

Warrior and Pilgrim

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Reflections on a Life in War and Peacemaking

We are fascinated by war. War is the central, powerful theme of human history. But, for the Unitarian Universalists here on a Sunday morning looking for enrichment of their spiritual lives – what is the spiritual connection?

To answer this I would ask: Is there any more central theme of life and history than war? Sir Winston Churchill wrote: “The story of the human race is war.” The historian Sir John Hackett observed: “From the beginning of man’s recorded history physical force, or the threat of it, has been freely and incessantly applied to the resolution of social problems. . . . The requirement for it has shown no sign of disappearing.” How many people of our world are affected now by present and past wars? How many loved ones have we – the people of the world lost? Have you visited a veterans’ hospital lately and seen, sitting around in their wheel chairs the human living refuse of our wars?

We accord war a place of both glory and horror in our hearts. War generates both excitement and anxiety in us. During the buildup and conduct of the Iraq war numerous people told me they had been unable to sleep because they were having trouble dealing with the idea that their nation was launching a war they felt was unjustified. But many other Americans felt a sense of pride and elation that their nation was willing to sacrifice its blood and dollars to combat the forces of *evil*. Yes, war has a spiritual dimension, just as other aspects of life and death are a basis for our reflection and spiritual concern.

War is infused with the mythologies that drive our lives. That great observer of human cultural history, Joseph Campbell, wrote in his masterful *Myths to Live By*:

... not only has conflict between groups been normal to human experience, but there is also the cruel fact to be recognized that killing is the precondition of all living whatsoever: life lives on life, eats life, and would otherwise not exist. To some this terrible necessity is fundamentally unacceptable, and such people have, at times, brought forth mythologies of a way to perpetual peace. However, those have not been the people generally who have survived in what Darwin termed the universal struggle for existence. Rather, it has been those who have been reconciled to the nature of life on this earth. Plainly and simply: it has been the nations, tribes, and peoples bred to mythologies of war that have survived to communicate their life-supporting mythic lore to descendants.

Joseph Campbell notes that of the contending forerunners of man, *Zinjanthropus* (the vegetarian) and *Homo Habilis* (the meat-eater, killer, and maker of weapons and tools) it was the vegetarian who became extinct.

And again from Campbell:

Heraclitus declared war to be the creator of all great things; and in the words ... of Spengler, “The one who lacks courage to be a hammer comes off in the role of the anvil.” [Campbell continues:] Many a sensitive mind, reacting to this unwelcome truth, has found nature intolerable, and has cried down all those best fit to live as ‘wicked,’ ‘evil,’ or ‘monstrous,’ setting up instead, as a counter-ideal, the model of him who turns the other cheek and

whose kingdom is not of this world. And so it is that ... two radically opposed basic mythologies can be identified in the broad panorama of history: one in which this monstrous precondition of all temporal life is affirmed with a will, and the other in which it is denied.

Rather than belabor this, scan history quickly and see if you can think of any culture in which the mythology of war was not a central theme. Whether you search the cultures of the Americas, Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe, or the islands surrounding them, warriors were, and are, central to their tribe or nation. When man started building cities at the dawn of the agricultural epoch, walls soon enclosed those cities – and for good reason. How many parks, squares, and plazas around the globe are dominated by a heroic, bronze, armed man on horseback?

Our most ancient literature is infused with the glory of battle, and topping them all are the *Iliad* and the Old Testament. In the *Iliad* Homer states: “Men grow tired of sleep, love, singing, and dancing sooner than of war.” Hector says to Ajax:

War – I know it well, and the butchery of men. Well I know, shift to the left, shift to the right, my tough tanned shield. That’s what the real drill, defensive fighting means to me. I know it all, how to charge in the rush of plunging horses – I know how to stand and fight to the finish, twist and lunge in the War-god’s deadly dance.

We recall how Deuteronomy records the Lord’s giving his chosen people the lands of seven other nations, “greater and mightier than yourselves,” and commanding the Israelites to “utterly destroy them ... and show them no mercy.” And moving on to the Israelites’ assault of Jericho, Joshua’s band “utterly destroyed all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and asses, with the edge of the sword....”

Or in the New Testament we have Jesus parable – of the noble man who was made king and returned to his people: “... these enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them – bring them here and kill them in front of me.”

For balance, we must remember that even the Bhagavad Gita is part of a great war epic. The king’s instructions for successful rule include:

A king seeking prosperity should not hesitate to kill his son, brother, father, or friend, if any one or more of these should stand in his way Without cutting the very vitals of others, without performing many cruel deeds, without killing living creatures, as fishermen kill fish, one cannot win prosperity.... Every work should be done completely By killing its inhabitants, by destroying its roads, and by burning and pulling down its houses, a king should devastate his enemy’s realm.... Might is above right; right proceeds from might....

