

Reflections on Veteran's Day

November 10, 2019

Good morning.

Since I'm standing in front of you, there must be a holiday afoot. As a worship committee member, that's my MO. When we look around for someone to coordinate a service, I look for a Sunday I can link to a holiday; my memory of how it worked out last time takes a walk; and I raise my hand. I leave the meeting smugly thinking, "Clever! So many advantages! No casting about for a topic! Plenty of great quotes and readings. Significant music everybody knows. Shared memories of the past! It'll be a slam dunk."

I wake up the next day and realize it's actually really complicated. And this triggers an inescapable period of what some would call procrastination. I know it is actually "mulling it over," "exploring the issue." But as Duke Ellington said. "I don't need more time; I need a deadline." Eventually, Panic starts, real work begins, and I find I am wrestling with even harder problems than I had "mulled." And then I really begin to learn something.

Today has been no exception. it has been the most difficult so far. My journey from August to this morning has been rocky and uncomfortable. But also revealing - especially about me; But also, I think, about us - about human community and society; about morality and accountability.

As always, this can only be my story, my road. And as always, your mileage will certainly vary. But I fear I don't think I can offer an easy ride today. And it will be a winding road. I'm afraid you'll see I should have stopped "mulling" a few days earlier.

In my lifetime, our holidays and how we see them have (usually appropriately) evolved . . . a lot. Especially, it seems, the uniquely American holidays. Columbus Day was once about discovery and a celebration of Italian-American heritage. It ignored the subjugation of indigenous peoples. Thanksgiving fell under the same shadow. I remember dressing as a caricature Indian for pageants to celebrate the coming together and sharing among the Pilgrims and the original people. Now we know how this papered over a reality of racism and colonialism. And Independence Days too often have actually celebrated American Exceptionalism and militarism as well. And Mothers and Father's Day are challenged, as we understand the fallacy and injustice of gender stereotypes.

Tomorrow is Veteran's Day, and change is needed here as well. In a changing world with changing soldiers, changing wars, changing values.

To start, I need to give some context. I need to let you know where I am coming from.

First, I am not a veteran. My generation's war was Viet Nam – the last war with a draft. I sought and received CO status. And had that been rejected, a student deferment would have been my next line of defense. Here's a sad observation, only slightly off topic. I think we were the last generation with a singular war. Today, wars are so much longer with so much overlap, this generation doesn't have "a war." It just has wars.

So, I come to you only with the views and understanding of a non-veteran with a second hand understanding of the experience of veterans. Though each veteran's story will be unique, there seems to be agreement that service creates a bond among those who serve. And almost all say that when soldiers fight, they fight for their companions, not whatever cause they were told to fight for. And it is certainly true I have no way or right to speak of how living with violence and horror tears at a life.

My second disclosure is about guilt – my guilt.

In the days of “my war,” like many around me, I was the kind of passionate radical that only an elite 18-year-old could be. I was enraged by a deeply unjust war, I leapt to join others on the barricades; to righteously occupy university buildings. I wrote fiery tracts no one read. And I secretly yearned for that status badge of honor of smelling tear gas and suffering under a cop’s stick (only lightly applied, of course)

Up to this point, I feel a little embarrassed, but spiritually comfortable. Idealistic? – yes. Right to protest the war? – yes. Incredibly naïve. – Check. Up to this, I think I was fine. But there was a darker side to many of us. We reviled and condemned the soldiers of that war. We stayed blind to the class divides that filled those planes headed East. And we thought each person, each soldier, accountable for the moral failing of going where we sent them.

From the safe and exquisitely privileged confines of the University of Chicago, of course, I seldom saw any returning veterans. So, I never found out what I actually would have said or done. I never learned how I would have treated a person, as opposed to a concept. Would I, like others, have spit, yelled “baby killer,” or worse? I hope not but will never know. I try to avoid self-deception. But the thoughts alone justify some guilt. These views we held, proclaimed, and supported mattered; they filled whole lives with undeserved and unjust pain - and shame - and bitterness

I have a third confession I must make. But I’ll come to that a little later.

So back to this journey. Early on, I shone a bright light on a personal, seemingly irreconcilable dilemma. How can I so strongly believe in peace and justice - and yet also honor and be grateful to veterans whose service was for war and to sustain our power? How can I demand peace and still honor warriors?

I am clear in my heart. Peace and justice are moral imperatives. Ultimately, all people can, should, must, and will live in peace. I have no more important belief. It lies at the center of my religion. And I believe it in spite of the constancy of war in all history of humanity - and even history of our primate forbears. To continue to believe in peace in the face of this is probably the greatest challenge of my faith.

But on the other hand . . .

I know not all veterans are the same. Motives, deeds, perspectives vary with for each person, as with all people. But as a group, and for the veterans I have known, I am moved and respectful of their service of commitment, courage, and integrity. I am honored by their sacrifice. I am grateful for their work.

That's what I saw on that morning after I volunteered to be here today. And that's when I started some really serious "mulling" to avoid the question.

Psychologists talk about cognitive dissonance – the stress of holding two contradictory ideas to be true. And they observe defenses against the stress – a tendency to distort, to rationalize why ideas don't contradict

This seems pretty clinical. An intellectual romantic, I prefer F. Scott Fitzgerald who wrote - "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function"

I'm absolutely not a first-rate intelligence. But I did need to find an honest way to hold both these true and truly conflicting ideas – both true. I wanted to understand how I came to believe them, and how to reconcile them, hopefully without distortion and rationalization. And I had already "mulled" way to long.

