

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Veteran's Day Service”

May 29, 2011 Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore

Opening Poem (chosen and read by Don Odell)

Bad Dreams

When you send a lad away
To a foreign hot land
To fight in a war he doesn't understand
When he comes back
He brings more than just a tan

He's probably not ok
He's probably not all right
He's probably in a dark place
Whether it's day or night

Governments and Media
With their pack of lies
Will never tell the truth
But try to convince you otherwise

It feels like my eyes
Have been stretched wide open
Now and then
I have trouble coping

Images of memories
Imprinted on my mind
The boy they knew before
Is what they'll never find

-Alex Cockerill, 2010

Casualties For the Week of May 23, 2011

This past week the following men died in Iraq and Afghanistan. They lost their lives supporting Operation New Dawn in Iraq, and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan.

The following Army soldiers were identified:

- Sgt. 1st Class Clifford E. Beattie, 37, of Medical Lake, Wash.
- Pfc. Ramon Mora Jr., 19, of Ontario, Calif.
- Staff Sgt. Kristofferson B. Lorenzo, 33, of Chula Vista, Calif.
- Pfc. William S. Blevins, 21, of Sardinia, Ohio
- Pvt. Andrew M. Krippner, 20, Garland, Texas
- Pvt. Thomas C. Allers, 23, of Plainwell, Mich.
- Chief Warrant Officer Christopher R. Thibodeau, 28, of Chesterland, Ohio
- 1st Lt. John M. Runkle, 27, of West Salem, Ohio
- Staff Sgt. Edward D. Mills Jr., 29, of New Castle, Pa.
- Staff Sgt. Ergin V. Osman, 35, of Jacksonville, N.C.
- Sgt. Thomas A. Bohall, 25, of Bel Aire, Kan.
- Sgt. Louie A. Ramos Velazquez, 39, of Camuy, Puerto Rico
- Spc. Adam J. Patton, 21, of Port Orchard, Wash.

The following Air Force airman were identified;

- Staff Sgt. Joseph J. Hamski, 28, of Ottumwa, Iowa
- Tech. Sgt. Kristoffer M. Solesbee, 32, of Citrus Heights, Calif.

The number of Afghans and Iraqis killed was not reported, and probably were not fully known.

Reflections on Returning Home – A Personal Observation by Don Odell

On a September day in 1966, I woke up on the floor of my bedroom in my childhood home. My father had run upstairs to see if I was okay, thinking I had fallen out of bed. I had no idea why I was on the floor. My father told me that a car had backfired outside on the street, and almost immediately he heard the thump on the floor. Once I was sufficiently awake, I realized I was home, and not on a cot in base camp, or wrapped in a parachute cover on the ground in the field, which had served as my bedding for the past year of my life with the seventh artillery of the First Infantry Division in Vietnam.

Three or four days before I woke up on the floor of my bedroom I had left my unit for Division headquarters, and then a night at the air base before flying out of South Vietnam for a flight back to the States. Even on the last night in the out processing center, we were on

edge as there had been incoming mortars the previous night, and a short timer had been killed within hours of his departure. There was nothing worse than getting killed as a short timer. If you had to die in Vietnam, let it be at the beginning of the year-long tour, not the end of it. I did not want to come home in a body bag after going through all that.

I arrived home some 30 hours after leaving Vietnam. Except for family, no one seemed to know of or care about South Vietnam. In my adventures for the next few days, the response on the streets of Sidney is that people were glad to see me and wondered where I had been. "Oh! Vietnam. Yeah, that is that place we are fighting the communists, right! Oh, I thought you were in graduate school or had a job somewhere." But, then it was on with their lives. I think that might have been the first time I visited a bar in the daytime. Bartenders can be good listeners.

Upon completion of my active duty in April 1967, and reporting for work as a planner with the State planning office, and finding this church, I had realized that no one cared to hear about Vietnam, so I said nothing about it.

In this congregation I walked into the social activism I thought I would find. But, I also walked into an anti-war sentiment that not only was against the war, but had people who were against those who had gone to Vietnam. Hey, I was there. I never thought it a war we should be in, either before or during or after my time there. But, my 20+ years of being enveloped in the idea of patriotism and duty, when I was called, I served, if unhappily. There could have been other Vietnam vets around, but they did not share their experiences any more than I did mine.

I said nothing about being in Vietnam for some fifteen or more years. Not here at FUUSA, not at work, not in my social life. Fortunately, I think..., I had been "lucky" to be in field artillery, and not rotting in the jungle or rice paddies as a grunt in the infantry. I did not fall off the edge mentally. So, I buried my Vietnam experiences. My son, Matt, and I talked about it. He asked. He was a curious teenager. I often wonder how our conversations might have gone had he lived.

I began to hear more of the suffering of Vietnam vets. I began to think a bit more about the suffering of those who were in infantry, and compared that with my time in artillery. I also explored some books about war, not as history, but as the affect it has on human beings, and the role it played in our evolution. Gwynne Dyer's *War*, and Chris Hedge's *War is a Force that Gives us Meaning* come to mind. With the dinner at FUUSA for veterans and their families in the 80s I felt more comfortable about speaking about my experience. My favorite memory of that event was seeing Fred Schroeder in the uniform he actually wore when he came home from World War II.

But, we are into a new era. A state of constant warfare. There is no draft, so, who cares? There is truly no front in Iraq and Afghanistan, so if you are there, it's combat. But, there is something else. Unlike Vietnam, there are returning vets who thought that they were doing the right thing in these wars. They believed in what they were doing. They were humans who found the act of war was driving them crazy. PTSD when you thought you were right.

