

Conscience In War

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Strauss

The power of our faith tradition is not to be found in creed or dogma. The power of our faith tradition is not to be found only in our rituals or worship, or structures of authority. The power of our faith tradition is not vested in an image or icon.

We are the power of our faith tradition. The Beloved Community is our power. Gathered assemblies of ordinary people committed to extraordinary acts of love and justice- that is our power. We, all of us, our elders, our children, the generations before us, and those who come after...we are the power and the sacred spirit of our liberal faith.

I call you to use your power...as an individual and as a congregation- I call us to use our power for the greater good.

All we need is courage. The courage to follow our conscience.

Polish poet, Szymborska writes; "What you say has a resonance, what you are silent about is telling."

I am deeply troubled by the silence of progressive voices. Why is there so little civic conversation about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan? Why in this recent mid-term election was there no acknowledgement that we are approaching ten years as a country at war? Why is the money that we invest in the battle against terrorism, not part of the equation of our financial crisis here at home.

"What we are silent about is telling".

Silence about the horrors of these wars is immoral.

To know the costs in lives, in severe injuries, in suicides, in the defense budget, in shame, in fear, in divorce, in broken families and broken spirits...to know these costs and to stay silent is immoral. To speak of these things requires courage. To act on our knowledge of the truths of a war time economy takes courage.

In two weeks we will ordain Seanan Holland to the Unitarian Universalist ministry. Seanan is a Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel on a path to becoming a Navy Chaplain- A UU Navy Chaplain. We care deeply about Seanan. And he will, if all goes according to plan- Seanan will return to active duty, perhaps in Afghanistan. If nothing else motivates me to speak – my love for Seanan does.

He ministered among us for 10 months. My conscience tells me that we must create evidence of his presence here. My conscience tells me that we need to be actively engaged in sharing the burden of our country's commitment toward trying to make a safer world.

My conscience tells me that the loss of lives- American, Iraqi and Afghan lives- is a grief and a sorrow we must find a way to express. The suffering of war time must be shouldered by us all.

And yet we remain silent. And our national leaders remain silent...and our agendas get filled up with other, quite legitimate concerns...and we look away.

It's complex, it's difficult, there's no helpful place to lay blame, there's no obvious way out. What can we do?

You should know that our Unitarian Universalist history is filled with inspiring acts of love and justice...and the taking of risks for the greater good. Our free faith is a history of courage.

One UU institution of which we can be proud is Beacon Press. Many of you may not know that we, Beacon Press and the UUA, played a role in the events surrounding the publishing of the "Pentagon Papers: U.S. Vietnam Relations 1945-1967". In June 1971, Daniel Ellsberg, a Pentagon analyst and his colleague, Anthony Russo photocopied 43 volumes of secret documents, and leaked them to the NY Times and to United States Senator Mike Gravel, Democrat from Alaska.

These documents demonstrated unconstitutional behavior by a succession of U.S. Presidents from Truman to Johnson regarding relations with Viet Nam. Subsequently 4,000 pages were published, in five volumes, by our Beacon Press. The fifth volume was edited by Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn and published by Beacon.

Almost immediately upon publication of the first volume, the FBI investigated the back accounts of the UUA. There was government harassment and intimidation of Beacon Press staff. There were subpoenas and trials.

In Jan. 1972, the UUA sought a temporary injunction from the Supreme Court stating that the actions of the courts were a violation of religious liberty. We lost that case, but, then UUA president, Bob West, represented our values of freedom of the press and freedom of religion for several very difficult years.

The leaking of those documents was intended to end a wrongful war...subsequent events including Watergate and the resignation of Richard Nixon...overtook the headlines and the case against Ellsberg and Russo was dismissed.

Beacon, a very small Press, acted with exceeding courage. It was nearly bankrupted by this courageous action.

UUA leaders appealed to UU congregations to help finance the huge printing job by buying copies in advance. Ads were placed in the UU World asking \$45 for hard copy editions and \$20 for paperback. Many congregations bought and donated copies to local libraries.

