

HATING WAR; CARING FOR THE WARRIOR  
by Rev. Kit Ketcham, Nov. 2005

On this Sunday after Veterans Day 2005, I ask that we pause for a few moments to remember in silence the many victims of the disaster of war.

Let us remember all the soldiers who died or were injured in the wars that mark the history of humankind, from millennia ago till the present time.

Let us remember all the loved ones--the mates, the children, the lovers, the parents, the brothers and sisters, the friends--who lost soldiers in the wars of humanity.

Let us remember all the scorched and obliterated earth that was damaged by weapons of war, from boiling oil to fiery napalm, atomic bombs and modern biological tools.

Let us remember all the beautiful places--homes and farms and cities and villages and meadows and mountains laid waste by the destructiveness of war.

Let us remember all the animals, both domestic and wild, who died or were injured or lost because of the ravages of bombs or defenestration efforts designed to eliminate hiding places for the enemy.

Let us remember all those who returned to their homelands after the war had ended, physically injured or emotionally maimed, forever damaged by the events they had experienced, whether as soldiers, as refugees, as journalists and politicians and commanders.

And let us remember those who waited at home for their return, some of whom welcomed the returning soldiers and some of whom, in their hurt and confusion, rejected the returning soldiers, who turned to other lovers, other ideals, who began to see the war as criminal, not necessary.

Many of us remember clearly the days of the Vietnam War, when friends, classmates, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, went away to a far off Asian country and did not come back. Either they were killed by guns and bombs and napalm--the enemy's weapons or our own --or they experienced emotional and physical loss so severe that they never recovered. Or they were simply classified MIA.

The effects of war are not just visited upon combatants, but upon all who experience it--soldiers, chaplains, chaplains' assistants, journalists, nurses, doctors, survivors of all kinds, in the warzone and at home.

My close friend and mentor, Rev. Robert Latham, who called me into ministry several years ago, went to Vietnam in the 60's as a Southern Baptist chaplain. What he saw and experienced there changed him so radically that, when he came back, with his traditional ideas of God and religion shattered, he turned to Unitarian Universalism for healing and deeper meaning, unable to find in his Southern Baptist faith a way of making sense out of the chaos of war.

In his book Achilles in Vietnam, author Jonathan Shay, a Boston psychiatrist who works with veterans who are victims of severe chronic Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, discusses the ancient Greek poet Homer's Iliad. Its hero, Achilles, is a young Greek who struggles with a character named Agamemnon to reclaim the woman he loves, wrongly taken from him during a tense negotiation over a ransom agreement. This ancient story paints a picture which chillingly foreshadows the experiences of all who are forced to go to war and those who await their return.

The Iliad graphically lays out a tale of betrayal by Achilles' commanding officer, unjust treatment of his fellow soldiers and himself, the death of his closest friend and the rage and emotional desertion Achilles experiences as a result of the inhumanity doled out by others upon himself and his comrades.

Jonathan Shay graphically lays out the same tale. Those who participated in the Vietnam conflict experienced countless betrayals by commanding officers, who often sent soldiers they didn't like into the most dangerous situations. Attacks which killed innocent civilians were explained away by commanding officers as necessary to the cause, despite the protests and misgivings of the soldiers who were ordered to participate. Does any of this sound familiar---and recent?

Friends who had protected each other and had survived countless atrocities were wounded and killed and sometimes had to be abandoned on the field, when they could not be reached.

Rage at being exposed to unnecessary risk and danger by incompetent officers, at being required to perform indefensible actions such as killing civilians, at the inhumanity of watching friends die horribly, caused many, if not most, Vietnam veterans to suffer the effects of PTSD.

Dr. Shay says, in his introduction, "My principal concern is to put before the public an understanding of the specific nature of catastrophic war experiences that not only cause lifelong disabling psychiatric symptoms, but can ruin good character."

Shay presents example after example of young men of good character and high ability, experiencing frequent betrayals of right behavior by commanders, and the subsequent onset of a berserk state, in which a soldier is in the grip of frenzy so crazed that he performs atrocities upon other human beings.