If we are looking for an expression of the mystique of war closer to our own era, remember the words of General Robert E. Lee at the battle of Fredericksburg: “It is well that war is so terrible – we would grow too fond of it.” Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote: “To ride boldly at what is in front of you, be it fence or enemy; to pray, not for comfort, but for **combat**; ... to love glory more than the temptations of wallowing at ease.”

This archetypal symbol of the warrior, this instinct for fighting only thinly veiled by the veneer of civilization, does indeed live in our collective psyche. Peace also – but less prominently in our world – has a deeply spiritual connection. Men and women have lived and died according to their deep devotion to the values of one or the other.

Throughout history the warriors and the religious leaders have been intimate partners in the pursuit of national violence. Recall the pagan Roman priest blessing the warrior legions with the fresh blood of a bull, of the tribal shaman convoking the spirits to infuse the warriors with invincibility, with the clergy urging on the medieval kings of Europe to crusade against the Jews and Muslim infidels. For their part Muslim nations, in the name of Allah, were conquering peoples from the Mediterranean littoral to South Asia. For generations the Christian sons of the landed gentry became either military officers or priests while the ranks of their battle formations were filled by drafted peasants from their estates. Or more contemporarily recall the scene of the U.S. Army chaplain shown baptizing a long line of U.S. soldiers in a water-filled hole in the desert in the hours before the invasion of Iraq.

And then there is Sunday football where we vicariously exercise our visceral passion for combat. When there's no real war to fight, people the world over glory in team sports which are born of the spirit of war, with their opposing sides locked in combat, their platoons and squads, their strategy and tactics, even to include the temple maidens contorting ecstatically on the sidelines in their near nakedness.

Peace also is deeply ingrained in religious life – although apparently less so than war. Eastern concepts of protecting all life spring from ethical and religious motives. Recall the pacifism as practiced most courageously and effectively by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Continuing that preference for nonviolent solutions even today the U.S. National Council of Churches joined with the Pope and religious groups around the world in urging the U.S. not to launch its invasion of Iraq. Our own UU Association has been a steady voice for choosing the peaceful option in international relations.

So back to my title – Warrior and Pilgrim – you see it is apt. Fortune exposed me to a series of separate realities that seem contradictory. But they blend into the psyche and conviction of a warrior-humanist. Let me explain.

In my senior year in high school, trying to choose among university options, I happened to take Margaret Heimsoth to the movies. We saw Tyrone Power in *The Long Grey Line*. That was it! That saga of duty, honor, and country, of dedication and sacrifice, appealed to that hometown boy more than making money or building things. To be a part of those men standing together and dying together with the strains of *The Corps* playing in the background – now that was spiritual!

At West Point, in addition to the intensive education in engineering and liberal arts we also studied what was called Military Art – the histories, strategic lessons, and tactics of those great campaigns and battles from Alexander's day to Napoleon and to the present. When the public packed the field to see us parading in our dress uniforms we were always conscious that we were adorned with more than the feathered plumes but with gleaming bayonets and M1 rifles. After graduation from West Point I went through the Army's daunting Ranger training and later through parachute training to be, as the later recruiting slogan said, "all I could be."

Providence went further and gave me a sequence of experiences in the succeeding years that enabled me to develop a perspective that few have been privileged to receive.

My first assignment in Germany was to join a combat unit near the Iron Curtain border at the height of the cold war. When I arrived in Germany one could still see bombed-out buildings in the cities from the devastation of World War II. I want to tell you two things about my years in Germany. First, I was based in the former German SS compound at the Dachau death camp. In my headquarters, the room where I stored the classified documents had been used – I was told by our old janitor – for storing the tons of gold teeth and gold eyeglasses that had been removed from the prisoners before they were killed. My living quarters had decorative swastikas on the drain pipes and

the chandeliers. Our stair railings had the SS symbol build in, as did the seats in the chapel. The boy from sunny Colorado immersed himself in the dark reality of the horror of Dachau. It is one thing to read about death and destruction, or now even to see it on television. It is quite another thing to be in it: to handle the cremation ovens and their equipment, to trace the blood ditches used to drain blood from the killing platforms like we drain water from a swamp, to find the doctors' charts illustrating experiments on killing people by freezing them to death, to find and gently touch the pithy final words that prisoners carved in the wooden sleeping platforms, to see the photos of skinny naked human bodies stacked twenty high. The evil power of this place led me to pursue the whole thing – how the place operated, how they transported people in from the trains in great wagons pulled by teams of prisoners, the overwhelmed cremation ovens, the problems with the gas chambers, the stories of survivors, It became my additional and voluntary duty to conduct tours of Dachau for the few people who were ever permitted to visit it at that time. This is an experience for those who are willing to face an alternate reality and try to grasp it. This is reality.

