

Feast or Famine

by tyler boudreau

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Introduction

In Iraq, as an officer working in the operations section of an infantry battalion, the bulk of my deployment in 2004 was spent in a space called the Command Operations Center (COC). This was a space through which all information flowed and missions were orchestrated, a space from which units and patrols were dispatched, directed, overseen, reinforced, resupplied, and so forth, and when combat ensued, the COC was the place where commanders would often position themselves to assess tactical situations, make decisions, and issue orders. In short, the COC lay at the heart of all our operations. The people who filled this space around the clock on a daily basis (i.e. operations and intelligence personnel, radio operators, medics, guards, clerks, etc.), would always find themselves in one of two dramatically different states of being—acute boredom, when our Area of Operations (AO) was quiet, or heart-racing fervor, when the AO was teeming with violence.

There was a phrase thrown around the COC to describe this perpetual swinging between extremes of high and low activity, a phrase spoken frequently and in a tone falling somewhere between jocular and peevish: “Feast or Famine.” These were the words used over and over by troops and officers alike. *Feast or Famine*. At the time, I didn’t give a great deal of thought to the expression or our casual use of it. I accepted it as I believe it was intended—a way of articulating an evident pattern of oscillation between long stretches of waiting with nothing much to do, decide, or think about, and sudden frenzies of urgent events, calls for support, intense exchanges, frantic reports, frustration, panic, and so on, always thrown upon us all at once. But looking back on those days now, on the actions we took and the attitudes we carried, I’ll have to admit, I’ve come to question the innocence of this phrase, *feast or famine*. Can I be sure which of these extremes was the *feast* and which was the *famine*?

After all, feasts are generally associated with positive social events with an abundance of food and drink and mirth. A feast suggests a gathering of happy healthy people. On the other hand, famines are rarely thought of as anything but terrible episodes of scarcity and death. So why then did we flip the connotations of these words in Iraq? Why did we so consistently set the range of violence along this particular continuum? Why did we characterize the fighting days as bountiful and, conversely, peaceful days as dearth? The phrase, *feast or famine*, may have been spoken with intentional irony or maybe it was just a poorly applied metaphor that needn’t be overly scrutinized; and yet, I believe it would be rash to dismiss this paradox as irrelevant because, regardless of one’s intention, the words *feast* and *famine* had to settle themselves in the consciousness aligned either with combat or quietude. So which was which? It may be impossible to declare each individual’s own interpretation; however, given the frequency of the utterance combined with the military’s assiduous cultivation of enthusiasm for battle, I suspect, for all of us in the COC, that the “feast” could quite reasonably be assumed to be the fight. Now while this minor incongruity cannot, in itself, be the key to recovery from some form of moral disturbance, it may offer a glimpse into the obstacles one will face along the way.

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I understand a moral disturbance as the result of a harmful act perpetrated by an individual at the behest of a larger societal institution. The institutional origin of an operation and the orders it comprises tends to give individual acts of violence a sense of legitimacy while simultaneously creating a degree of moral and legal ambiguity. It's seems clear enough from historical example that official orders, by themselves, cannot exculpate those who commit clear crimes against humanity; however, in occupation operations there are far more examples of acts committed that are harmful in some way and morally problematic but not technically illegal. This makes the occupation environment extremely difficult to navigate morally. One of the profound difficulties of a felt moral disturbance lies in the fact that the disturbance itself must be expressed and mediated through shared language and shared moral frameworks and so any strategy of recovery will necessarily bear an epistemological component.¹ This difficulty is profound precisely because there is no understanding of either language or morality that is shared universally.

What, for instance, do the words “recovery” or “healing” mean to different people from different social, cultural, political, or economic backgrounds? What do these words actually look like, or sound like, or even feel like “on the ground” in real life? How might we describe the goal of these therapeutic processes in more tangible terms? How many different ways might a person imagine the ideals of morality and, therefore, the ideals of moral repair? Whatever strategies are employed, I believe it's imperative to confront the epistemological assumptions that lie beneath such strategies, in order to reconcile one's sense of the problem with the methods one applies.

