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## **THE TWO-MIRRORS OF MORAL INJURY: A CONCEPT FOR INTERPRETING THE EFFECTS OF MORAL INJURY**

Abstract –

The Two Mirror Model of Moral Injury (TMM) is a framework for understanding the dynamics of Moral Injury. It is composed of three elements; an internalized ideal mirror reflects the moral development of ultimate personal and professional values, an internalized perceived self that reflects the moral judgments upon combat experiences, and the moral dissonance that is the outcome of Soldiers' efforts to morally reconcile differences between the two mirrors. This dissonance radiates issues of fidelity (buy-in), responsibility (ownership), accountability (culpability), maturity (reasoning), and efficacy (empowerment).

The paper is the summary of a thesis submitted at the Eisenhower School of the National Defense University. The thesis created the TMM framework from clinical narratives, research studies, developmental theories, and historical soldier testimonies in order to interpret the moral reasoning Soldiers use to serve and with honor, and the Moral Injury they experience from combat. Moral Injury is best understood as an invisible soul wound resulting from a desire for responsible agency (moral development). In the profession of arms, responsible agency integrates personal character and professional ethos to empower those who conscientiously accept military service to serve honorably under difficult conditions and successfully return home. In combat, responsible agency doesn't guarantee acceptable actions (moral judgment). Reasoned choices and planned actions fail; character and ethos fragment; and moral injuries occur as participants live with the consequences (moral dissonance).

Moral injury is a question of conscience and implies the existence of moral health, moral service, and the possibility for moral healing. The TMM provides a working framework for understanding the mechanisms for MI and can be used to describe the continuum relationship between moral health/healing/resilience, Moral Injury, and pathologies such as PTSD. The TMM also provides an operational basis for examining moral development, education, and training, to help Soldiers integrate their professional vocation with their personal life.

**THE TWO-MIRROR MODEL: A CONCEPT FOR INTERPRETING THE  
EFFECTS OF MORAL INJURY**

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the National Defense University, the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government.

*Your soul is like a shadow. Sometimes it wanders off like a butterfly, and that is when you're sad and that's when you get sick."*

Hmong Folk Proverb<sup>1</sup>

*As a platoon leader, I feel responsible for everything my platoon does or fails to do ... I failed to keep Jesse Dietrich safe, and you know, it was just tough... I keep thinking of other ways I would have done it, but it was a very tough mission and the enemy beat us that day. It was just a really bad night."*

Captain Alejandro Villeneuve, Army Ranger<sup>2</sup>

### ***Purpose-Defining The Heart And Soul Of Moral Injury***

This paper is the summary of a longer thesis written to develop a conceptual model for military leaders, educators, and health professionals to interpret the injurious effects of Moral Injury (MI) and to guide their efforts in helping soldiers to serve and live with honor. The Two-Mirror Model (TMM) provides a concept to deconstruct the injurious processes that create Moral Injury, to reconstruct new meaning that enables soldiers to reconnect with the values and people that ultimately matter. Foundationally, the model depends upon understanding the moral reasoning processes where moral development, moral judgment and moral reconciliation interact within the military. This paper will intentionally use the word Soldier to include all members of the military and to distinguish professional expectations from the combat function of warrior. Lieutenant Colonel Peter Fromm summarizes this distinction, "The Army (military) is full of great Soldiers, not literal warriors, and their mission is to protect, not to destroy."<sup>3</sup>

### ***Defining Moral Injury (MI)***

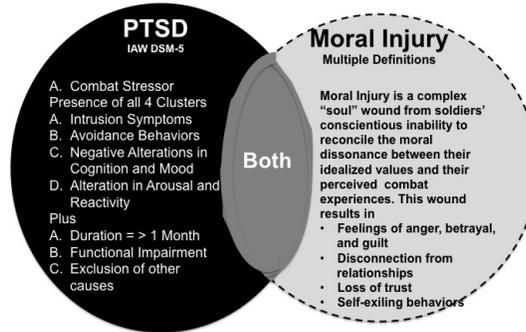
Moral Injury is the complex effects from moral reasoning processes that gnaw at the heart, and darken the soul of combat veterans. This paper combines elements from four recognized definitions into this working definition.