So, what do we do? What do I do? How can we be sure that the veterans with real issues get a genuinely sympathetic ear and the help they need. Thanks to our former minister intern, Chris Antel, we have a war healing ministry happening right here at FUUSA. It has been a good experience for me. I don't have horrible dreams about wars, or at least not often. But others do, and I wish there were more sympathetic listeners. What to do? That is the question.

Homily

Over two million men and women have served in Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and Operation Iraqi Freedom. If each one of them on average has five close family members, that is ten million people directly affected by war. Include their larger family, friends and co-workers, the social network affected by their service could expand to forty million or more. As we have been at war now longer than any other war, and many soldiers have had multiple tours of duty due to stop loss, there is a lot of stress and suffering when these men and women finally return home.

And many return home wounded. Officially, over 40 thousand have returned home injured. But the invisible wounds are far more numerous. In 2008, the Rand Corporation estimated that 300,000 veterans suffer from significant PTSD, anxiety, or major depressive symptoms; an additional 320,000 may have experienced a traumatic brain injury.

Now, I think it is important to note that many returning home served in support roles. The mechanic on an aircraft carrier isn't at the same risk as a soldier dodging sniper fire in the mountains of Afghanistan or a night patrol that may encounter IEDs. But no matter where they serve, even in front of a computer screen, they can be traumatized.

Soldiers must learn to manage facing death on a daily basis. I don't know about you, but this doesn't happen to me in Albany. I don't worry about hitting an IED as I drive in from Altamont. I don't worry about a mortar shell falling right next to me as I park my car. I don't worry that someone might jump up from the congregation with a gun and take me out.

These could and have happened – but very, very rarely. Yet, this is likely in a war zone. And when our servicemen and women return home, the adjustment isn't easy. What kept them alive in a war zone isn't appropriate in the checkout line in the grocery store.

One of the difficult adaptations returning home is figuring out what to do with anger. In a war zone, anger is your friend. It pushes down the fear and motivates action. At home, that anger response can become a barrier to processing loss and grief that come with the injury and death that is a part of war. Dr. Ed Tick calls the psychic wounds of war, “soul wounds.” As social creatures, our innate moral sense is offended by killing. Our natural inclination to bond with each other is warped by violence. The disorder of war offends our sense of fairness and justice.

Spiritually, one of the hardest parts of war to deal with is the randomness. A stray bullet, a faulty ordinance, an accident, and those terrifying IEDs, can eat away at the psyche, keeping fear hormones constantly circulating in the bloodstream, eventually eroding one's spiritual, philosophical, and psychological resources.

We live with this randomness too. A tornado can wipe out a town as it did in Joplin, Missouri. An earthquake can send a tsunami to devastate a coastline as it did in Japan. Between 30 and 40 thousand people die in traffic accidents every year. Every time we get out of bed in the morning, our lives are at risk. And they may be at risk if we stay in bed too! The difference is our ability to deny those risks prevents any physiological response. Soldiers learn to survive by not denying risk.

Hyper vigilant, steeped in the culture of war, burdened with unprocessed anger and grief, licking unseen physical and psychic wounds, they return to society. And they face a population that has almost forgotten that we are still at war over there. They face a population busy with daily lives wholly removed from their experience. Civilians don't understand what they have been through, who don't share a common language of experience. Family members want things to be the way they were - not the way they are now. The transition back to civilian life can be excruciatingly hard. Many go back to war. Others can't hold a job. Marriages fall apart. Rehab bogs down. Some give up and start living on the streets.

Chris Antal, our intern a year ago who has now become an Army chaplain, taught us that we can't forget these wounded warriors who have returned home. Whether we agree with war or not, they still fight for us as a nation. We as citizens of this nation have a responsibility for their care. We have a responsibility to assist them as they adapt back to civilian life.

In our congregation, we've provided a venue to do this with our war healing circle, started by

Chris in partnership with [Soldier's Heart](#). If vets are given a chance to tell their stories, express their feelings fully in an environment of respect and support, healing can happen. Ryu Roshida facilitates the group for our congregation in partnership with John Ostwald from Soldier's Heart. If you'd like to learn more, about the group, please speak with Ryu. Right now, the group meets in B-8 on the second and fourth Sunday nights at 7pm.

I'm working on another way we can make a difference in the lives of our most troubled vets, those who are homeless. There is a nationally recognized program started in 1988 called "[Stand Down](#)" I'd like to try here.

The first Stand Down for homeless veterans was modeled after the Stand Down concept used during the Vietnam War to provide a safe retreat for units returning from combat operations. At secure base camp areas, troops were able to take care of personal hygiene, get clean uniforms, enjoy warm meals, receive medical and dental care, mail and receive letters, and enjoy the camaraderie of friends in a safe environment. Stand Down afforded battle-weary soldiers the opportunity to renew their spirit, health and overall sense of well-being.

In 2011, we can offer respite for dozens of homeless vets from "combat" life on the streets. We can offer access to the community resources needed to address their individual problems and rebuild their lives. Services we can offer include food, clothing, medical, legal, mental health and housing assistance, job counseling and referral, and most importantly, companionship and camaraderie.

Here's what I'd like to do. I'd like to have a stand down event on Saturday, September 17th. If you're interested in helping me make this happen, please let me know.

But if you want to wait till September and you'd like to do something tomorrow, I've got an answer. You can join the [Albany Chapter of Veterans for Peace](#) and march with them in the Memorial Day Parade. The gathering point is the start of the parade at Lawrence and Central at 9:15am. Stopping current and future wars is one way to support veterans who know the evils of war first hand.

However we honor our veterans, let us do more than say, "Thank you for your service." Let us find a way to make a positive difference in the lives of returning soldiers like Don Odell.