

LONG TIME PASSING

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Among the things that's hardest to deal with as a new minister are the stories that make up the mythos of a congregation—stories that might or might not, given the haze of time, be totally historically accurate, but which nonetheless inform the way the congregational system processes and reacts to things.

One of the stories in this Fellowship has to do with war. The Vietnam War, to be precise.

It seems that almost forty years ago, a minister served here whose opposition to our nation's engagement in that war divided the congregation pretty bitterly. As the story goes, the minister was stubbornly single-minded in communicating his feelings about the war, which made those divisions entrenched and painful.

I want to be clear that I understand that story. I understand it to be the truth—insofar as it represents the feelings and experiences of those who remained long after the minister's departure.

I want to be clear because until now, I have been reluctant to discuss—from the pulpit or elsewhere—my own feelings about the current wars our nation is engaged in.

I have been reluctant to engage as a spiritual leader with the realities and the consequences of our country's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, to tease out the moral differences between those conflicts, to ponder the long-term ramifications of the United States' actions in the region, to declare my support for one course of action or another.

And then, a few weeks ago, I saw the pictures in the newspaper. They were not grisly photos of a roadside bombing, or bleak snapshots of desolate streets in Baghdad. They were not even hopeful pictures of public artwork on concrete barrier walls or women in burkas casting votes in local elections.

They were tiny, crisp portraits—many of them official ones, some provided by families. Rows upon rows, pages upon pages of portraits, each with just a few words of identifying information beneath them.

There were a thousand pictures in all, the pictures of the last thousand United States military personnel to be killed in Iraq—deaths that brought our nation's losses over the 4000 mark.

I saw the photos, and I cried, and I knew I had to say something.

To be fair, fear of reigniting forty-year-old congregational tensions is not the only thing that has kept me mostly silent on this subject. That story is a pretty convenient excuse, truth be told.

Among the other reasons is my own internal struggle over our war in Iraq. While I marched in the streets in April of 2003, when it became clear that our President had made up his mind to go to war,

and while I remain convinced that the decision to engage in this war was a mistake of the highest magnitude, I remain torn about what the right course of action is now that we've been there for five years.

I hear the stories about good things happening—about political progress and such. I fear that the sudden withdrawal of our troops will do more harm than good.

And yet I also understand that the mere presence of United States troops in Iraq is causing problems. I am well aware that the group that calls itself “Al Qaeda in Iraq” would not exist if we were not fighting this war. And I know that the billions of dollars of debt our nation is incurring to wage war are unconscionable.

Seven hundred and twenty million dollars a day in debt, according to the American Friends Service Committee, is what it is costing us, when the direct and indirect costs are added up.

Each week, we spend enough money in Iraq to provide three meals a day for a year to six million children—roughly the number of children who die each year from malnutrition. Each year, we spend enough money fighting this war to provide health insurance to every uninsured child in our nation.

To date, our Federal government has spent over four hundred billion dollars on the direct costs of the war—costs that don't include, for example, the growing costs of health care for the veterans who return every day with physical and mental scars. (UUA, “The True Cost of War,”

<http://www.uua.org/socialjustice/issues/iraq/32677.shtml>)

And then there are the pictures. As of yesterday, four thousand and eighty of them. (Numbers from <http://icasualties.org/oif/>)

And we don't print pictures of the wounded—twenty-nine thousand, nine hundred and seventy-eight at last count, or the three soldiers still officially listed as missing in action. To do so would probably bankrupt newspapers across the nation as they paid for the miles and miles of newsprint such an endeavor would require.

But the strongest reason I have been reluctant to address the war in Iraq has to do with my father.

Now, I've been pretty steadfast in my determination to keep you all guessing as to my age. I guess I've figured that if you didn't know how old I was, most of you would just assume I was somewhere close to your age (though the grayer-haired amongst us have surely by now figured out that's not true). So you know I'm serious when I talk about something that gives you a clue.

You see, my father served in the Army in Vietnam. He was drafted out of Brooklyn College—ineligible for a student deferment because he went to school at night and worked during the day—and put in the Corps of Engineers, taught to build bridges in the jungle.

I cry every time I visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. You've probably seen pictures of it—the low, sloping granite wall, buried under a hillside, engraved with the names of fifty-eight thousand, one hundred and seventy-eight men and women who lost their lives in that war.

I cry because I know that were it not for accidents of timing, my father's name could have been on that wall next to those of his fellow soldiers and friends, and if that were the case, I wouldn't be here at all.

Had he been assigned infantry duty, or been seated in a different place as bullets were fired into his convoy, or had his draft number been called a mere month after it was, forcing him to stay in Vietnam for the beginning of the Tet offensive, we might not be able to have a discussion on this topic right now.

I cry because I know that those fifty-eight thousand, one hundred and seventy-eight people lost their lives fighting a war that so many people here opposed—a war that many called morally unconscionable, that thousands took to the streets to protest. A war that tore apart congregations as their ministers stood up in protest. A war that tore apart families as they wrestled with what the proper response should be to our nation's insistence on fighting.

And I cry because I know that those who fought that war and returned paid the price for our government's failure to heed the moral voices of the day.

My father doesn't talk about Vietnam much. He'll answer questions if I ask them, but it is clear he'd rather change the subject.