Moral Injury as a complex “soul” wound that results from soldiers’ conscientious inability to reconcile the moral dissonance between their idealized values and their perceived experiences. This wound produces a continuum of exiling behaviors that damage soldiers’ ability to reconnect with their lives.<sup>6</sup>

MI begins in the moral development of responsible agency. In the profession of arms, responsible agency entwines personal character and professional ethos to empower those who conscientiously accept military service to serve honorably under difficult conditions and to return home successfully. In combat, responsible agency doesn’t guarantee acceptable actions. Reasoned choices and planned actions fail; character and ethos fragment, and moral injuries occur as participants live with the consequences.

MI grows out of a moral reasoning conscience, trying to reconcile the dissonance between “idealized” standards against perceptions of “real” behaviors and events during combat. The idealized standards, perceived behaviors, and the resulting dissonance reflect the outcomes of moral development, morals judgment and moral reconciliation processes occurring within a Soldier’s conscience. The severity of the dissonance becomes the mechanism of MI that affects veterans throughout the remainder of their lives. The dissonance may be; as mild the effects of cloudy skies during a planned outing, as unnerving as a thunderstorm when caught out in the open, or as devastating as a tornado tearing through a living room. Irreconcilable dissonance from combat experiences determines the severity of the Moral Injury.

## *Moral Injury (MI) and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)*



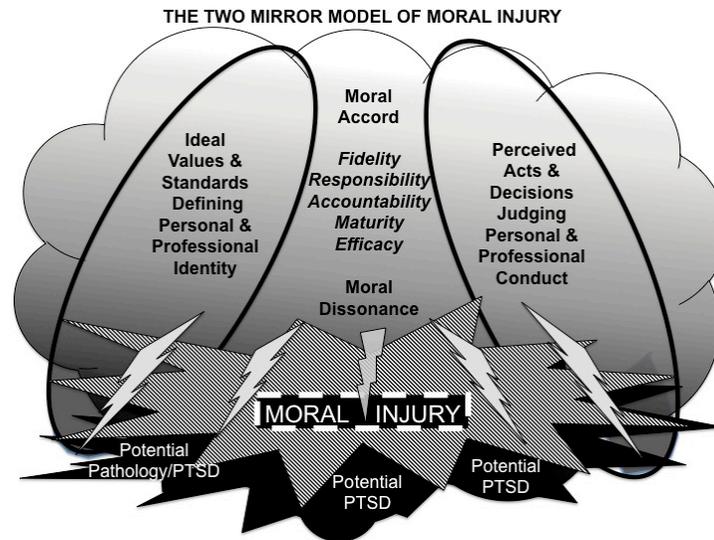
**Figure 1.1 Differences Between PTSD and Moral Injury<sup>7</sup>**

PTSD is a trauma-related injury diagnosed from Soldier reactions to combat stressors. Moral Injury is based upon Soldiers' processing what *they* experience. Because of this, MI may not manifest itself in the same cause-effect post-trauma behaviors as PTSD.<sup>8</sup> Psychiatrist Jonathan Shay found that some Soldiers' perceptions about their combat experiences led to their post-trauma symptoms, *not their direct exposure to violent traumatic events.*<sup>9</sup> Moral injuries occur less from fear and more from loss, specifically violent, traumatic loss... loss is a very important and [a] separate, potential harm for service members in war."<sup>10</sup>

### ***The Two-Mirror Model (TMM) of Moral Injury***

The TMM is composed of three interactive components describing the relationship between the values, perceptions, and dissonance that form the mechanism of injury for MI. The first two components of the TMM are based upon a two-mirror clinical model used by Dr. Keith Olson to describe the comparative process people use to reconcile their self-identity. The first mirror reflects the "ideal or desired self," that is formed from habituated values and desires that shape an expectation for life, as it "should be." People use this mirror as a standard to compare to the image they see in the second

mirror. The second mirror reflects the “perceived self” derived from the external and internal feedback people use to judge their thoughts and actions. Perception is reality, and the differences between the “ideal” and the “perceived” images form a gap characterized by a dissonance that becomes the third, and most important component of the TMM.