The other thing about this three-year experience in Germany – I commanded what was then the first and only battlefield nuclear weapon delivery system, the 280 millimeter gun – capable of firing a 600 pound nuclear shell over a distance of 31 kilometers. I had my own cache of real live nukes that had a variable yield up to more than double that of the Hiroshima bomb. I, and the soldiers I commanded, assembled and disassembled them, watched over them, and carried them around southern Germany to our various border firing positions keeping them ready to fire on short notice. The boy from Colorado had the power in his hands to start World War III. It was not uncommon to find myself reflecting on the power in those enriched uranium rings I carefully held in my hands while assembling the shells, to think of how man had created such innocent looking lethality, to think of the tens of thousands of people we incinerated at Hiroshima and Nagasaki by this ordinary looking hardware. I thought of the thousands of Germans and Czechs that my own personal weapons were targeted to snuff out. This, too, is reality.

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A few years later the U.S. president decided on a major commitment to assist South Vietnam in defending against a takeover by communist North Vietnam. Being a trained and capable young captain I volunteered and soon found myself in command of a U.S. artillery unit in the heat of battle. What does one learn from two years in the field, constantly facing and seeing death, making life and death decisions over and over again? I experienced it as a different and powerful reality that made the other world I knew seem superficial and shallow. The seemingly great concerns of ordinary life were trivial and silly. In combat we got down to bedrock concerns where whining or thinking about internal feelings had no place. The emphasis was on action, top performance, constant vigilance, survival. Living this utterly different reality may be what attracts and addicts some to war.

Something else I learned there – no matter how much the national leaders and policy makers want to conceal it, the non-combatant deaths are heart-rending and undermine most of the moral argument to start a war. Come along with me on the day when somber village leaders take me to their village which was hit accidentally. Come with me into the house with the roof blown off and with crying children cringing in the corners and see with me the young mother and father in their blood-soaked bed clasping each other in death in a last loving and desperate embrace. Never mind that the our country says, as recently as the war in Iraq, that as a matter of policy we won't count civilian deaths. Tell someone who has been there that they don't count. We won't count the thousands of civilian or enemy military deaths because it undermines popular support for the war.

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In 1975 fortune again found me. That year South Vietnam finally fell to the invaders from the north. You recall that hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese people took to the sea in boats of all kinds to escape from their overrun country. Those who did not perish at sea were brought to the U.S. The whole U.S. Army had only one active duty civil affairs battalion at that time and I happened to be the commander of that battalion. The mission of Civil Affairs units is to deal with

refugees or occupation situations. So I took my battalion to the refugee collection camps and found myself in charge of a chaotic situation where thousands of refugees were arriving daily that were in dire need of nutrition, medical care, and psychological attention. Family members had no idea where the rest of their families were. Most of these frightened people had no idea who we were or even what country they were in. All they knew is that they had been fleeing for their lives, many for weeks or months.

I divided my battalion among the main camps in Guam, Arkansas, and Pennsylvania. Within a few days we had some 130,000 desperate human beings on our hands to feed and clothe, to deliver their babies and tend to their wounds and diseases. Every hour of every day brought new instances of pathos – and occasionally joy as we were able to sometimes unite family members who assumed that their loved ones were dead or lost. We worked around the clock for over a year to try to bring some comfort and stability into their lives and prepare them for life in their new homeland. These were lovely people who had been doctors, teachers, administrators, or officers in their homeland and now they had nothing left of their former homes and lives.

We hear the word refugee often and don't give it much thought. Currently the world refugee population – people displaced from their homes by conflict who are living in other countries – stands at more than 12 million. Imagine if your children and grandchildren, or your parents were refugees, restricted to life in a squalid camp with little hope for a better future. The impact of war goes far beyond those who are killed, burned, maimed, and traumatized. Lives are changed and disrupted for generations. What a strange blessing for me to be able to experience this reality and to give of my time and energy and experience to help them. Their faces and voices, their cries and laughter are with me today.