So here I stand – with some ideas that helped my understanding. Ideas that also changed my thoughts about a lot of things. As always for me, once found they seemed obvious. And I am certain they have long been obvious to many of you. I’m a slow learner.

First, and most obvious, soldiers don’t start wars. There isn’t little of Douglas MacArthur’s life or writing you’ll ever hear me quote. But I believe that for most soldiers (and veterans) he got this one right.

“The soldier above all others prays for peace, for it is the soldier who must suffer and bear the deepest wounds and scars of war.”

As in every blanket assertion, we’ll find exceptions. Clear exceptions here include some most senior military ranks, where only war brings ultimate glory, and where military authority, political power, and ambition blur.

But these exceptions are few and far between. Indeed most of our forces (and forces throughout history) are the least powerful; the least advantaged from among us; the least positioned to start anything.

Each question and each answer reveals another question. If not soldiers, then who is accountable for war? The answer I found for me is unsettling.

I concluded that I must own the wars. I concluded that it is a collective accountability of the community, the tribe, the society. And as a member of the collective, I am individually accountable, too. I couldn’t put the burden on the leaders. Whether tyranny or democracy, we allow or enable them. I cannot blame those around me and hold myself innocent if I could have done any more to change them toward peace. Conviction, action, and passion are essential and imperative, but not enough to shift the blame. Until peace is achieved, we as a people are not peaceful. It is we as a people who allow war.

And then, another disturbing (but obvious) belief emerged. Without real universal peace, I condone some wars. For me some wars are justified. In WWII, genocide of Jews had to be stopped. The same for enslavement of Koreans and Chinese, and gays and gypsies and so many others. I found that in today's world as it is, my faith is incomplete. I didn't believe pacifism would have led to peace in 1941. And certainly not peace and justice. There could be wars we need to wage. We may need armies. We may need soldiers.

Now it was really getting personal. And I come to my promised last, and most troubling, confession. If I am accountable for war; and if I accept that there are justified wars; what about my long-avowed pacifism? How do I remain in a community that goes to war without bearing the costs of our collective choice? I haven't resolved this yet. And I'm not sure I ever will.

But I know you are waiting impatiently to turn from this rambling personal narration to veterans and Veteran's Day. But it was this journey that led me here.

Soldiers become soldiers because we ask them to - or because we force them to. Soldiers are serving us. To not project onto you, and to be appropriately modest, I'll say instead, soldiers become soldiers because I ask them to - or force them to. Soldiers are serving me. I will say that at least in part, they serve out of duty to me - from a commitment to our community. They serve from a place of good intention. My idealism is not infinite, there are always exceptions and atrocities. But to call all veterans criminals, much less baby killers is unfair and unjust and . . . And also, when they are cruel or even barbaric, how often was it their service that made them so?

Believing this, I think honor, recognition, and thanks are due, no matter how misguided I was to let them go.

And what incalculable price is paid for agreeing to serve? The personal costs of service, of becoming a veteran, are not and cannot be fully accounted. If we ever truly felt or even understood that cost, it might be a true catalyst for peace.

We long believed we saw the wounds of war – but we were blind. We really only saw wounds that bleed. We didn't see, or turned away from, the grievous hidden wounds – the wounds to brains, to minds, to spirits.

And wounds don't come only from combat itself. How much do we harden and shape and stunt our children when we train them to obey – to kill. These lessons are not excised at discharge. They don't go away. They aren't forgotten.

And wounds and suffering are never borne by the veteran alone. A parent killed is forever lost. A spouse, a parent, who comes home harmed in body, mind, or spirit brings sorrow, pain, and loss home with them. What have we all lost?

I am accountable. I owe veterans and their families my share of recompense. But so much of this cost can never be paid. And for the costs that could be paid, we are always so deeply in arrears. How much should we pay to heal the wounded veteran? How many veterans damaged by war should be homeless? How much medical care would be enough? How much is enough to help a ruptured family? What should we give parents for a lost child? What should we do (or have done) to help a veteran rejoin a world not made of blind conformity, violence, chaos, terror?

What do I owe? What have I paid?

This is just about as far as I've gotten so far. I can't leave you with a clear call for action. But for me, I need to work from the following foundation.

I must convey my respect, honor, support, and gratitude for their willingness to serve us? How? I am certain, totally certain, that a perfunctory “thank you for your service” at checkout lines is not sufficient. Nor is the poppy I buy at the grocery store. And more personally, the veterans meet in life merit my personal regard, respect, recognition. And when i can, they merit my help and my support.

I believe our treatment of veterans is an issue of social justice, and therefore merits the attention of our faith. We need to address our responsibilities to create societal equity and support, and to accept personal responsibility to help. We must make sure that the community that makes the wars pays what it can to the people it sends to war.

And this journey I’ve been on leaves one compelling demand.

No more veterans! No more! The price is too high. And the debt cannot be truly paid.

We must find the roots and causes of war and pull them up. We must continue the struggle and we must testify for peace and justice. We must find the way to ask no more children to fight our wars.

The sacrifice of veterans cannot be repaid. But we can honor their service. And what better honor for veterans and prices they have paid than to never ask their children to pay that price?

John Porter