**Figure 1.2 The Two Mirror Model of Moral Injury**<sup>12</sup>

The gap works this way. The closer the reflected images between the “ideal” and the “perceived” coincide; the greater the accord people experience. The further apart these two mirror images become, the greater the amount of dissonance. This dissonance can be a change agent for personal growth; or this dissonance can be a disruptive storm for self-destruction.<sup>13</sup> When this model is applied to the profession of arms, the two mirrors reflect images of a idealized and perceived character that are the outcome of a moral development process that is inherent within the profession of arms, and a moral judgment process that is at work within the military. The differences between the two images create a gap of moral dissonance that individuals try to reconcile. This reconciliation process becomes the mechanism of moral injury.

Moral dissonance is a highly nuanced, contextual conflict that results from soldiers attempting to reconcile the specific elements of moral dilemmas.<sup>14</sup> It is necessary to holistically conceptualize and examine these elements in terms of the complex processes they embody and the complex effects they engender. The TMM is designed to explain how Soldiers continual “replaying” their attempts to reconcile conflicting ideals with perceptions generates a continuum of moral dissonance that disrupts their lives. This disruption affects both their identity and their behavior. Author David Wood states that Moral Injury is, “a new concept to describe what many (veterans) feel: a sense that their fundamental understanding of right and wrong has been violated and the grief, numbness or guilt that often ensues.”<sup>15</sup> Moral Injury is not new, and the following sections will describe the moral reasoning processes within the profession of arms that inherently contribute to the formation MI.

### ***The Ideal Mirror – The Moral Development of Professional Soldiers***

The ideal mirror reflects an aggregate image of desired values formed from the content and structure of moral development processes. The United States Military is a moral construction, because it is value-centric in determining the standards and practices governing its ethos. These standards and practices carry the moral weight of growing deep roots unifying the individual and social identities of its soldiers that define “good/right versus bad/wrong.” This is true in times of peace, but more significant in times of war when the uses of force for killing in combat become the critical practices for defining soldiers’ identity.

Civilians do not enter the military as a blank slate. They come with a “pre-wired” conscience operating with personal values. As civilians enter military service their

personal foundational senses of care, fairness, liberty, loyalty, authority, and sanctity become entwined with professional senses of fidelity, responsibility, accountability, maturity, and efficacy (FRAME).<sup>16</sup> FRAME consists of five interactive professional senses defining the moral development of all military values including trust and the five essential characteristics of professional character.<sup>17</sup> Specifically these professional senses are: fidelity (buy in), responsibility (ownership for determining behavior), accountability (culpability for results), maturity (experience and competence), and efficacy (empowerment and capability).

The ideal standards for military service are the result of moral choices practiced by Soldiers making professional ethical decisions. It is important to examine the content as well as the education processes the military uses to achieve its standards. The development of *how* Soldiers reason depends upon the education and training of *what* they do and *why* they do it. In the military, “Training is transferring skills and abilities, education is transferring knowledge, and development is creating lasting changes in one’s identity, perspectives and meaning.”<sup>18</sup>

The critical question is whether Soldiers develop the capability to morally reason along with as a professional competency. The ideal mirror unites ethical decision-making with moral reasoning thru traditional classroom and experiential range instruction using the moral developmental theory of Jonathan Haidt, the operant conditioning theories of David Grossman, and the tactical ethics theory of Dick Couch. Currently, ethical decision-making is a desired learner attribute for Professional Military Education, but moral reasoning is not.<sup>19</sup> Ethical decision making in the military depends upon legal and moral elements used by the profession and individual Soldiers.<sup>20</sup> It also depends upon

Soldiers capability to interpret conflicting ethical systems of principle, utility, situation, and virtue into operational systems governed by rules/orders, command intent, situation awareness/flexibility, and character.<sup>21</sup> Soldiers will morally reason using all their values regardless of whether the military develops their reasoning capability. A disconnect within the education and training systems can lead to an arrested moral development of Soldiers.

