

Just War

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This is Veterans Week and in two days it will be Veterans Day, a time set aside to honor those who have served in our military. I grew up calling this commemoration "Armistice Day" for the signing of a truce ending the First World War. Americans hoped that this was the end of the war which would end all war. Eight million had died but it was finally quiet on the western front and the bells rang out at the "eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month." The church bells rang and then as people ran into the streets many rang their own bells spreading the joyful news across the land.

It is touching to think about that. My parents and millions of other Americans believed that there could be such a thing as a war that would end all war.

Naïve. Hopeful. Wrong. We have instead not had any lasting peace. So many have gone to war. So many have had to send someone they love into harm's way.

Let me ask, how many people here this morning have loved someone who served in the armed forces? Please raise your hands.
(Thank you.)

How many have had someone in your family serve?
(Thank you.)

And how many here today, including reservist and National Guard have been in the military?

Thank you for your service. Sincerely. Thank you.

As of last week, our service personnel killed in Iraq was 4,124 and the official count of American wounded was 30,764. No doubt that does not begin to include those suffering with PTSD or indeed most of those who are

suffering mentally. I wonder if it is possible for anyone to serve in a war and come home substantially unchanged? I cannot imagine any family able to pick up where it left off. Such a terrible cost. Everyone is someone's son or daughter or brother or aunt or closest friend. Every loss a tear in the great web of life.

Since World War II, the United States has involved the military, in ways big and small, in Korea, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Guatemala, El Salvador, Lebanon, Grenada, Iraq, Panama, Colombia, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Haiti, Afghanistan again, and Iraq again. I don't believe any country in the world can match our record.

Actually, we have never had a period of time when we were not involved in war somewhere.

Humans have tried throughout history to come up with rules of engagement that preserved honor, both when to go to war and how to conduct war. We have also wrestled with the definition of pacifism. I believe that I would fail the most basic test because if my children were threatened, I would want to kill. I might be too clumsy to pull it off, but the urge would be there.

It is all a messy business with so much that cannot be resolved.

Our current military depends on recruiting young people with limited prospects, who often cannot afford other options like college. There are exceptions; there are those who are affluent enough to have wide choices, but so many do not.

In 2003, Tim Johnson, Democrat of South Dakota, was the only member of both houses who had a child who had enlisted in the military and the only senator with a child in Iraq.

Those in power are widely separated from those at peril.

I wonder if it would not be fairer to reinstate the draft? With a draft more people would pay close attention to the losses we're suffering.

You may already know the basic rules of “Just War Theory.” When is it moral to go to war? There was a lot of talk about this when we were gearing up to go to Iraq. Here are the seven essential points:

- # War must be a last resort.
 - # It must be declared by a legitimate authority.
 - # It can only be fought to redress a wrong. Self-defense against an armed attack is always considered to be a just cause.
 - # A war can only be just if it is fought with a reasonable chance of success, otherwise the predictable loss of life should be a deterrent.
 - # The ultimate goal of a just war is to re-establish peace and a better peace than preceded it.
 - # The violence used in the war must be proportional to the injury suffered.
- And:
- # The weapons used in war must discriminate between combatants and non-combatants. It is never permissible to target civilians.

Iraq dead are now estimated to be one million three hundred thousand.

It is all so entangled and impossible. Who is making the case for going to war? What are their interests? We would be very naïve not to notice that whenever we have gone to war there was something else we wanted in addition to peace or democracy: land, oil, minerals. It is just never clean. And when we are wronged, how could we protect ourselves without creating another of set of wrongs that should be avenged?

It is an endless cycle.

I myself do not believe that we can fight for peace. And, though we cannot fight for peace, it does seem that sometimes we do have to fight, at least as the world is now. Of course we immediately think of the Holocaust. At a certain point, war seems the inevitable course.

When we fight, even if it is inescapable and even if eventually there is an armistice, are there any real winners? Are arms manufacturers the only one?

I remember Eisenhower as president. His presidential campaign is the first one I personally remember. Although I most often imagine him posing while

wearing his general's uniform, I have read a number of quotes lately that I find deeply stirring, like this one:

“I hate war as only a soldier who has lived it can, only as one who has seen its brutality, its futility, its stupidity.” It's futility. And that's from the Supreme Commander of the Allied forces in Europe during World War II.

We live within all of this messiness: the longing for peace, the desire for protection, the impossibility of pure motives.

(In our denomination, by the way, we have six students currently in seminary preparing for military chaplaincy.)

Of course we should admire those young people who believe that a strong national defense reduces the threat of war and put their own lives on the line and wear a uniform. When the time comes, may we enthusiastically and affectionately welcome them home. And, likewise, I believe we must care for those who sincerely believe in pacifism and apply for “objector” status or ask for compassionate reassignments.

