



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Give Them Their Meaning

Rev. Hannah Petrie, Acting Senior Minister
May 24, 2015

301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@neighborhooduu.org

In a bid to procrastinate writing this sermon, I optimistically saw *Mad Max: Fury Road*, thinking surely it had some relevant cultural commentary about war and soldiers and humanity's hope for a better future. Afterward, I understood one reason why the dystopian genre has become so popular. It's so we can think to ourselves, "Yes, things are bad, but they're not THIS bad!"

The desert setting of *Mad Max* is so eerily reminiscent of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and its signature enemy weapon, the IED. See, I've also been reading *Redeployment*, by Marine Officer Phil Klay, some gritty but excellent contemporary fictional short stories about the war in Iraq. Reading it makes vivid the images of all those Russian roulette convoys, the Humvee processions outside the green zone and the horrific casualties the Improvised Explosive Devices could cause, the PTSD-imprinting memories they thrust upon the survivors.

Those memories are our memories, too, at least, I'm willing to take some shadow, some semblance of them on, when I read war literature like *Redeployment*, or some of the non-fiction accounts available by people like Yochi Dreazen and David Finkel.

Why? Why do I read this stuff? Why do I see movies like *Mad Max*? In part, it's because "war is a force that gives us meaning," as Chris Hedges wrote during this war-drenched era, and as an activist-minded UU minister, I'm caught up in that, too. I look for signs of hope that someday we may evolve beyond war, but I know it's naïve for me to think so. William James, psychologist and pacifist, wrote in his excellent essay "The Moral Equivalent of War" a century ago that nothing unites a people like war. And nothing can get people to bind together and fight as well, either. He saw no hope of growing beyond war until/unless we could find a "moral equivalent" that had the power to unite and mobilize a whole people.

Even though my hope for a war-free world is naïve, like Charlize Theron's character in *Mad Max*, I believe in the green space – that destination of a better way of life, the "moral equivalent" James wrote of, perhaps. Even if I find out it no longer exists, as she does, and I have to help rebuild it from scratch – it is worth fighting for.

Mad Max: Fury Road makes an apocalyptic nod to matriarchy – the film conveys the message that it was this wrong turn away from a more feminine, cooperative understanding of shared leadership that led to such top-down violence and destruction. It's interesting it was released the same week that the story broke about an appalling dearth of female directors in Hollywood for TV and film-making. If that doesn't change soon, our chances for a *Mad Max* future go up.

The other reason I read war literature is related to what retired Four Star General Stanley McChrystal said recently in his interview with Kai Risdal of Marketplace, when he talked about the importance of re-engaging America as a whole with our military. He said the military tends to be very insular, with the sons and daughters taking on the family business and not much interaction taking place with the civilian side. So I read the war literature to, at least in some small way, bridge that gap, to get a feel of what our soldiers' lives, and the lives of their families, are really like. Regardless of regarding the Iraq and Afghanistan wars as my generation's Vietnam, I want to know what sacrifices are made to ostensibly defend the country that I love.

General McChrystal says, this military/civilian disconnect is “dangerous for the nation, because when a nation decides to use its military it’s for fundamental reasons, it’s for the defense of the nation, and I think all of America should be involved in that.” He says, “I don’t believe that’s something you sub-contract out to someone, it’s too basic, so I think a familiarity with the military, an identification with our military [is important] - when we look at our military, it ought to be a mirror reflection of all of our nation.”

That may sound lofty, and if it does, that tells us something about just how far removed we are from the military, and around holidays like Memorial Day, it’s something for us to think about. To cut to the chase, when we sub-contract our defense out to this military sector of society, we stop paying attention to their sacrifices – to their families, their bodies, their very lives.

But this isn’t how it’s always been, back when we fought wars that were worth fighting, which we haven’t done since World War II. Back then, the contract between a country and its soldiers was a sacred one. For their part, the soldiers agree to risk everything, even their lives. In return, the country must assure them that the war is *worth* their lives. We’re not keeping up our part of the bargain.

This is tough stuff. Most UU churches, to my knowledge, don’t like to talk about what Memorial Day is really about – it’s about honoring the young dead soldiers. I suspect we avoid it because somewhere deep inside us we sense that we aren’t doing our part – a very low percentage of liberals fight our wars nowadays. But we do have connections to the military among us and I’d like to honor those now. If you have a family member who has served in the military, or if you are a veteran, will you please stand? Thank you.

So I want to ask us today, what it might really mean to take the sacrifices of our soldiers seriously, to recognize the role our soldiers play for us, but also the roles we might need to take to play our part, fulfill our responsibilities, both to the soldiers and to our country. As Unitarian Universalists, we hold democratic principles sacred. While most of us are pacifists, the fact of the matter is that war exists, and as we’ve entered an era of endless war – just where do we stand with that? Are we really entitled to the “out of sight, out of mind” attitudes a lot of us have? What is the ethically and spiritually responsible course of action to take here?