The intent of the profession of arms is to develop what Michael Walzer describes as the necessity for “fighting well in a just war.”<sup>22</sup> “Fighting well,” may not be good enough, because, “Veterans who suffer from MI are struggling to recover their lost sense of humanity.”<sup>23</sup> A Soldier’s troubled conscience reflects their ultimate values as well as their professional values. FRAME helps interpret an ideal standard operating under conflicting ethical systems of principles, utility, situations, and virtues. The difference between a Soldier, a functioning warrior, and a pirate (who possess the military skills without the values) depends upon their level of moral development. Civilians can be trained to function as warriors, but in the absence of disciplined standards they may act either as lethal pirates or as professional soldiers, or as a combination of all three. Ask yourself, “What ideal standard Soldiers using?”

### ***The Perceived Mirror – The Moral Judgment of Combat Experience***

What makes a warrior a warrior is taking personal responsibility, and when they fail to live up to that enormously high ideal, that's moral injury.<sup>24</sup>

The Perceived mirror reflects Soldiers’ moral judgments. Moral judgment is the professional conscience at work. These judgments are a report card reflecting Soldiers’ grades comparing their “ideal” standards of what “should” happen in relation to their

perceptions about what “did” happen. Therefore, questions of *what* soldiers think are intricately connected to questions of *why* they think it, and *how* they reason.

The simple assumption is that ideal soldier behaviors shaped by professional values leads to favorable perceptions. However, the data reveals that soldiers, warriors, and pirates operate using complex-blends of values, desires, and group authority to determine and judge their behavior. Soldiers blend their personal values with their professional values and competence. They may perceive their participation as correct/wrong, or good/evil. When a soldier is functioning as a warrior, these blended values form a continuum of possible behaviors in combat.

Couch refers to this continuum as the “Dial.” The Perceived Mirror reflects the Dial that soldiers use in combat and the moral “after-action” report card they give themselves, their unit, and their nation. These judgments happen around events soldiers associate themselves, acts they commit, and acts they failed to prevent (omission). Psychiatrist Edward Tick prefers to use the Civil War term “Soldiers’ Heart” to describe this injury, because it accurately describes the outcome from impossible situations that, “disorder of a good warrior.”<sup>25</sup>

These judgments are often a tangled-blend of virtue, principle, utility, and situation resulting from Soldiers’ ethical decision-making and moral reasoning. They may also reflect decisions by others. Soldiers are trained to be the “good guys,” and loss of this ideal can result in feelings of anger, betrayal and guilt. A majority of Soldiers don’t dishonor their profession or their country, and their anger, betrayal, guilt, and hurt reflects the gap between what they ultimately value and what they attempted to accomplish in impossible situations. The key issue is not hypocrisy, failure, the chaos of

combat or their vocational choice but how Soldiers deal with the moral dissonance between their ultimate sense of value and their perceptions. FRAME provides a method for interpreting Soldiers' moral dissonance.

### ***Moral Dissonance – Surviving the Storm***

“Modern warfare promises transformation, but it fails to deliver.”<sup>26</sup> Soldiers ask, “Did I live up to my ideal?” A negative answer is what injures them. Moral dissonance is the process soldiers uses to reconcile conflicting images. In manageable amounts, dissonance is the sign of a healthy conscience at work. However, it can also be a growing storm cloud representing an increasing burden of effects. Dissonance is complex, and highly influenced by the individual development and judgments of Soldiers, as individuals, as a unit, and as national stewards. When the distance between the ideal and the perceived is small, the effect is light and the storm cloud resembles a cloudy sky. As the distance increases, the effects grow and the storm cloud resembles a thunderstorm or a cyclone. Moral dissonance can result in a moral irritant, a moral hurt, or a moral injury.