Our Unitarian Universalist culture is pretty good at holding all of these contradictory ideas simultaneously. We know that any attempt to resolve such dilemmas once and for all is impossible, for that would require that we ignore parts of the truth.

Some of our churches were sanctuaries for resisters during Vietnam. Some ran underground railroads to Canada. Some of our people went to jail for civil disobedience. Many of our youth applied for and received Conscientious Objector status. Many others served in the military. Our churches lived, as so many people in this country lived, heartbroken and torn apart.

War has been with us since we were naked apes brandishing clubs and even our wisest leaders have not been able to sort out when to fight and when to refrain from fighting.

Are we forever doomed to continuing terrible violence? Must the young of every generation be faced with impossible choices? I think not. I think there

is another way, There is not only movement between war and non-war but along another axis altogether.

You might already be aware, from many directions at once, that something like a spiritual awakening is occurring. You might choose other language but this is a church and “spiritual” certainly points in the right direction. It seems to me to be real and growing.

Paul Hawken writes about it this way, (I am loosely quoting him):

“In what's called the Axial Age, the period between 900 and 200 BCE, there was a time when much of the world turned away from violence and cruelty and barbarity. There was an upwelling of philosophy, insight, and intellect in that period that is carried forth in the work of Socrates and Sophocles, Lao Tzu, Confucius, Mencius, the Buddha, Rabbi Hillel, and others.

Rather than creating religious institutions, these leaders brought forth social movements that addressed human suffering. These systems did not require belief, they required practice. Action. (They were trying to create) a compassionate society. They asked their students to question and challenge everything, to never take anything on faith.” (Doesn't that sound like us?)

They urged people to change how they acted in the world. All of these teachings relied on one common principle, the Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Or, as Rabbi Hillel said, "Don't do anything to your neighbor you would not want someone to do to you. That is the Torah; all the rest is commentary.

“The axial sages wanted to create an entirely different kind of human being. They insisted that people abandon their egotism and greed, their violence and unkindness. Not only is it wrong to kill another human being, not a hostile word should be spoken about or towards another person. And, don't stop with just our own people but somehow extend (this kindheartedness) to the entire world.”

No one at that time said, “Hey, we're in the midst of a spiritual awakening.” It was a very difficult time, far from perfect. It had the usual betrayals, jealousies, and misunderstandings. It too was a time of war. The goal of the movement was to understand the source of violence, not to fight against it.

The practices guided the mind with very simple precepts that slowly and gradually might change how we respond to threats.

“Enlightenment was not the goal. Kindness and compassion were.”¹

What Hawken believes is that, unknowingly, our current activism, volunteerism of all stripes, AmeriCorp, VISTA, Service Nation, NGO’s our own community organizing in Peninsula Interfaith Action and our Social Action Committee, all us are doing this work of healing the world and it matters more profoundly than we realize.

Paul Hawken again, “(Our time) is a very different awakening (from the axial age). It is accompanied by an exquisite understanding of biology, ecology, physiology, quantum physics, cosmology, and most importantly, unlike the massive failing of the (earlier time), the feminine is now seen as sacred and holy. (Our awakening) recognizes that the wisdom of indigenous people from all over the world, (and their unique wisdom) . . . are our sisters and brothers in this movement.”

You know, this election pulled us to work in the commons more than most of us, I think, have experienced before. We phone banked and raised money and traveled to Nevada and Colorado. We made big commitments and made great effort to care for our vision of this country.

ServiceNation is one example of the many unashamedly idealistic organizations campaigning for a new America. Here is their motto:

(I find this very healing and exciting)

“To live in America is both a blessing and a responsibility, and service to community and country is at the heart of true patriotism. Ever since our Founders pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor to each other and the cause of independence, each generation of Americans has stepped forward to serve in the defense of our freedom and ideals, an America where citizens unite and take responsibility for the nation’s future, an America that restores the great tradition of citizen service and honors the profound sacrifices made by so many Americans who have passed before, from the small band of Founders to the millions who have fought for equality and justice at home, and defended our freedom abroad.

¹ Paul Hawken, from a quote on the minister’s chat

ServiceNation is about an America that is ruggedly idealistic, compassionate, and above all committed to the idea of shared sacrifice in pursuit of America's boldest promise: liberty and justice for all." (end quote)

This is a hopeful time. It will not be easy. Our financial unknowns are huge, rising unemployment, outsourced production, degraded environment, struggling schools. . . just the fact that all change takes so terribly long, but I am feeling hope. And like you, I'm willing, and enthusiastically willing, to work for the common good.

"Yes, we can" is ringing in my heart.

Amen, Ashe, and may it be so.