The WikiLeaks International website which has recently published thousands and thousands of anonymously submitted documents about the Afghan and Iraq wars are similar in nature to the Pentagon Papers. They also rely solely on donations. They too have experienced censorship and intimidation.

Freedom of the press, like freedom of religion, like all freedoms must be fought for and won by each generation.

In the words of Frederick Douglass, "Power concedes nothing without a demand; it never did and it never will."

That's why we cannot remain silent.

That's why we must find the courage to follow our conscience and not look away from the wrongful wars of today.

How many service men and women have come home from these wars damaged. Without a leg, without an arm, with a brain injury, with psychological scars. How many families have been ripped apart by grief and loss. And how many have had to return and return and return to the war zones?

An all volunteer force has its own unique cost...and in wars as long as these, the need for re- deployment is high. In an all volunteer force, it is easy to dismiss the suffering as chosen.

There are also spiritual scars. How do service men and women deal with the trauma of acting against their conscience.

How do they live with what they have done or seen or participated in? How do we live with looking away...with being silent, with pretending that the acts of war have little or nothing to do with us? Our country has been wounded in these wars. How will we heal our country?

There is hope and courage to be found even today. The further we get from the trauma of September 11, 2001, the longer these wars continue and more costs pile up...the greater is the need for legitimate critique of our military-technological complex.

We have a moral obligation. An obligation to speak our conscience- both to acknowledge our grief for the sacrifices of our troops -and to make clear our resistance to the excess, waste and futility of our government's policies in these wars.

There is no doubt that there is a terrorist threat in our 21st century world...but what are we doing over there? What are we doing here?

As I write, the sun sinks low in the early November sky...the red and gold leaves still clinging to the trees cast a rosy glow over the church grounds. I walk outside and watch for a moment as the sun goes down...and I think of all the lives lost since 9/11... all the wounded who cannot just get up and walk, all the spiritually broken who can no longer see the beauty in a sunset, all the spouses and caregivers who must carry the family burdens alone...What is my moral obligation?

There is a new conversation beginning. A coalition of more than 60 religious, veterans, academic and advocacy groups are calling on the United States military to extend conscientious-objector status to soldiers who believe a specific war is immoral.

They held a "teach-in" on "selective conscientious objection" both in DC and in NYC. An Interfaith Worship Service was held here in DC on Thursday evening...led by the Reverend James Forbes, minister emeritus of Riverside Church in New York, and the daughter of Bishop Desmond Tutu.

The organization is called The Truth Commission on Conscience in War. They intend to address the spiritual wounds of those enlisted men and women, who are asked to participate in acts counter to their conscience. The intent is to spark a broad conversation about the cost and character of modern warfare and to engage in dialogue around just peace-making.

Responding to the protest of the war in Viet Nam, in 1971, the Supreme Court expanded the definition of conscientious objector status to include not only members of specified pacifist religions, but to "anyone with deeply held beliefs that cause them to oppose participation in war in any form." Yet the current exemption still applies only to pacifists. The Truth Commission coalition seeks to revise the regulations with this language..."to respect the moral teachings of just war and religious and philosophical traditions that adhere to just-war criteria.

Just war tradition offers three criteria as conditions for a war to be morally legitimate...they are: it must be a last resort, have a high probability of success, and there must be proportionality between the good it aims to achieve and the evil it inflicts.

Many of those who enlist in the military have never heard of conscientious objection. They have never reflected on the evils and aims of war. It is only when they see first-hand something morally wrong in their actions and the conduct of the war that they begin to feel the pain of acting against their conscience.

Is a new national conversation possible? Can Unitarian Universalists be part of a movement that leads away from fear and toward reflection? Can we find ways to share the burden of this war...beyond paying our taxes? Can we create a place on our grounds, a ritual to witness to the on-going suffering of the longest war in American history?

Can we, before too many more lives are lost or destroyed, - can we exercise the power and the courage that is the heritage of our faith? I pray that we can.

Amen/Blessed Be/Shalom