This chapter bears two important characteristics that I'd like to announce from the outset. The first is that both my understanding of moral disturbances and the processes of recovery are derived through a social constructionist epistemology.² The second is that my exploration into these issues does not come by way of clinical experience with others; rather, this is a description of my own journey, understandings, and approaches to recovery accumulated over the years since coming home from Iraq. It was only when I went to address my own moral angst that I began to notice the absence of any established framework that I could readily apply. This forced me to contend with some uncomfortable questions. For example, why do I experience moral consternation now, *after* the fact, *after* the acts have been committed, *after* the damage has been done and the blood has been spilled? Why do I now regard these same deeds as harmful where I once thought them honorable? Why do I now question the very combat scenarios I trained for as though I had no way of anticipating their flaws prior to my deployment?

Clearly the interpretive framework that put me into this moral distress in the first place could not be reapplied to deliver me back out. I needed a new way of understanding. This was, in fact, the actuating notion that pushed me toward the ideas presented in this chapter, which will proceed along two parallel arcs: First, a general discussion of the epistemological and discursive aspects of

¹ For the purposes of this essay, I'll use the term “epistemology” as shorthand to reference the means by which knowledge is produced and sense-making occurs in society.

² Social constructionism is, in essence, an epistemological orientation that describes knowledge production as an accumulation of social interactions, discourses, and narratives that have been reproduced and sedimented in the popular consciousness over time.

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recovery, and second, a personal narrative, a description of sorts, of how I've compiled and stitched together a bricolage of strategies that have helped me to hold (not purge) this moral disturbance with care (not contempt) and take on the necessary life-long work that transforms theoretical strategies into daily life practices directed toward moral repair. The tension here is between *self care* and *social responsibility*, a tension that is, in my view, the most crucial piece in any recovery project intended to address a moral disturbance. Genuine moral repair cannot be imagined and certainly not accomplished without an urgent commitment to *both*.

The Pursuit of Meaning

After I resigned my commission and left the military in 2005, I began scouring my memories of Iraq obsessively, doggedly, for years, as though I needed to account for every tactical decision ever made, every order issued, every political speech and policy shift, every roadside bomb, every shot fired, every body felled, every detail from the beginning to the end of the occupation, as though a static compilation of facts and figures could ever aid in my recovery, or that this fanatical pursuit of “meaning” could ever lead to salvation. I'd cloaked myself in contemplation very similarly to how we'd layered ourselves with steel in Iraq, from the fences on the Forward Operating Bases to the armor on our trucks and backs, we were entirely masked from our environment, and our environment, in turn, was masked from us. Now it's certainly likely I'll be inventorying my memories of Iraq for the rest of my days but I've come to suspect that memories lose their meaning or meaning loses its value when deprived the backdrop of new experiences. So in order to *meaningfully* remember, one must push that contemplating body into motion, especially into unfamiliar social contexts, so as to give one's memories and contemplations the opportunity to produce continuously new applications rather than allowing them to fester uselessly in an isolated mind, serving only to perpetuate one's anguish or nostalgia.

On the other hand, the pursuit of new understandings of an event, and new vantage points, and new information can be unsettling because even a single event in one's life experience cannot be too rigorously redefined or distorted without altering the dimensions of one's entire social universe including one's own identity. The instant one's perspective is altered, the order of everything and one's moral standing is suddenly thrown into disarray and the distress is only compounded when one is unexpectedly accosted by a creeping sense of *culpability*. It was far easier to avoid critique when my world felt stable and comprehensible and more congruous with my beliefs. And it was certainly more appealing to be thought of as a protector, or a warrior, or a hero, or at very least a man in the service of his country. The problem, however, was that world I'd been regarding from that single vantage point bore neither dimension nor humanity. And the beliefs I'd been holding as a young man were not really beliefs at all, not substantial ones at any rate—more so ideological adornments for my presentation of self. Suddenly, in the act of undoing my world, I perceived in the mirror the face of a *perpetrator* rather than a protector, a man who'd been feasting on violence and calling it sacrifice. Here lies the difficulty in applying new meanings to an event in the aftermath. However I choose to define a given event and the words employed to understand it, I

