

A Call to Honor Life

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It is late afternoon on a cool autumn day. I'm sitting at my desk, books scattered around me, with a notepad and pen in hand. I pause for a moment to look at the world around me. Gazing out the window I see trees crowned with red, yellow, and orange leaves against a blue sun filled sky, and on the rippled surface of the pond behind my house; a pair of swans glide gently across the water. Yes, it is a beautiful day and I can't help but savor the beauty and wonder of my surroundings.

I gaze up into the cloudless sky and my thoughts turn now to another place, separated by land and sea, a place not so picturesque, but a place whose landscape is marred by the ravages of war. Of course, I don't know what Afghanistan looks like except from images I've seen on television, in magazines or in the newspaper over the last several years. From what I've seen I can't imagine being there for an hour let alone days, weeks, months or years. And surely I can't image dying there.

I wrote those words over a decade ago as I reflected on the war in Afghanistan, a war which only ended recently, at least officially.

Then, as now, I'm haunted by how easy it is to fight a war from home. If images on the television disturb us we can change the channel. When guilt or shame overcomes us, we recite the politician and pundit's justifications we've been fed muttering "God Bless America" lest anyone question our patriotism.

Indeed, never is a war so just as the one we don't have to fight ourselves. With the exception of war protestors and a few others, when our nation engages in war, most Americans experience it much the same way as background music played in department stores and supermarkets; we know it's there, but we largely ignore it, after all what can we do about it anyway?

Tomorrow we observe Memorial Day, an annual reminder that for some, war is not an occasional irritant to our comfortable lives, but a living whose wages are too often death. On Memorial Day we are asked to remember and honor military personnel who have died in service to our country. But how exactly how do we do we honor them?

Is it with poverty, high levels of unemployment, untreated or poorly treated drug and alcohol addiction, lack of access to mental health services and inconceivable, shamefully slow processing of medical and disability claims for those who do make it home?

Or is it with bickering, ideological partisans in government who behave more like reality show stars beholden to corporate sponsors rather than public servants elected to promote the public good? Or maybe we honor those who have served and died by continuing generation after generation to send people to war, that wretched invention of humankind which Thomas Mann called, "...a cowardly escape from the problems of peace."

The way I see it the only way to truly honor those we train to kill and die for us, is to learn to honor life.

Now, what does this mean? Let's turn to the reading from Genesis. The story of Abraham and Isaac is more than it appears on the surface. Surely, taken literally it's a pretty awful story, I mean, how insecure and/or sadistic is this god who would test a man's loyalty by commanding him to sacrifice his son? But herein lies a clue.

To whom or what are we loyal?

In the myth, Abraham is informed by two competing forces within his own psyche. One force calls for loyalty to the past, to the traditional way of doing things, the way of the blood sacrifice and blind obedience to established, often external authority. Obedience to this force is learned but deeply ingrained so as to seem "natural". It is recognized by some as the voice of God. The other force calls Abraham to break with the past, to open up to a new way of relating to the world and others, this is the same force that compelled Jesus to teach love of one's enemies ---- the voice that informed the Prophet Muhammad's words, "Do not hate one another..." ---- and the inner stirring that compelled Buddha to teach love as the only cure for hatred. Obedience to this voice is more difficult. It contradicts conventional wisdom. It too is learned, but has to be pursued and practiced over time. This is the higher call to honor life. And it too is recognized, by some, as the voice of God.

Which voice do you identify with?

The problem for humankind says Rabbi Howard Cooper, is "that we have identified with the force that tempts Abraham to offer up his child, rather than internalizing Abraham's new understanding of "God" as the energy that makes possible the transformation of what has always been into what ought to be." Indeed, too many sincere people of faith or even no religious affiliation at all identify with the force that tempts us to sacrifice life rather than save it. We have been taught to obey external, established authority and to be wary of that still, small voice inside despite the psalmist's invitation to, "Be still and know that I am God!"

