

Welcome Home?

*A Sermon by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon
Delivered to the UU Church of Columbia, MO
Sunday, May 29, 2016*

At the height of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, my colleague the Rev. Kathleen McTigue wrote about her congregation's tradition of each week reading aloud the names of the American soldiers killed that week.¹

She recounts in that essay sitting in her study before each service, speaking the name aloud, wondering about the person behind each name. Who they had loved and who loved them, where they had been, what they had dreamed and what they had feared. She pictured them as a baby, as a child, as a proud young adult. She pondered each name for the story that it contained and she contemplated the preciousness of each life.

She remarked, too, on contemplating the Afghan and Iraqi dead as well – the combatants and civilians alike, though she didn't know their names – pondering once more the preciousness of each life.

It is a spiritual practice. Grieving our human kin. Speaking their names. Attempting to understand some fraction of the cost of war.

Seeking to understand, seeking to feel that cost, which is always too dear, is our responsibility as citizens of this nation.

It is particularly our responsibility as we come to grips with the fact that we are currently a nation in perpetual conflict – our armed forces have been engaged in combat continually for the last 15 years, whether we call it war or something else.

In their recent article “The Price of Perpetual War,” Lt Gen David Barno and Dr. Nora Bensahel make a compelling case that we should, indeed, be calling it war. They write:

While the White House insists that U.S. troops in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria are not involved in combat operations, they still face bullets and bombs, still are maimed and killed, and still return home bearing the scars and stress of war. Their experiences differ little from their predecessors in previous “big wars.” At least Secretary of Defense Ash Carter was truthful in describing the recent death of a SEAL team member in Iraq as a “combat death.” The men and women of the armed forces are willing to fight — and die, if necessary — to defend the nation. But asking them to do so without acknowledging that they are at war is simply wrong.²

Simply wrong. But all too common.

¹ <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditation/ten-thousand-baby-names>

² <http://warontherocks.com/2016/05/the-price-of-perpetual-war/>

The nature of these conflicts - stateless, sprawling, ambiguous, diffuse, possessing no clear end goal or path to victory – make it hard to feel that we are at war in any way that we can understand.

Combine those factors with the fact that less than 1% of the population serve in our armed forces, and the reality that the support by American citizens for armed conflict has declined continually and precipitously since 2003, and one might not be surprised to learn that most Americans feel disengaged from the reality our service members face.

And when it comes to our war dead and those civilians and combatants suffering in a dozen or more different conflict zones... it seems we are no longer speaking their names.

Poignant remembrance projects by the New York Times and the Washington Post ended in 2012. The website for the Post's "Faces of the Fallen" project is broken. But the casualties are not over.

Since last year's Memorial Day, 22 more American troops have been killed in Afghanistan alone: Jason May; Peter McKenna Jr.; Matthew Roland; Forrest Sibley; Kyle Gilbert; Kcey Ruiz; Nathan Sartain; Quinn Johnson-Harris; Ryan Hammond; Jordan Pierson; Jonathan Golden; Gregory Kuhse; Phyllis Pelky; Louis Bonacasa; Chester McBride; Peter Taub; Michel Cinco; Joseph Lemm; Adrianna Vorderbruggen; Matthew McClintock; John Gerrie; and Blane Bussell.

And then there are all the names we don't know – of Afghani people, civilian and combatant alike – whose lives also mattered.

And this is only in one theater of conflict.

It is ours to remember the dead and to honor the preciousness of their lives.

And it is also ours to remember our living, and to seek understanding of the world they face abroad and the realities they encounter as they return home. This will require real engagement at both the collective-political, and personal-emotional level, rather than simple lip service, as suggested in this morning's reading from Sebastian Junger.

In his 2015 cover article for the Atlantic "The Tragedy of the American Military," James Fallows wrote of civilians' attitude to our military: "Outsiders treat it both too reverently and too cavalierly, as if regarding its members as heroes makes up for committing them to unending, unwinnable missions and denying them anything like the political mindshare we give to other major public undertakings, from medical care to public education to environmental rules."³

In his article, Fallows calls on the American people to "take the military seriously, rather than just revering it" by learning of our fellow citizens' real, human experiences and by holding our public leaders accountable to the deep and difficult questions of war and peace.