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must apply those same definitions to my identity; otherwise, I force myself into unproductive and unhealthy cognitive dissonance. The question, “What is the meaning of this event?” cannot be separated from “Who am I?” as a participant of the event. These are not two questions, after all, but one, and so my search for meaning and a process of recovery required an epistemological inquiry into the very ways I’d narrated my experiences *and* my self.

One problem with such an inquiry, often unanticipated, is that questions that are strictly theoretical, answered or not, don’t alter the material or social conditions of one’s existence. The array of new definitions and understandings that I’d compiled over the years after Iraq and figured for “truth” had no way of manifesting themselves in my daily life. Consequently, these understandings of my time in the military amounted to nothing more meaningful than a highly detailed mythology whose only application could ever only be the production of more mythology. I refer to these historical moments as “mythology” even though they occurred in real life because they’d become untethered from all present and ongoing social interactions and so rendered any critique of the experience essentially valueless in terms of producing tangible change for the world and, in turn, for myself.

If, however, knowledge is understood as co-constructed through interacting bodies that are situated in particular places and times with specific world views and experiences, then logically the *pursuit* of knowledge must be understood as situated, as well, requiring collective retrieval and sense-making. What is significant about this point is that there is reciprocal constitution occurring between the individuals constructing narratives and the narratives themselves. In other words, as historians of our own identities, we cannot produce any sort of personal or historical account of our lives without, in the process, altering the very identities we are seeking more stable understandings of. So the analysis of my self in Iraq was tainted from the start without my even noticing since the interpretive frameworks I’d been implementing were also narratively produced and internalized at some earlier period in my life and had never, themselves, been interrogated. I wasn’t noticing the moral migration of *me* in the process of creating a new story of my time in Iraq because I took for granted the stability of identity in a changing environment. This was a problem that would eventually come home to roost.

I want to emphasize the mediation that must take place between people, groups, organizations, communities, and society as a whole. For people to convey their internal experiences of external events to other people in understandable terms, their stories must be conveyed across the foundations of that which has already been shared. There must already be in place shared narratives, shared interpretive frameworks and values, shared language, and other shared mediating acts; otherwise, the story will make no sense to the audience and the teller will become unrecognizable as a member of that society, consequently placing one’s identity in jeopardy. This recognizability and acceptance of one’s narrative as *legitimate* is crucial, both to one’s social existence in general and to the recovery process in particular. Moral repair cannot even begin if one isn’t seen, if one’s story is not believed and legitimized, and if one is utterly cut off from society. Whatever recovery strategy one chooses, it will inevitably involve some dramatic changes in

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perception. A static epistemological orientation will prove a formidable opponent to such change. However, if one allows *knowledge* and *narrative* and *identity* to be understood as inseparable, mutually constitutive, embodied, and so always evolving, then the possibilities for innovating world views and daily life practices become much more accessible.

For me, experiencing this moral disturbance from Iraq created two apparently contradictory needs: a need to be understood and believed and recognized by others, pulling me in one direction, and pulling me in the other direction, a need to change, to grow, and to become a different person far more circumspect about such morally contentious events in the future. The years I spent analyzing in solitude were eventually fruitful, but the fruit didn't bear until *after* I'd extended my process beyond this paper-thin critique based on an incoherent interpretive framework and unsupported by any action whatsoever in my daily life since my daily life had been reduced to little more than obsessive analysis. I began to feel the centripetal force of a mind moving in circles, covering the same ground over and over, with time ticking by, stripping that very ground of any sound, or smell, or taste or anything else tangibly felt in my body. Iraq was slipping away from a freshly lived experience, to flickering memories, to the flotsam of ideas and arguments about Iraq adrift in my consciousness, growing more scattered and hazy by the day, and more detached from my contemporaneous reality.