To add further confusion, often the soldier is considered heroic in this berserk state, as was Achilles when he got revenge by violently mutilating the corpse of the man who had killed his friend.

Soldiers in Vietnam, enraged and bewildered by a constant flow of contradictory and questionable orders from commanders whom they often did not trust, might experience a berserk state in response to enemy actions. Sometimes this berserk state was survival oriented; often, however, deliverance from certain death triggered the berserk state, as when a comrade died instead of oneself.

The bereavement and sorrow which permeated these events elicited explicit advice from officers to their weeping soldiers: Don't get sad, get even! Revenge became the motivator for increased savage behavior.

In the words of one soldier, "War changes you, changes you. Strips you, strips you of all your beliefs, your religion, takes your dignity away, you become an animal. I know the animals don't.....(he pauses). Y'know, it's unbelievable what humans can do to each other."

Those of us who waited at home during the Vietnam war, whether we had friends or relatives who were stationed overseas, were ambivalent about this war, which was claiming so many young lives and souls.

Some of us supported the war, wanted the US and its allies to make definitive, killing strikes against the North Vietnamese to end the war quickly and bring the soldiers home. Others of us marched in the streets, or burned draft cards, or chanted "Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?"

Most of us waited in fear, wondering what the fate of our drafted friends and relatives would be, or savoring the relief of a high draft lottery number, or missing a father or brother, trying to read between the lines of the letters sent home from Da Nang and Saigon.

And when the war was supposedly over, though not won in the normal sense of the word--for though our troops had won every battle, they had lost the war, according to the politicians--when the war was over and the men and women who had fought it had come home, another battle was only beginning.

For these particular veterans, unlike those of the two World Wars and other more clearly defined conflicts, were not welcome at home. Soldiers who had witnessed unbelievable atrocities and had survived the best they knew how were often spat upon and shunned once they returned to the US, even in American Legion and VFW posts, where they were assailed as "losers" by other veterans.

Instead of a hero's welcome, these young men--no, these young boys, 18 and 19 years old--who had gone to war primarily because their country had asked them to, who had no personal stake in southeast Asia, who, when they got there, had no options but to follow orders or to desert their comrades in a strange land, these young men received further humiliation and betrayal, often at the hands of people who had once loved them.

In addition, most of the returning soldiers had gone instead of someone else, someone like many of us--a college student with a deferral, a woman, a person with a physical defect severe enough to be ineligible, someone with a high draft lottery number. They returned to find us possessing most of the advantages and themselves possessing little, not even their own self-respect or the respect of the nation.

As we know, many Vietnam vets came back with serious drug habits, the result of self-medicating in an untenable situation. Many Vietnam vets today live on the streets or in veterans homes, attend daily Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous meetings to cope with their addictions. Some receive treatment for their post traumatic stress disorder. Most do not.

But the point of my words today is not to showcase the fate of the veterans of Vietnam or to point out the similarities between those vets and today's returning soldiers. It is not to encourage you all to say "welcome home" to the vets you know, though I hope you are able to. It is not even to suggest that you urge friends and relatives who exhibit signs of PTSD, to get help, though I hope you will do that.

No, my point today is that we are all victims of war. We are all affected by post traumatic stress disorder, whether we have ever picked up a gun or grenade and aimed it at another person, whether anyone we know is afflicted.

I am not a total pacifist. Though I hate and deplore war, I also know that I would fight any attempt to invade my country or hurt my people. I believe that there may be a justifiable occasion for war, particularly in cases of genocide, such as World War II or Bosnia.

I depart from my pacifist friends and colleagues in this regard, though I deeply respect and honor their stand and do not question their love for this nation.

But war, particularly as it is waged today when weapons and human behavior can be so brutal and so devastating, war damages us all, whether it is justifiable or not.