³ <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/01/the-tragedy-of-the-american-military/383516/>

In his new book *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*, war reporter Sebastian Junger argues that the way we best take our military seriously is by becoming the kind of society that is worth living for – a connected and interdependent society that cares for the stories of each of us and that engages us collectively in meaningful endeavor. This would be a society that holds a shared public meaning... for war, and for the life that connects us in times of peace.

By sharing his experience in war zones and coming back home again, he asks: What kind of welcome home do our troops receive when they return home to an isolating society from a perpetual war that most of us would prefer to ignore? What welcome do they receive from a society that shares little public meaning with their experiences?

And, most importantly: How can we build a society worth dying for, and even more, one worth living for? That is the society to which our service members deserve to return home, and the only kind of society that can finally pursue a lasting peace.

He writes: “Today’s veterans often come home to find that, although they’re willing to die for their country, they’re not sure how to live for it. It’s hard to know how to live for a country that regularly tears itself apart along every possible ethnic and demographic boundary.”⁴

He continues: “I know what coming back to America from a war zone is like because I’ve done it so many times. First there is a kind of shock at the level of comfort and affluence that we enjoy, but that is followed by the dismal realization that we live in a society that is basically at war with itself.”⁵

The argument of his book is that this reality of division, isolation and alienated individualism in our country is both unworthy of the sacrifices of military service members *and* a key problem in the struggle of those who seek to recover from the trauma of war.

Reviewer Jennifer Senior summarizes his point: “Soldiers go from a world in which they’re united, interconnected and indispensable to one in which they’re isolated, without purpose, and bombarded with images of politicians and civilians screaming at one another on TV.”⁶

This is a profoundly alienating experience. Junger points out that combat requires of our troops the kind of communal living and tribal devotion to one another that is mostly gone from an American society where our tribes have shrunk to a small handful of close family at most.

⁴ Junger, Sebastian. *Tribe: On Homecoming and Belonging*. New York: Twelve, 2016. Page 124.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/19/books/review-sebastian-jungers-tribe-examines-disbanded-brothers-returning-to-a-divided-country.html>

We live in a society, he points out, where we glorify the isolated individual pursuing their own private goals, where we share too much consumerism and too little commitment to the common good.

Many of our returning service members feel alienated because of this isolation alone. And for those who carry trauma from their experience of war, this feeling of disconnection and alienation compounds the effects of that trauma.

Junger writes: “As one anthropologist pointed out to me, trauma is usually a group experience, so trauma recovery should be a group experience as well. But in our society it’s not.” This is a problem, because: “In humans, lack of social support has been found to be twice as reliable at predicting PTSD as the severity of the trauma itself. [... And] Social resilience is an even better predictor of trauma recovery than the level of resilience of the person himself.”⁷

Of all our innovations and achievements in American culture, social resilience does not seem to be one of them. And whether they have experienced trauma or not, all of our veterans may have trouble adjusting to life conceived of as an isolated consumer in a corporate economy, after living in a war zone that requires such clarity of purpose and such commitment to tribe.

As reviewer Matthew Crawford puts it: “To risk one’s life for the common good is to declare oneself outside [our] cultural logic of acquisitive individualism; the veteran is an outsider to us by definition, and no amount of yellow ribbons can change that fact.”⁸

But what if alienation to our prevailing culture is right and appropriate? What if we were all, in the words of Martin Luther King Jr., more maladjusted to the isolation and division that defines us?

Could that be a pathway to healthier culture for soldier and civilian alike *and* to the kind of citizenship that would seriously engage difficult questions of war and agitate for a just kind of peace?

Junger’s ideas about the communal values of soldiers at war may be a bit romanticized to make his point, but his proposition that societal solidarity and lived human interconnectedness is the cure for what ails us – veteran, soldier, and civilian alike – well, that sounds an awful lot like Unitarian Universalism. That sounds a lot to me like the path toward peace.

The work of faith – to extend that sense of tribe – It is the way to honor our dead and our living, by re-centering ourselves and our society on the values they hold dear – accountability to one another, dedication to the common good, commitment to our fellow human.

⁷ Junger, page 103.

⁸ http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/29/books/review/sebastian-jungers-tribe.html?_r=0

The last words go to Sebastian Junger: “We keep wondering how to save the vets, but the real question is how to save ourselves. If we do that, the vets will be fine. If we don’t, it won’t matter anyway.”⁹

⁹ <http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2015/05/ptsd-war-home-sebastian-junger>