
the lotus gatherers sailed out
among their resuming white blossoms.

And that brings us back to what you were alluding to before, the moral injury.

Doug Anderson:

Yeah. It's a serious problem, and it's woven into PTSD.

Steve Kuusisto:

Yeah.

Doug Anderson:

And to somebody who doesn't have it, it's mysterious. They don't know
it's a thing. They don't know how it puts a dark lens on your life. They don't

know it, you know? I went back in 2000, and Bruce was also along on that trip, and the veterans at the William Joiner Center for the Study of War and its Social Consequences know -- and one of the real gifts of the last few years is to be able to share stories of people who used to be my enemy. I know some of the people he does ---- these are all people that have become poets and fiction writers since the war, and we all have our narratives to share with each other. It's really deeply moving and I can read a very short poem.

Steve Kuusisto:

Please.

Doug Anderson:

That expresses that. It's dedicated to Bảo Ninh, the novelist who wrote "*The Sorrow of War*." We had been to visit him in Vietnam, and he's also visited the Joiner Center in Boston, and this is about a night we spent together in a bar, several of us and he. "Letting Go."

I asked him how he could not hate us.

We killed his children and left

his country a sump of chemicals
and upturned graves, ten years
in the jungle hammered by 2000-pound bombs,
his job to gather his comrades body parts
into something like a hole to bury them.
He said we had the Chinese
for a thousand years, and
then the French, the Japanese.
You are merely the most recent.
He lit a cigarette and looked
out into the smoky bar.
Finally, and I believed him,
he said we have nothing left to hate you with.

Steve Kuusisto:

Wow.

Doug Anderson:

Yeah. And it's amazing that I watched the Ken Burns series, which I am ambivalent about, but one of the really wonderful things in it was to watch people watch the Vietnamese actually have compassion for the American

troops they were killing, which is astonishing to me that anybody could feel this. But I think it was Huting, he was talking about the Americans at Contien. They had them surrounded and trapped. They were shelling them with artillery from across the DMZ. They were pinned down, and they couldn't evacuate their wounded, and there was such sympathy in his voice, and then he went on to talk about the savagery of war, that it's a state of mind that you enter into. Mutilation is the savagery of war, and that is something that we can share with them despite the fact that they suffered much more horribly than we did. I mean, for one of us killed, a hundred of them were killed. We can share that. It's the war inside the war that only combatants know. And suddenly, the politics were gone.

Steve Kuusisto:

Yeah, the politics are gone, and then I'm going back to your memoir, "*Keep Your Head Down*." There's a passage that sort of stunned me, and it's a small thing I suppose, but in chapter 24, you say -- I'm just going to read it, if it's all right.

Doug Anderson:

Sure.

Steve Kuusisto:

“He was a short round faced man with white hair and full lips who reminded me a little of pictures I’d seen of a Vietnamese general. He had directed national liberation front operations in Saigon during the 15-year war without being detected by the Americans or the South Vietnamese. Now he was a grandfather, with a grand piano in the front room of his ground floor apartment on a quiet side street. When we arrived, he sent his grandson to tell the neighbor children to be quiet so he could toast us properly.” That little detail, just sending his grandson out to tell the neighbor children to be quiet so he could toast you, that’s such a poignant and deeply respectful detail.

Doug Anderson:

Yes.

Steve Kuusisto:

Yeah.

Doug Anderson:

It's like people who have suffered so much that they just don't have room for pettiness and antipathy. They know they can look right into you and know. And I found that extraordinary about them. We went to a Chinese restaurant in Hanoi with Hu Ting, and I hadn't met him before, and he took my hand, and he said we soldiers understand each other. It's a bonding that goes so deep and it reminds me a little bit of the famous Christmas truce in World War I, where the truce, who were sick of the war and had been sick of it for years -- it was a horrible war. On Christmas, they came out and they exchanged gifts. The British and the German troops crossed into no man's land, exchanged gifts, ate, celebrated Christmas, played a game of soccer, and then went back to their trenches and then were killing each other the next day. There's a level of reality here that people don't get and there's tremendous healing power in that, because even enemies understand that nobody outside of this, nobody back in the world, as we used to say, nobody who sleeps on clean sheets and knows about the war only from the

newspaper is ever going to get this. And it's such an incredibly healing thing to know this, that trip back in 2000 was one of the most healing things that ever happened to me.

Steve Kuusisto:

What made you decide to go?

Doug Anderson:

I wanted to go really badly, and I hadn't been. A lot of the veterans who make up the staff of the Joiner Center had been back several times, had done amazing things there. They had made it possible for a number of Vietnamese writers and poets to be translated into English. They had built the wing of a hospital, and in terms of my Vietnam -- dealing with Vietnam and bringing it into consciousness, I was kind of like Rip Van Winkle. I had started later than a lot of these guys, and I was angry and rejecting of the war when I came back that I just -- I just tried to hide from it, which was a big mistake, and that led into a number of years of alcoholism and substance abuse. But with the Joiner Center, I found it possible to bring this into the open, bring this into

consciousness, and to do something with it, you know, to acquire knowledge, to acquire healing, and most of all to be able to share it. Deeply, deeply important to me.