Part of that is undoubtedly because war is (simply and unoriginally) hell.

And part of that has to do with the welcome he got when he returned to civilian life after his tour of duty had ended.

Any of you who served in Vietnam or know someone who did know that the servicemembers forced to fight that war returned home to a nation deeply hostile to them, unable to look them in the eye or respect their dedication to our nation.

Our nation took out our shame over the war in Vietnam on the people who had suffered the most for our government's immoral policies.

We cannot let the same thing happen again.

So this year, as we mark Memorial Day, I bring up our current war in Iraq with serious trepidation.

It is possible you support this war. It is possible you did not support it at the beginning but think now that we must finish what we started. I respect both of those opinions, even if I find myself disagreeing with them.

But, more than that, in calling for an end to this war, I want us to also honor the brave men and women who have put their lives on the line to fight it. The men and women who answered their country's call to service, who pledged their dedication to the defense of our nation and our liberties. And, most of all this Memorial Day weekend, the men and women who gave their lives on our behalf.

UUA President William Sinkford, in a letter to Congress written some fourteen months ago, wrote this: "We have already failed our troops in so many tragic ways. The best way to support them now is to

bring them home and to ensure that they and their families are given all of the respect, compensation, and care they deserve.” (<http://www.uua.org/news/newssubmissions/37943.shtml>)

I agree with President Sinkford. It is time to bring our troops home.

I think we can do more to honor those who are serving our country. I believe we must hear their point of view, to hear the words that they are speaking about what they do. In order to do that, I would like to bring you reflections from two of my friends and colleagues in the United States Military.

One of them is from 2nd Lieutenant David Pyle, chaplain candidate in the U.S. Army and a student at Meadville-Lombard Theological School. I was honored to be present for David’s swearing in as a chaplain candidate in January of 2007.

David recently wrote this about his call to military service:

“I want to be a pacifist. I pray for the day when we have the practical possibility of ceasing from war. That call within me to pacifism was why I made the faith commitment that I personally would never carry or fire a weapon again. But we are not there, nor will we be for a long time. In essence, by my commitment to serve as a military chaplain, I have dug in for the long campaign, one that in the end I believe will create the conditions for pacifism; for an end to the need for military force. I have accepted that this work will last longer than my personal lifetime. I do this work, first in my own heart, second by ministering to and with the young men and women who we as a nation send to war, and third by serving as an ethical voice within the military, and asking my non-military fellow UU’s to serve as ethical voices from outside of the military.”

(David Pyle, Celestial Lands Blog, 4/5/08, <http://celestiallands.org/wayside/?p=62>)

The other is from the Rev. Cynthia Kane, a Lieutenant and chaplain in the United States Navy. In a 2006 article, Cynthia wrote this:

“My troops like it that I have a God who laughs. And loves. And listens. And journeys with them through the daily grind of life, in and out of the trenches. Every day I find myself counseling a young man or woman to conscientiousness—about issues at work, at home, in relationships, with the military.

“My role as their chaplain is to walk with them through life’s dark valleys. Yet after I fractured a rib in martial arts training, it was a bottle of 800-mg Motrin that comforted me—along with the knowledge that people like me are not the ones defending our great nation and its ideals through such physical force. Despite my idealism and disastrous attempt to embody protection, I am grateful for folks like Sgt. Brown—and the other Marines, soldier, sailors, airmen, and Coasties—who do and have.

“On this Memorial Day, I salute them. I salute them because they have made sacrifices to serve and feel it a duty and an honor to wear the uniform. I have ministered to those

who have struggled to find meaning in their duty, for they are our sons and our daughters—trying to do what their conscience tells them is right.

On this Memorial Day, may each of us, in our own way, honor those who serve and have served our nation by protecting and upholding the principles upon which it was founded.” (Cynthia Kane “A Pacifist’s Salute,” UU World, May 2006, <http://www.uuworld.org/spirit/articles/4734.shtml>)

I have the deepest respect for Cynthia and David and others who answer the call to serve their country.

I am grateful for the women and men who put their lives on the line to defend our nation.

I mourn those who have lost their lives in service to my country.

And in keeping with Cynthia’s request that we honor those who have served our nation by upholding its founding principles, I understand that it is my right as a citizen to oppose the war being fought in my name, to denounce the civilian government of our nation that continues to wage and fund this war.

Please note though, it is not our military I fault for this war. The brave men and women of our armed services are not now and will not be the recipients of my harsh words. They are not now nor will they be the target of my disapproval or my disrespect.

We must remember that this nation’s founders, in a wise moment, placed elected civilians in charge of the military. We do not live in a dictatorship run by a junta of soldiers. We do not live in a nation where our President wears a uniform.

We live in a nation where we, the people, are responsible for electing the commander-in-chief of our armed forces, a nation where we, the people, elect representatives to Congress who must approve the expenditures of funds for war and for peace.

It is they who must hear our calls for peace.

Our calls to bring our troops home.

It is they who should be crying when a thousand pictures are published in the newspaper, row after row, page after page, and when each of those thousand pictures represents one more life lost.

This Memorial Day, I want to make sure the people in those pictures are remembered and honored. Let us do that by working together to make our nation a better one for all.