



From Repair to Return

Trauma, Moral Injury, and a Forgotten Lineage

Much of how we talk about trauma today is shaped by a modern inheritance that treats suffering as a problem to be fixed. This approach has brought real benefits. It has named injuries that were once invisible and offered tools that help people survive. But for many veterans, especially those carrying moral injury, something essential remains unaddressed.

Modern trauma discourse often operates within a repair model. Trauma is understood as a malfunction in a system. Symptoms are isolated, regulated, and managed. The goal is stabilization and a return to functioning. This is necessary work, but it is not the whole story.

Moral injury rarely presents as a broken mechanism. It presents as a rupture in meaning, identity, and belonging. It is not only about what happened to the nervous system, but about what happened to one's sense of right order, responsibility, and selfhood. For this, repair alone is not enough.

To understand why, it helps to look beneath modern psychology to an older and largely forgotten lineage.

Before science separated itself from symbolism, alchemy offered a way of understanding transformation. Alchemy was never only about turning lead into gold. It was about the conditions under which change becomes real. Dissolution preceded integration. Descent came before refinement. The alchemist was not simply fixing matter, but submitting himself to a disciplined process of transformation.

This alchemical imagination shaped early modern thinkers, including Isaac Newton, who wrote extensively on alchemy. Modernity kept Newton's methods and discarded his symbolic vision. What was lost was not superstition, but an understanding that transformation requires participation and moral endurance.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe resisted this split. He refused to treat nature as an object to be mastered and insisted instead on attentive participation. For Goethe, knowledge was not neutral. To know something was to be changed by the act of knowing it. Nature, including human nature, revealed itself only through patience, restraint, and presence.

Carl Gustav Carus extended this vision into psychology. He understood the unconscious not as pathology, but as a living natural process. Suffering was not simply a defect to be eliminated. It

was often a signal that deeper integration was required.

Carl Jung later translated this lineage into modern psychological language. Drawing explicitly on alchemy, Jung described inner transformation as a process that involved breakdown, encounter with the unconscious, and reintegration. Healing, in this view, was not optimization. It was becoming whole through descent.

Placed in this lineage, trauma appears differently. Trauma, and especially moral injury, is not only something to be repaired. It is often a threshold. It demands witness, meaning, and reorientation, not just correction. Some wounds do not close. Some experiences change who we are. The task is not always to return to who we were, but to learn how to carry what we have become.

This is the distinction between repair and healing.

Repair seeks stabilization and restored function. Healing involves integration and transformation of identity. Repair asks how to fix what is broken. Healing asks who is being called to emerge through the breaking.

Both matter. But when repair becomes the only horizon, moral injury is reduced to a technical problem, and the deeper work of reckoning, responsibility, and meaning is left undone.

Powell and SEMPERGEIST stand consciously within this older lineage. They do not reject therapy, neuroscience, or evidence-based practice. They refuse, however, to reduce healing to regulation or performance. This work treats trauma as relational, symbolic, and often intergenerational. It understands healing as participatory. Those who accompany others through descent are changed by that accompaniment.

For veterans, this means there is nothing wrong with you for not being 'fixed.' Some injuries are initiatory. Some descents cannot be rushed. Healing does not always look like triumph. Sometimes it looks like endurance, discernment, and the quiet recovery of moral ground.

Alchemy understood this. Goethe trusted it. Carus gave it depth. Jung translated it for a fractured age.

Powell and SEMPERGEIST carry this inheritance forward as lived practice. They offer a space for return without triumph, grounded in fidelity to the embodied work suffering asks of us, a work that is felt, carried, and lived rather than performed.

About the Author

Dr. Dennis Stevens is a U.S. Coast Guard veteran, visual artist, and educator with a Doctor of Education from Columbia University's Teachers College. He is the founder of the Sempergeist Institute, a nonprofit dedicated to healing through art, ritual, and storytelling. His current work centers on Powell, a platform using generative AI to help people navigate grief and loss.