Steve Kuusisto:

The idea of being encouraged to remain silent, that's also something that the poetry and writing by veterans takes on, doesn't it?

Doug Anderson:

Yes. And I turned against the war when I came back immediately. As a matter of fact, I was already against the war when I was there. I knew that I would turn against it politically when I got back, and it was in the moratoriums, and there were not a lot of vets where I was at the time, and I didn't have the solidarity with them, so I kept quiet about it pretty much. I think it was a good year before I even told anybody that I had been to Vietnam, but there was such an emphasis on Vietnam veterans as war criminals in those days. The massacre that came out in March of '69, and I

didn't want to be identified as a Vietnam veteran. I didn't want it anywhere in my life and I was going to take any drug and drink as much as possible to make sure it wasn't in my life. And I think this is part of the moral intrigue issue for a lot of vets, is they got defined as baby killers, even if they weren't. Very few people actually killed any babies in that war, and if they did, it was probably by an accident, but you take an incident like My Lai, and suddenly everybody sees every veteran that way. Even when I began teaching college there were faculty members who came down on me because I'd written about the experience, so this is how you got moral injury. You get people to shut up. You let them know that what you have to say is immediately corrupt by virtue of being who you are, that there is nothing that you can say that they would be interested in hearing.

Steve Kuusisto:

And again, this points back to how veterans are once more leading the way, just as your generation of veterans helped profoundly, I think, to push for what became the Americans with Disabilities Act, and broke down

barriers of all kinds. Veterans today coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan have been pushing tremendously for greater understanding of the complicated traumatic injuries that affect us neurologically, right, the sense of PTSD but also traumatic brain injury, tremendous activism going on now among younger veterans that is helping to change the dynamics of how we think as a culture about these things.

Doug Anderson:

I went through a PTSD treatment program a few years ago, and there were veterans from four different wars in there. There were veterans from who had just come in from Afghanistan, and there were people my age who had been in Vietnam. There was even a Korean War vet in there, and so I got to talk to a lot of the younger guys, and some of the imagery is different. The weapons were a little different. The tactics are a little different, but the experience is exactly the same.

Steve Kuusisto:

Yeah.

Doug Anderson:

Yeah. I had a roommate who was a veteran of the Afghanistan war, and he wouldn't drive because he associated driving with being blown up. He had been blown up by an IED, and he was still dealing with TBI. So when they let us off the ward to go into town I would drive these Afghanistan vets who couldn't be in a car because being in a car panicked them so much. I listened to their stories. I got to know them, and, wow, there is this huge, huge spectrum of knowledge to be had from these vets. Some of them, like Brian Turner, have gone on to write about it, and this young woman you just read, Jen.

Steve Kuusisto:

Yes.

Doug Anderson:

Yeah, but, you know, there's a body of knowledge they have that's worth communicating.

Steve Kuusisto:

And I want to point to this, right. What sends people into the military and allows them to serve is a deep and keen sense of nobility. And I don't want to underscore that or underestimate that since we are talking about the difficulties that veterans, particularly veterans with disabling conditions face. You go into pandemonium, and you discover that it's not black and white and that morality falls apart pretty quickly and that you're in the middle of a real firefight, and you may or may not get out alive, but the person who went off to do that believed that they were fighting honorably. What I'm trying to get at here, I have been thinking about this, when you come home and you realize that you have posttraumatic stress disorder, because we don't think with much sophistication in our culture about disabling conditions, it can make it probably harder to come to grips with something like PTSD, because it seems ignoble to have it.

Doug Anderson:

There's a wonderful paragraph right at the beginning of the Thucydides' Peloponnesian Wars, where he says something to the effect, 'it's been 30 years since there was a war, so therefore it's easier to get people to go to war.' I'm paraphrasing, but it's in the opening section of the Peloponnesian Wars. Time goes by, people forget, politicians with their feral sense of how to motivate people get the flag going again.

Barry Whaley:

Hi. This is Barry Whaley. We're out of time for this episode. I hate to cut you off. This is a fantastic conversation. Maybe we can take this up in our next episode. So, thank you all for joining us for today's part one in our webinar series, *Veterans, Disability, and the Power of Literature*. The archive will be available, and an email will be sent when the archive is available for you. Also, keep in mind that education credit is available after completion and verification of attendance to all three webinars and completion of a post-test after each webinar too, and then you may request a verification of completion form, with further instructions on how to complete that form as well. Thank

you again for your participation in the *Veterans, Disability and the Power of Literature* webinar series.

Please complete the evaluation. Your feedback is important to help determine the effectiveness of this webinar in meeting your needs and to guide planning for future webinars. The link for the evaluation will also be sent to you as well.

Our next webinar, part two in this series, will be on Wednesday, September the 12th, from 2:00-3:00 p.m. Eastern time. Part two will focus on how veterans with disabilities use literature to build community. The third part of the webinar series will broadcast on Wednesday September 26th, from 2:00-3:30 p.m. Eastern time, and it will be a conversation with the poets on veterans and disability.

Thank you again for joining us. If you have any questions, please contact the Southeast ADA Center at 404-541-9001 or email adasoutheast@law.syr.edu, or visit our website at www.adasoutheast.org.

Thank you again for joining us. This concludes the broadcast of today's webinar.