My pacifist friends know that war damages everyone and they fervently believe that the only way to avoid this damage is to avoid war. I can't argue with that logic. I don't want war either, but it seems evident to me that wars will happen, and that we have three goals when it comes to dealing with the threat of war: first, we must do all we can to prevent it.

Second, we must do all we can to survive it, and third, we must do all we can to heal ourselves and each other afterward.

Clearly, the prevention of war is most certain when personal and national interests are built upon a foundation of love and compassion for others. All the negotiations, all the peace treaties, all the covenants enacted by nations in conflict depend upon the true good will of people and their governments. Without this, most treaties and agreements are worthless, because it is simply impossible to override the selfish interests of nationalism.

That being so, we turn to surviving war. In conversation with Steve Herring years ago, I asked him what he thought would have made his experience less devastating, and he replied "better preparation, better training, a better understanding of the difficulties which lay ahead and a reasonable grasp of the issues and their rightness".

We send young men and now women into battle, telling them of the glories of defending their nation's interests; we romanticize military service and distract recruits from the real anguish they will face in leaving home, defending causes they don't understand or agree with, returning perhaps to shame, not to gratitude and appreciation.

We give little or no help in the face of these realities. We expect military service to "make a man out of a boy", blaming the boy when he comes back changed, not into a man but often into a mechanistic avenger.

The training and preparation given to troops in Vietnam and now perhaps Iraq bordered on abuse. Commanding officers had virtual total control over their recruits, treating them like small children in regards to their own autonomy. They were told not to run away, despite their real fear, told when, where, and what to eat, sleep, and how to take care of bodily functions, with a combination of enticement, force, and intimidation used as reinforcers.

Small wonder, then, that returning soldiers often exhibited a hostile attitude, social withdrawal, feelings of emptiness and hopelessness, constantly threatened, and estranged from loved ones. These are evidence of character distortion, and this is what we seek to change, in order for our soldiers--and ourselves--to survive war.

As for our third goal, is recovery and healing from the ravages of war even possible? Perhaps it is. But to recover, we all need to talk about what has happened. We need to invite people to tell their stories; we need to be patient and not afraid. We need to be safe places. We must not blame or judge, but rather seek to understand. We need to urge associates with PTSD to seek treatment and find relief from their torment.

And we ourselves, the survivors, the often guilty-feeling survivors, we need to acknowledge our own anger and shame and make amends for harmful words and deeds. We too have stories to tell, of our own fear and despair, of the shame and horror we feel experiencing war vicariously. We have secrets too.

Our first song today had as its theme, "ain't gonna study war no more." I'd like to alter that slightly. I believe we need to study war long enough and hard enough that we figure out how to prevent it, and, if that's not possible, how to survive it and heal one another in the aftermath.

World War II was a horrifying watershed in the 20th Century, revealing the darkest side of human nature in the events surrounding the Holocaust. But that war was at least understandable. Vietnam inflicted a bottomless, incomprehensible psychic wound upon this country, one that has scarred us for generations to come. And now a pre-emptive war in Iraq has added wounds upon wounds to that horror and tragedy.

If we believe in the theory of organizational systems, we know that, unless we take steps to heal that wound, it will return again and again to haunt us, that we will never be free, that we will repeat our mistakes until we obliterate ourselves from the earth.

Laotse, the Chinese philosopher, wrote: 'If there is to be peace in the world, there must be peace in the nations. If there is to be peace in the nations, there must be peace in the cities. If there is to be peace in the cities, there must be peace between neighbors. If there is to be peace between neighbors, there must be peace in the home. If there is to be peace in the home, there must be peace in the heart.'

Let's pause for a moment of silent reflection and prayer.

#### HYMN

Our closing hymn is #318, We Would be One.

#### BENEDICTION:

Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that we fight war on many levels: on a global scale, with other countries; on a local scale, with unjust leaders and policies that damage our democracy; and on a personal scale, with our own demons and fears. May we have the courage and the insight to separate the wars we must fight from the wars we must NOT fight. May we discover within ourselves the compassion and commitment to resolve the personal issues that so frequently can lead down paths of misery and brutality. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.