

Opening Reading: A Letter from Fredericksburg

Headquarters, 2nd Division
9th Army Corps, Army of the Potomac
Camped near Falmouth, Virginia
December 12th, 1862 - 2 o'clock A.M.

My dear Cousin Vira:

Five minutes time with you; and God only knows what those five minutes might be worth to the many-doomed thousands sleeping around me.

It is the night before a battle. The enemy, Fredericksburg, and its mighty entrenchments lie before us, the river between - at tomorrow's dawn our troops will assay to cross, and the guns of the enemy will sweep those frail bridges at every breath.

The moon is shining through the soft haze with a brightness almost prophetic. For the last half hour I have stood alone in the awful stillness of its glimmering light gazing upon the strange sad scene around me, striving to say, "Thy will Oh God be done."

The camp fires blaze with unwanted brightness, the sentry's tread is still but quick - the acres of little shelter tents are dark and still as death, no wonder for us as I gazed sorrowfully upon them. I thought I could almost hear the slow flap of the grim messenger's wings, as one by one he sought and selected his victims for the morning.

Sleep weary one, sleep and rest for tomorrow toil. Oh! Sleep and visit in dreams once more the loved ones nestling at home. They may yet live to dream of you, cold, lifeless and bloody, but this dream soldier is thy last, paint it brightly, dream it well. Oh northern mothers wives and sisters, all unconscious of the hour, would to Heaven that I could bear for you the concentrated woe which is so soon to follow, would that Christ would teach my soul a prayer that would plead to the Father for grace sufficient for you, God pity and strengthen you every one.

Mine are not the only waking hours, the light yet burns brightly in our kind hearted General's tent where he pens what may be a last farewell to his wife and children and thinks sadly of his fated men.

Already the roll of the moving artillery is sounded in my ears. The battle draws near and I must catch one hour's sleep for tomorrow's labor.

Good night dear cousin and Heaven grant you strength for your more peaceful and less terrible, but not less weary days than mine.

Yours in love,
Clara

Veterans Day – A Degree of Ambivalence?

Big Sky Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

By Bill Kronholm

November 9, 2008

I first thought of doing this sermon in late March, when Joyce and I visited the Fredericksburg battlefield and read the letter by Clara Barton, an early Universalist who nursed Union casualties. We were standing in Chatham Manor, the mansion that was the Union Army's field hospital. It is now a museum. The room next to us was the operating room, where surgeons amputated mangled limbs and, for lack of space, threw them out the window. Walt Whitman, who was a volunteer nurse at Fredericksburg, wrote about the enormous pile of arms and legs that grew outside the window next to a tree. The tree is still there.

But what struck me was the imagery in Clara Barton's letter about soldiers sleeping their last night. Dream well, she wrote, and in your dreams visit your loved ones at home for the last time. She wrote about young men as individuals, and they were about to die by the thousands.

The Union forces had to attack across perhaps 300 yards of open field, with no cover whatsoever, toward a sunken road with a stone wall that sheltered the Confederate defenders. Wave after wave, they charged, and wave after wave they were mowed down. I thought about what must have gone through the mind of a young soldier, ordered to charge, knowing those before him had been cut down, knowing that was his likely fate, but charging anyway, because that was his duty.

Nearly 18,000 soldiers were killed or wounded in the battle of Fredericksburg. **18,000.** And I felt I had to say something about them, and all the other young men and women who have worn their country's uniform.

Looking for ideas, I turned to our UU library of sermons, and to the sermons of Unitarian Universalist churches online. And I got a surprise. Veterans Day doesn't rate many sermons. The big, urban metro UU churches in particular didn't pay much attention to Veterans Day at all. And I began to wonder why.

I don't believe it's a conscious or deliberate disrespect for veterans. Many of us remember Vietnam, when young men in uniform, often through no choice of their own, bore the brunt of anger against the war. That abuse of our soldiers will forever tarnish whatever might be considered noble about the antiwar movement.

But the more I thought about it, the more I wondered if Veterans Day provokes ambivalent feelings among many Unitarian Universalists. You see, while we may voice our respect and thanks for those who serve us in the military,

and while in our conscious mind, we may sincerely mean every word, we know that we are speaking of soldiers. And stripped to the basics, there are two distinctive characteristics of soldiers: Soldiers die. And soldiers kill.

Strangely, I think UUs tend to be more comfortable and accepting of the former than the latter. We can grieve the death of soldiers with a clear conscience, and speak against the war that killed them. But to honor a soldier trained to kill may involve a bit more ambivalence. Generally speaking, we disapprove of killing. Yet that is what every soldier, to a greater or lesser degree, is specifically trained to do.

Now a certain level of discomfort might be understandable if we were a pacifist denomination like the Quakers, but we are not. I know many of you as individuals are pacifists, and I respect that. But UU as a denomination endorses the concept of just war. That is, there are some evils that cannot be confronted in any other way than by war.

The concept of just war was developed in the early Christian church; it was discussed by St. Augustine in the 4th century. To be a just war, the cause must be just – say, defense against an attack -- the authority undertaking the war must be competent, all peaceful alternatives must be exhausted, and there must be a reasonable hope of success.

Adolph Hitler is the poster child for the just war; I think we can imagine some of the possible worlds that might exist today had pacifism prevailed in 1941 and the United States had not entered World War II. It is conceivable that Europe might still be under the Third Reich.