The Becoming of Truth

A new question was needed to disrupt this cycle of inquiry and break myself out from the captivity of endless contemplation. The question I fell upon was this: *What am I to do?* This turns out to be another version of the same questions I'd been posing from the start; however, the vital distinction is that this question demanded a response that would supplement my static thoughts with *action* thereby transforming *being* into *becoming* and therefore enabling change. For me, the most immediate obstacle to this question—What am I to do?—turned out to be my own identity. I'd certainly become more concerned about social justice over time, and yet, in isolation these analytical exercises were not so very different than the training exercises I'd done for so many years in the military. Both were essentially exercises of the imagination in that they were always conducted in a vacuum of hypotheticals. Neither my critiques nor my training had any real world consequences for me or anyone else. In training the interactions were always staged (and so imaginary), and after Iraq, inside my house, inside my head, endlessly analyzing, there were very few interactions to speak of at all. But it is within the perpetual unfolding of consequences and interactions all over the world where we find true meaning, the kind of meaning that moves and morphs in daily life and produces new social landscapes and moral dynamics, not the meanings found in data and texts that hold their poses indefinitely, irrespective of context.

My entire belief system was essentially fantasy. And so again the question arose: *What am I to do?* What could I do? And with whom? I'd turned away from my community in the military and those who supported my role as a soldier. My sense of what was important, or humorous, or sad, or beautiful, or ethical had changed so radically, and my deconstruction of self had been so extreme,

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I'd unwittingly torn myself down to the point of being virtually unrecognizable to the people who once made up my social universe, and that included me. I struggled to recognize and understand the person peering back at me in the mirror. The loss of my community meant the loss of an audience for my narrative. And since I was inherently a member of my own lost audience, I'd lost myself, as well. It was at this juncture that I realized the most difficult task in this process of recovery was not going to be the deconstruction of self; rather, it would be the *re*-construction of self in some recognizable way. Power structures and one's connection to them are relatively easy to dismantle intellectually. But what mantle, I ask, might I wrap myself in now so as to be seen and accepted in a new social sphere or community that, at that point, was not yet known to me?

It is identity itself and one's sense of agency that's most disrupted by the moral disturbances under discussion in this volume. One's moral framework is so integral to one's identity, a collapse of one necessarily implies a collapse of the other. That is why I view a moral disturbance as a loss of self and why moral repair is, for me, a remaking rather than merely a rethinking. But this task in life is not as simple as it appears in print. And so I ask again: What am I to do? The question rears its head incessantly as we are all in perpetual states of *becoming*. It's crucial to remember, however, that not all people are *becoming* under the same material and social conditions, and so reforming one's world view is not enough to ameliorate the moral distress. One's identity includes a body that cannot be changed, a body that may or may not have access to resources and support. Recovery itself will often be impeded by the politicized physical categories one inhabits. What is significant about this point, for me, is that in the process of dismantling and reformulating my narrative and ethical viewpoints, I realized that my own moral disturbance could not be exclusively a product of my participation in the occupation of Iraq; it had to also include my participation in the systems of oppression at home as well.

I would say, further, that the latter is exactly what primed me for the former. Quietly present in one's "truth" and in the personal narration of one's history lies the interpretive frameworks that shape that story and surreptitiously install a range of narrative constraints that prevent the story from straying outside particular ideological lines. Meanwhile, personal narratives are still thought of and described as truths, sometimes even sacred truths. But how can I be certain this "truth" is my own? How do I know this "truth" doesn't belong to an institution or a system or a society in which I've been participating and conditioned? The occupation of Iraq could only make sense to me if I'd already come to understand myself, others, and the world in a very specific and inflexible way. The value of knowledge as *doing* is, in part, the rejection of static ideals and identity paragons, making room for more diverse (always imperfect and incomplete) understandings of self. It was the *rigidity* in my narrative identity that enabled a willful naïveté that led me into a morally dubious situation. What was needed most to contend with that moral disturbance and to become a more socially aware and productive person was narrative *agility*.