The professional senses of FRAME (fidelity, responsibility, accountability, maturity, and efficacy) are helpful for interpreting the effects of dissonance upon Soldiers' lives, and for creating a path for moral reconciliation. Specifically they can be used to deconstruct and reconstruct Soldiers personal narratives. MI is more than normal reactions to abnormal conditions. MI is a violation of what ultimately matters, and about living with the resulting “shades of gray.” War attacks morality and the effects from combat stress are both cumulative and comprehensive. They are cumulative because they build upon one another. They are comprehensive because they permeate soldiers' existence. MI is linked with the levels of hurt caused, received, or associated with combat

In combat when the ideal standard disappears and ethical reasoning is put on hold, then only the perceived present is left to determine action. Moral Injury is a testimony to the destructive power of the perceived present in combat. This dynamic is just as much a matter of ethical leadership and training as it is about medical care

MI is a moral inversion that is immune to medication, stress reduction, and value-neutral therapies<sup>27</sup> When these conditions are diagnosed and treated as adjustment problems, veterans do not “get better,” because the center of gravity is not a chemical imbalance, but a violation of the value systems they use to navigate through life. Here, guilt, shame, anger, and betrayal become “weights” that shift the balance of life itself. The consequences of moral judgments made during war shape behavior and shatter individual and corporate belief systems to the point where Soldiers’ rage is directed both inward and outward.

Human beings are also governed by moral force. The great cost of underestimating these forces in the information age is surely too great to go long unnoticed and inadequately addressed.”<sup>28</sup>

### ***Conclusion***

What a returning Soldier needs most when leaving war is not a mental health professional but a living community to whom his experience matters... If both mental health professionals and chaplains made authentic communalization of Soldiers’ grief their goal, they would do more good than the best individual counseling. And such advice on communalization will be welcomed by commanders in wartime only if prior training and role modeling have prepared them to be receptive.<sup>29</sup>

The hope of this study is that the TMM model will alter the way the military interprets the moral effects of combat, and change the way it develops, leads, and heals soldiers within the profession of arms. Perhaps a more reasonable objective is that the

TMM will provide a way that soldiers, educators, leaders, and counselors can deconstruct combat experiences and facilitate the reconstruction of a healed identity.

Resiliency in the military can be defined as the capability to “bounce back” from external stresses, or more accurately, resiliency should be defined as the virtue to overcome trauma by integrating a wounding experience into a new a new path forward.<sup>30</sup> This path will require an intentional integration of all the professional and human dimension elements necessary for defining and practicing our sense of “ultimate values.” This includes a holistic – body, mind, and spirit approach to training and educating moral reasoning within the military.

The problem with Moral Injury is not that military standards are too high and reality of combat so low, but that human beings assumed the profession of soldier and must live in the continuum between peace and war by connecting ultimate values with practice. This is not a matter of hypocrisy; it is a matter of living simultaneously between principles, utility, situation, and virtue. For soldiers this means developing a moral conscience. The Two-Mirror Model (TMM) provides an intentional way for military leaders, educators and healers to interpret what happens to moral conscience in in combat, and provides the means for soldiers’ to conscientiously accept and deal with the complexities of service as members in the profession of arms.

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997). 100.

<sup>2</sup> Ashley Fox, "Alejandro Villanueva's Long NFL Path," *ESPN News* (April 5, 2014, .

<sup>3</sup> Peter D. Fromm “Warriors, the Army Ethos, and the Sacred Trust of Soldiers.” *Military Review* (Special Edition, Ethics Reader, 2010): 19-26. Available online at [http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview\\_20100930ER\\_art006.pdf](http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20100930ER_art006.pdf)

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<sup>6</sup> This definition combines some of the author's research conclusions with elements from Jonathan Shay, Edward Tick, Rita Nakashima-Brock, Gabriella Lettini, and Brett Litz. Their specific works and contributions will be cited later.

<sup>7</sup> Constructed from [http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/PTSD-overview/dsm5\\_criteria\\_ptsd.asp](http://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/PTSD-overview/dsm5_criteria_ptsd.asp) and the combined definitions of Jonathan Shay, Edward Tick, and Brett Litz documented throughout the original thesis.