But waging a just war, like any war, requires soldiers trained and skilled in killing other soldiers. So we stand here, opposed to killing, but honoring those who would kill in our name. Is there any wonder that there might be some degree of ambivalence deep inside us?

Now, add the complication of an unjust war. We have thousands of soldiers in Iraq, a country that never invaded us, never attacked us, never seriously posed a threat to us. Our invasion of Iraq and our continued presence there fails on all counts in the definition of just war – the cause was not just, the civilian authority in charge was not competent, peaceful alternatives were not exhausted, and the prospect for success was and remains questionable. So do we honor the soldiers that serve in Iraq and may kill there in our name?

One way out of this dilemma is to consider these soldiers as victims themselves, just as many of us now consider the infantry draftees of the Vietnam War to be victims. By that reasoning, we can cast soldiers as unwilling pawns, sacrificed to war. But that, I believe, diminishes them and dishonors their service.

Certainly, many of our soldiers in Iraq are not there by choice. But others fully support the war's stated cause. They truly believe they are fighting terrorism and defending America. And, whether they are in Iraq by choice or by order, they are volunteers in choosing to serve in the military.

Perhaps the issue of intent is a key to reconciling any ambivalence in our feelings. For soldiers do not join the military to kill other people, any more than police officers choose to wear a badge so they can shoot criminals. It is an unfortunate but sometimes necessary component of their service. The reasons our veterans have chosen to serve in the military can be far deeper and far more important – a desire to defend a system of government, and the citizens who live under it.

A UU minister in Santa Rosa, California, named Chris Bell tells this story: "As a young man I was getting picked up by someone I had never met (on my way) to a Zen retreat up in the mountains. I was deeply into Zen at the time and had not met this person before and ... I asked him "what do you do for a living?" and he replied "Well actually I work in the Pentagon." I was stunned. ... I boldly challenged him as being a hypocrite. I was young and impetuous, forgive me, and I said "what about Ahimsa? What about not harming? How can you possibly work for the military if you have that as your core ethical value?" And he said to me, "So who would you rather have running the defense department? Some crazy gun nut or a peace loving Buddhist?" Something shifted for me that day (and) it actually lifted up another Buddhist principle, that of Skillful Means: ... that you do what you can, where you are, with the reality that's presented to you."

Our veterans have chosen to face the reality that has been presented to us, and demonstrate their commitment to our country and its values by dedicating years of their lives to protecting us. They submit to civilian authority and deploy based on someone else's decision. They agree to risk their lives, and to possibly kill others, because someone must do it. They may not enjoy it. But they are willing to shoulder that burden, and that is something many of us cannot say. We honor veterans because they serve the principle that there are values and ideals that are worth preserving.

Here, it is appropriate to recognize one veteran in particular. World War II. The Battle of the Bulge. And a 20-year-old infantry lieutenant is ordered to secure an objective. To succeed, he must lead his platoon down an open hillside. Opposite this hillside, a German machine gun has a clear field of fire. The lieutenant leads the charge, deliberately drawing machine gun fire on himself, so the men behind him can pin down the location of the machine gun nest and take it out. The tactic succeeds, but at a price; the lieutenant is wounded. But for his valor that day, 2nd Lt. Joe Goldes is awarded the Purple Heart and the Silver Star, for gallantry in action. And Joe, we are honored that you are here with us today.

I said earlier that I found few UU sermons about Veterans Day among the large urban UU churches. But some of the smaller churches offered interesting views. I was particularly struck by one by Justin Miller, an active duty sailor based in Norfolk, Virginia, a volunteer lay religious leader on his warship, and a member of the Unitarian Church of Norfolk. He spoke there on Veterans Day last year, about how we as UUs can honor veterans. This is some of what he said:

If we are to truly appreciate veterans, we must reflect on why they serve; the importance of the system that they serve; and our own role as citizens.

Thus, we can honor our veterans for defending our democratic process by voting, by participating in the debate over the future of our country and our community; and by ensuring that every American is empowered to participate in our political system.

We can honor our veterans for their willingness to defend a Constitution with a Bill of Rights, by vowing to speak out in support of equal rights and civil protections for all Americans.

We can honor our veterans by working to protect people here and abroad from corporate opportunists, tyrannical governments, or genocidal leaders. We can press our society's leaders to be a force for good in the world.

We can honor our veterans by acting when we believe that tyranny may be surfacing here at home, and the Constitutional principles for which our veterans serve and die for, are being undermined while they are serving abroad.

If we wish to truly honor our veterans, then we must each -- as individuals and as a community -- commit to living our Unitarian-Universalist values daily.

All of this is a long way from a cold, dark battlefield in Virginia, where young men in blue and gray uniforms slept on the ground and dreamed their last dreams, as Clara Barton wrote nearly 150 years ago. Yes, they were trained to kill, and when the dawn broke in December of 1862, many of them did kill their own countrymen, and thousands of them were killed.

But we honor them both, those who died and those who killed. And we honor the millions who served in uniform in the wars that followed, right up to the present. We honor them not because they killed, but because of why they served. They served to protect us, and our ideals, and our values, and our form of government. And we should never forget their sacrifices and their service.

Shalom.