Narrative Agility and Social Responsibility

While it's clearly impossible to narrate every detail and facet of a lived experience, there is a persistent and popular notion that personal narratives do generally capture and relay the most salient or pivotal aspects of an experience and so are accepted as essentially factual summaries of past events. This is a problematic notion in that it creates resistance to change, a resistance that's activated by the very same ideological constraints responsible for shaping the narrative from the beginning. Underlying that resistance is the epistemological and narrative rigidity that brought on the moral disturbance and it is that same rigidity that prevents moral growth. Narrative agility does not imply a steering around a moral disturbance—that's the function of rigidity—rather, narrative agility enables an *envelopment* of the disturbance into one's identity so that it may serve as a platform from which new perspectives and new ways of being can be developed. Given the vastness and complexity of any experience and the limited time one has to describe it, a narrative must, by necessity, conceal far more than it could ever reveal. This is the natural relationship between time and narrative, not a condition to be overcome, but an opportunity to dig deep into one's consciousness, to mine one's memories in search of alternative details that can and will alter the narrative itself, its meanings, its moral implications, and the possibilities for change that all of these afford.

The expression *feast or famine* as it was employed so consistently in the COC relied on the rigid narratives of both the occupation of Iraq and the identities of its participants. There was no opportunity for any customized interpretations of those words or any option to question the expression itself. In that context, in that culture, circumscribed within those ponderous ideological walls, the "feast" could only be imagined as the fight. To tamper with that metaphor, insignificant though it may appear in text, would be to risk irreparable damage to a soldier's understanding of self and his or her role in the occupation. Under such violent circumstances, this is a forceful constraint on a personal narrative. Any claim to be a "warrior" within a culture of warriors will certainly prove less convincing when accompanied by the further claim that days of fighting and violence should only be thought of as moral famine. I imagine such a sentiment would not land well in the military community, effectively leaving that community two choices: accept the claim, which would force them to question their own morality, or, reject both the claim and the claimant altogether, leaving their own narrative identities untrammelled and intact.

Removing myself from the military environment did indeed increase my opportunities for narrative reform. But again, in the process of deconstructing my narrative I'd found my identity still deeply entrenched in a vast regime of oppressive social systems at home that not only correlate with wars and occupations but create the necessity for them. This makes it virtually impossible to isolate and swear off any one aspect of society's constitution, its collective narratives, or its structures of power, without creating multiple ruptures in one's consciousness and identity. If, for example, I choose to understand America's presence in Iraq as a morally bankrupt operation, then I must also accept the social dynamics that precipitated that operation as morally bankrupt as well. The same social dynamics that produced the conflict with Iraq also produced my willingness to take part in it.

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The problem is that I cannot resign my way out of society as I'd resigned from the military. So any recovery strategy I might adopt now will have to directly and concretely address not only my actions and attitudes in Iraq, but also my actions and attitudes at home. In short, the work of moral repair is foremost about social responsibility.

From my perspective, what remains most important in the discourse of recovery, where it comes to a moral disturbance, is the *pursuit* of responsibility—not a passive acceptance of responsibility for one's past actions, but a committed, impassioned, active responsibility for one's past *and* future roles in society. Morality is an inherent component of social coexistence. A moral disturbance is not an *inner* conflict; it is a conflict produced within the vast array of mutually constitutive relationships between individuals, social structures, and the various discourses and power dynamics sedimented within. One cannot progress from a moral disturbance without understanding the social conditions that contributed to its occurrence in the first place and the meanings that people have applied to those conditions thereafter.