<sup>8</sup> Brett Litz et al., "Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy," *Clinical Psychology Review* 29 (2009), 695-706. They found the presence of significant behavioral changes in soldiers that do not result in the hyper-arousal criteria needed for a PTSD diagnosis.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Brett Litz, quoted by Susan Kaplan, *The military is going beyond PTSD to help soldiers who have suffered a 'moral injury'*, <http://www.pri.org/stories/2013-12-27/military-going-beyond-ptsd-help-soldiers-who-have-suffered-moral-injury>

<sup>12</sup> The author derived the basic structure for this model from Keith Olson, *Counseling Teenagers* (Loveland: Group Books, 1984).

<sup>13</sup> Keith Olson, *Counseling Teenagers* (Loveland: Group Books, 1984). 26-32.

<sup>14</sup> Miki Kashtan, "Moral Dissonance," *Psychology Today* (July 27, 2013, , October 7, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> David Wood, "A Warrior's Moral Dilemma," *Huffington Post* (March 20, 2014, 2014), April 5, 2014. <http://projects.huffingtonpost.com/moral-injury>.

<sup>16</sup> The existence and adaptation function of foundational senses is a moral development construction borrowed from Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> The Center for the Army Profession and Ethic, *America's Army our Profession* (West Point, New York: The Center for the Army Profession and Ethic, September 2014).

<sup>18</sup> Colonel Sean Hannah, quoted in United States Joint Forces Command, *Final Report: Symposium of Ethical Decision Making and Behavior in High Performing Teams...Sustaining Future Force Success* (Washington DC: United States Joint Forces Command,[2010]). 16.

<sup>19</sup> Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Desired Leader Attributes for Joint Force 2020* (Washington D.C.: Joint Staff, 28 June 2013).

<sup>20</sup> Don M. Snider, Paul Oh and Toner, "The Army's Professional Military Ethic in an Era of Persistent Conflict" Center for the Army Profession and Ethic, 2014). 11.

<sup>21</sup> This is a condensation of an extended argument made by the author in three works, see Jeff Zust, "It's all about Ethics: The NCO Role in Unit Ethics Training," *The NCO Journal* (2004)..

<sup>22</sup> Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 1977). 20-21.

<sup>23</sup> Rita Nakashima Brock, Gabriella Lettini, *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury after War* . (New York: Random House, 2012), 54.

<sup>24</sup> Susan Kaplan, *The Military Is Going Beyond PTSD To Help Soldiers Who Have Suffered A 'Moral Injury'*, PRI's The World, December 27, 2013 <http://www.pri.org/stories/2013-12-27/military-going-beyond-ptsd-help-soldiers-who-have-suffered-moral-injury>

<sup>25</sup> Edward Tick, *War and the Soul* (Wheaton: Quest Books, 2005). 100.

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<sup>26</sup> Edward Tick, *War and the Soul* (Wheaton: Quest Books, 2005). 62.

<sup>27</sup> Tick Ibid. p 113.

<sup>28</sup> Douglas A. Pryer, "Moral Injury: What Leaders Don't Mention when they Talk of War," *Army* (September 2014, , 34-36.

<sup>29</sup> Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Scribner, 1994). 198-199.

<sup>30</sup> Eric Greitens, *Resilience: Hard-Won Wisdom for Living A Better Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015).(Kindle Location) 439.

## Biography

CH (COL) Jeff Zust is a native of Colorado, and a pastor from the Southwest Minnesota Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America with 30 years of experience. He has served as a military chaplain for 28 years in both reserve and active duty positions in the Air Force Reserve, Minnesota National Guard and the Regular Army deploying multiple times with service in Iraq, Kuwait, the Balkans, and Korea. He has completed battalion, brigade, and command level assignments.

CH Zust has a Bachelor of Arts in History from Colorado State University, Master of Divinity (Luther Northwestern Seminary), Master of Arts in Teaching (Minnesota State University), and Master of Theology in Ethics (Princeton Seminary), and is completing his Masters of Science in National Resource Strategy. He has served on the faculty at the Minnesota State Guard Academy, Park University, the United States Army Sergeants Major Academy and the National Defense University.

He is married to Chom Pun Zust. They have 5 children, four son-laws, and four grandchildren.