The lesson of the Biblical tale is no less diminished today; indeed it is one that is urgently needed. For despite all our progress as a species, our dreams of peace, the ultimate means of honoring life, go woefully unfulfilled. Decade after decade we continue to

identify with, and answer the call of a lesser god and with that choice we sacrifice our hopes and dreams. Indeed, the late William Sloane Coffin noted, "...the inexpressible sadness of every era is that each time the dream [of peace] revives, it dies..."

And so the cycle continues, wars - cultural; political; ideological; and religious- each laying waste to the hopes and dreams of humankind. War is indeed a cowardly escape from the work of peace and it leads us furthest from the call to honor life. "The warhorse is a vain hope for victory, and by its great might it cannot save.", words from Psalm 33.

It is far easier to continue our habitual identification with the voice of a god (small g) that allows us to sacrifice life rather than save it because it fools us into denying responsibility for our actions as so commonly expressed in the resignation, "I'm only human."

But this is precisely the point!

We are human and the call to honor life is a uniquely human calling. Animals and plants are not called to wrestle with such questions, but by virtue of our humanity, the voice of god we choose to identify with can either save us or destroy us.

Perhaps we are uncomfortable with the notion that that which some call God does not lie outside ourselves as some sort of cosmic driver chauffeuring us through life. Perhaps we'd rather continue as passengers and not have to face the daunting task of choosing a path that illumines the hurting world around us, that forces us to hear the cries of the hungry and refuses to let us cast from our eyes all troubled folk.

I have a small 17th century painting in my study at home depicting the story of Abraham and Isaac. In the upper left corner there is an angel in the sky calling upon Abraham not to plunge his dagger into his son Isaac. That angel represents not an outside force, but the workings of our interior life, the place within us of reflection and insight. It is a visual depiction of the higher call to honor life.

It is scary to think that we have to work to ensure our own salvation; to acknowledge that the angel who calls us to hold back or to plunge the dagger dwells within us and not some distant realm waiting to be dispatched by a remote, authoritative deity.

Recall for a moment Richard Gilbert's words...

What is that you say?

To save, one must serve?

To savor, one must save?

The one will not stand without the other?

Gilbert's words reflect the wisdom born in inner silence, an unconventional wisdom whose daring message is too much for most who hear it to bear. Because it is so radical we mistrust it and through myriad distractions we silence it until we no longer realize it is there.

War and other tragedies however force us to acknowledge that silent voice within. The images that disturb us most, the people and events that haunt our memory do so because we know the god or force we too often identify with, regardless of our stated theology, is the one that demands life be sacrificed rather than saved. Whenever we hear that voice and it disturbs us, that is our Time of Trial, our Day of Judgment. But, it is also our opportunity for renewal, to shed our old ways and take up the call to honor life.

We must, each of us, find the courage to trust the voice of our highest aspirations, the voice that rejects the old ways, the voice that lifts us toward a new vision and frees us from the devastating bonds of our own making. We must do no less than turn away for good from the god that demands the sacrifice of our children so that we may fully open our hearts and minds to that which calls us beyond ourselves and toward the very mystery and wonder of life itself.

How then shall we to honor our war dead?

How about a renewed, sincere commitment to the hard work of peace!

What might a renewed commitment to peace look like? How about a world devoid of hunger and homelessness... Or a just society where each person earns not a minimum wage, but a living wage; a just society where all have access to education, affordable healthcare and housing; clean air, and safe drinking water? What about a day when the morning paper doesn't read like a review of the latest dystopian novel, an endless account of human created misery? Or maybe, just maybe, for one day, a full twenty-four hours, in which not a single person is assaulted or killed by another in an act of aggression, vengeance, or hatred?

Governments count the cost of war in dollars and cents. The true cost of war, however, is not measured in dollars and cents but in the anguished tally of dreams lost and hope plundered.

As our nation and others wrestle with the tragic consequences of trying to escape the hard work of peace and the shrill chorus of partisan bickering play on, making appeals to conventional wisdom in the name of a lesser god, let us instead pledge to live that no life be endangered or sacrificed in vain. Let us, at long last, answer the sober call to honor life.

May it be so

Amen and Blessed Be