For me, this emphasis on social responsibility prompts some reluctance about the word “injury” in a conversation about moral transgressions. There is no question that many of the morally troubling acts committed by soldiers were encouraged or directly ordered by higher authorities, and so in that sense, I acknowledge and agree that these acts call for collective responsibility, not strictly individual responsibility. I would, however, caution against a disproportionate focus on the “injury” over responsibility within any process of recovery to avoid the potential fetishization of a veteran's moral distress or a faulty conflation of it with experiences of “survivors guilt,” which produces a very different form of anxiety and doesn't demand the same kind of simultaneous engagement with harm felt and harm done. My hunch is that the overwhelming rates of veteran suicides after Iraq and Afghanistan prompted a discourse that heavily (and appropriately) prioritized self-forgiveness. While it is absolutely necessary to direct care inwards in order to progress emotionally and function in daily life, there is significant risk that the term “moral *injury*” will begin to sound and function very much like the public discourse on post-traumatic stress—a discourse of sympathy for veterans, but seldom if ever a sympathy for the people of Iraq or Afghanistan who were harmed by those veterans.

There's no question that communal support and sympathy is necessary for recovery from a moral disturbance or a traumatic experience. But this is a discussion about moral *transgressions*, first and foremost, and neither the perpetrators nor the public can or should expect to see any genuine recovery take place without putting those harmed at the *center* of the conversation, not at the periphery. If a moral transgression has been committed, then one's moral compass must be realigned with one's new path through an attitude of responsibility. Feelings of contrition are not enough to truly reconcile oneself with one's deeds. Contrition and apologies do not mark the end of this conversation, but the beginning, and together function as the foundation for continual reparative actions. The most important idea to hold inviolate in one's mind is that whatever harm was perpetrated, the pain and loss and grief caused by these perpetrations will remain felt by those harmed *forever*, no matter how long they live or how well they've managed to cope over time; therefore, the perpetrator's commitment to moral reform must also go on *forever*.

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Conclusion

Grappling with a moral disturbance isn't primarily about personal atonement, or coming to terms with one's own wrongdoings, or finding peace within oneself. These are all desirable outcomes, certainly, and may even inspire and initiate a process of recovery, but in my view these cannot represent the *objective* of that process. If one's involvement in a publicly sanctioned but morally problematic social system has produced a moral disturbance, I believe that disturbance represents a far more searing commentary on society than it does on the individual. Ultimately, the true objective of one's grappling and processing must be to alter the moral conditions of the society that created such vast amounts of moral disturbance across its own citizenry.

Over the years, throughout my own process, I've noticed a great deal of emphasis placed on the idea of "communal healing," with which I agree absolutely, but I've also noticed the stress on that word *communal* is generally directed toward community members in terms of the support they can offer individual veterans, but seldom toward the veterans themselves in terms of the support they can offer in return. The moral burden of society must be carried by *all* its citizens, for *all* its activities and operations, and I don't feel it's unsympathetic to suggest that the participants of military occupations need to be included in that number. One cannot claim a moral disturbance without conceding the harmful acts that have been committed, and further, accepting one's share in the work of genuine community healing.

In Iraq, we spoke of feasts and famines. One feast meant a man's decapitation, the next feast, an incineration, in another feast bodies were burned and blown to bits, and all of the feasts to follow were similarly tragic—limbs lost, organs ruptured, children orphaned, families displaced, and on, and on, and on. These were the "feasts" of Iraq. And what did we call those times when we were sitting in the COC, staring numbly at the walls, waiting for our next feast? We called them famines. We called them famines because that was the culture we came from, and that culture was created at home in America, *not* in Iraq. If we're going to have a conversation about the moral disturbances felt by veterans, if we're going to dig into the transgressions committed against the people of Iraq and Afghanistan, and finally, if we're going to explore various approaches to recovery for veterans, then we'll need to begin by understanding both the transgressions *and* the recovery processes as equally *communal*. If we truly believe and are committed to the moral repair of veterans, then we must also commit ourselves to the moral repair of society and maintain that work indefinitely until no feast, foreign or domestic, is ever again imagined as a bounty of desolation.