You know, after Vietnam, they got rid of the draft. And many thought that was best. But it’s turned out to be a case of, “Be careful what you wish for.” Again, it’s naïve perhaps to think that liberals would fight to have the universal draft re-instated, but it’s a conversation I’m going out on a limb here to start because it’s an example of a role we could play. In terms of General McChrystal’s concern, it’s the most surefire way of how the people can connect with the military: by incorporating the whole spectrum of them in the armed forces. I know it’s discomfiting and sounds drastic, but here’s the larger point. If this were to occur, chances are we wouldn’t be looking at endless war anymore. We would be paying a lot more attention to what acts of war Congress and the President does or does not approve.

The other reason to bring back the draft is because we need more bodies so soldiers aren’t asked to redeploy so much – along with IEDs and PTSD, and TBI, that’s another signature of this era of war – repeated redeployments.

I have a dear friend who's a Vietnam veteran, and he believes one root of the terrible violence soldiers commit against themselves and their families when they get home from war is the realization that their sacrifices were for nothing. Again, it's that breach of that sacred contract with our soldiers combined with the denial that we've lost these wars, and lost a lot. It's resulted in frightening aftershocks within our military, among them two horrific epidemics, rape and suicide.

But as Dreazen points out clearly in his book, *The Invisible Front: Love and Loss in the Era of Endless War*, it's also the deeply engrained macho culture of the military that prevents veterans from getting the help they need. So another role religious liberals could play is to be an advocate for new cultural norms within the military. We've made strides with the acceptance of gays and lesbians in the military, because we've worked hard for it in the larger society – the military is reflecting that change. I lifted up the men earlier this morning who are taking incredible stands, sacrificing their careers, to identify the macho culture as a flawed principle in the military.

General Mark Graham is a powerful man, as is General David Blackledge and Robert Gates, for coming forward and saying, actually, vulnerability is a principle of strength. It's only through acknowledging our weaknesses and reaching out for help, that we become strong, human, and whole.

One of the things Mark Graham did was make sure military suicides received the same level of funeral services and acknowledgement that deaths in combat receive. It's only recently that President Obama sends a letter offering his condolences to military families who lost a loved one to suicide. It's only recently that names of soldiers who died by suicide get their names included in memorial installations.

Slowly, mental health services are improving for veterans. Is there a role for us to play here? Religious liberals have worked to de-stigmatize mental illness in our larger society, as we have right here in this church, which in turn can eventually affect the level of stigma within the military. We still have a long way to go, but it's worth fighting for. We could find advocacy groups and other organizations dedicated to creating change within the military, dedicated to serving our wounded warriors.

These are small things we can do. But my message today is to really impress upon you that these small roles can have great meaning. They plant seeds and they create ripples. They begin conversations with your friends and family. The small roles we can play in service to our country create cultural change. You know, on a basic level, what I'm really asking you to consider is ways we can bridge the liberal and conservative divide. It's not unrelated – the polarization between military and civilian, conservative and liberal.

As General McChrystal points out, it's dangerous when our country becomes divided into a bunch of little groups and enclaves. Part of being of service to our country can be simply doing what we can to embody more shared understanding of our commonality as Americans. It's a big part of what our liberal faith asks of us – that we embody our ideals of equality and freedom, thereby progressing a sense of unity. What President Obama said over ten years ago

still stands. We are not red states, we are not blue states, we are the *United States of America*. What this means is that we have to fight for our democratic ideals, as hard as our soldiers fight in our wars.

Let's conclude by returning to MacLeish's poem now. What's it really about?

The young dead soldiers do not speak. Nevertheless, they are heard in the still houses: who has not heard them?

They say: whether our lives and our deaths were for peace and a new hope or for nothing we cannot say; it is you who must say this.

The soldiers in MacLeish's poem are saying, "Remember us" — not just in thoughts, but in actions. In actions. "We were young. We have died. Remember us." Change things. Change the priorities and values that define you and this country that is now yours, no longer ours.

Remember us. As long as you must have war, make us soldiers representative of the whole spectrum of society, including the middle and upper classes, the wealthy: all of you. As long as you continue our struggle in wars, you must join us in them. Your sons, your daughters, must join us, even if that means they must become new generations of young dead soldiers. Only then, perhaps, will the young dead soldiers really mean much to you. That, finally, is the meaning and the cost of remembering us. Can you afford it? Can you? Will you?

And if you will not, if you cannot afford to remember us so powerfully, existentially, personally, painfully, how can you remember us in ways that don't trivialize the price we have paid for the continuing foolish wars of choice? Perhaps by telling the story, reminding yourselves and your friends of the causes and human costs of our wars that seem to benefit no one who is not making a huge profit. By reminding yourselves and others of how our culture of violence can in fact be changed.

And perhaps through our many deaths and disfigurements in body and mind, you can more fully appreciate how lucky you are, and how often trivial your complaints about life really are. My god, you're alive! Unlike all the growing hordes of young dead soldiers, you're alive! So do something with it! And once in a while, remember us. We were young. We have died. Remember us. We leave you our deaths. Give them their meaning.