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Yet another version of reality was in store for me. I was selected to spend about seven years on the staff of the Secretary of Defense where my responsibilities included arms control negotiations and U.S. foreign policy formulation. In Geneva, Switzerland I was a delegate to the U.S. negotiations with the Soviet Union and other nations to negotiate treaties on banning chemical weapons and biological weapons, prohibiting nuclear weapons tests, advancing nuclear non-proliferation, and so on. Day after day we faced our cold war adversaries across a long table in a sterile room. We became immersed in the technical details and the effects of these weapons of mass annihilation.

A slightly bizarre adjunct to the negotiating duties was having the opportunity to visit our own most secret laboratories at Lawrence Livermore, Los Alamos, and Sandia Labs, to learn about all of the new and imaginative variations on how to annihilate masses of people, destroy their cities and their industries. The largest accumulation of PhDs in the entire world was – and to a large extent still is – devoted to creating ever more powerful and destructive means for killing other human beings.

It has been said that making policy is like making sausage – you wouldn't want to see either process. To me that was sometimes true. On many issues the enemy was not the foreign counterpart sitting across the table, it was the politicians and special interests back home. When we would be near agreement in our negotiations there would be intervention from the U.S. driven by the special interests that were afraid we were on the verge of actually banning those destructive weapons. I can tell you from experience that many of the allegations you hear are true – intelligence is sometimes fabricated or changed to serve the policy goals of politicians who have the reins of power. “Damn the facts, damn the international community – we will do what we want to do to serve our interests as we see them.” There's no time now to recount the many real-life examples to you. We will save it for a later conversation.

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These poignant but conflicting realities, the mystique of war, the glory of a West Point parade, the horrors of a Nazi death camp, the body bags of Vietnam, the pathetic refugees, the perfidy of policy formulation, -- where does this take us? What can we make of it? Here's where it has brought me:

1. Yes, human conflict is endemic. Without laws backed by deadly force we can not be secure. Doing away with police would not do away with crime. Quite the opposite. And so it is among countries. Doing away with armies would not do away with war.
2. Therefore, the maintenance of a professional, disciplined, and non-political military force is essential to the preservation of a democratic nation. The military values of duty, honor, country, and – ultimately – the willingness to die in the service of one's country is, indeed, a high calling.
3. But, our people are too comfortable with the idea of waging war. The use of deadly force should be an absolute last resort – not used to settle old scores or make a point. Human lives are much too precious. War waged for political motives is wrong. Our governments have such a monopoly on the control of information that the true motives for waging war are often not known by the public until many years later when the archives are declassified. We have only learned in recent years for certain how much deceit was exercised for political motives in taking us to war in Vietnam. That political deceit makes the pathos of the Vietnam Wall with its fifty thousand names a monument to human folly.
4. I have learned that to be a good citizen is to be skeptical and not to become caught up in war fever. What, truly, are the government's motives? Domestic policy gets intense scrutiny and is subject to law and the Constitution. Punishment of our own citizens is carried out with much due process and regard for the rights of the condemned. But in international policy there are no such constraints. The nation can decide to kill, devastate, and conquer at will. Our national laws permit the U.S. president to initiate war and kill innocent civilians with no due process for the victims whatsoever. They can be and are condemned summarily at the pleasure of the U.S. Might makes right in the international sphere. The warriors and decision-makers of the losing side are tried and punished in trials convened by the victor.
5. I have learned first hand that the military professionals are more reluctant than the civilian politicians to threaten or start a war. Who was the president that warned his nation of the danger of the military-industrial complex? General Eisenhower. Who counseled against the invasion of Iraq? Former National Security Advisor General Brent Scowcroft, General Anthony Zinni (General Tommy Frank's predecessor as commander of the Middle East region) and – until they were overruled by the politicians – the U.S. military. What Senator stood against the tide and voted against the Iraq war resolution? Senator Jack Reed, West Pointer and combat infantryman in Vietnam, one of the few left in Congress who has seen war.

But war is popular in the U.S., there is no doubt about it. Especially war is popular among those who don't have to do the fighting or suffer its effects. People who question the justification for war are derided as "appeasers." "Anti-war" sentiments are often viewed as unpatriotic and those who question the rush to war are often viewed as something less than red-blooded Americans.

I trust we can be open to the beauty and the good of those who are willing to serve their country with professionalism and honor and who are ready to make the ultimate sacrifice in defense of their people. And I trust we can be skeptical and stand against those who would send the youth of their nation to wage war for less than as a last resort but as a means to political or economic gain. I believe we are right in our Unitarian Universalist Principles to affirm:

The inherent worth and dignity of every person

Justice, equity and compassion in human relations
The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all
Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.