

WAR, MEMORY, AND PEACE
Rev. Sheldon W. Bennett, Ph.D.
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It has now been more than four years of war. Often when I watch The Jim Lehrer News Hour on PBS, the program ends with a silent tribute to the most recent deaths, as their photographs and names become available. I look at each of the photographs of the soldiers as they are shown one by one. I read their names. I note their home towns. I consider their ages. With each photograph, my heart aches.

So many are so young. 19 years old. 20 years old. They looked so handsome and brave in their uniforms. There was so much hope and innocence in their eyes. Now they are dead. Somewhere in Michigan, in Tennessee, in Oregon, and in Massachusetts, another mother, another father grieves the loss of their son or daughter. I can only imagine the shock of receiving such terrible news.

Others are older – 35 years of age, 43 years of age. Officers. Their faces are wiser and more serious. But with each one, another wife, another husband, another partner, or another lover suffers a broken heart. In yet another home, a child, or children, are now missing a father or a mother, forever.

So many names and places. 3,422 as of Friday, and counting. We would remember them. We must remember them if we are to give their lives meaning. We would also remember the tens of thousands of soldiers, and civilians, too, who have come home seriously wounded – physically, mentally, and emotionally. We must assure that they receive proper care.

We would remember, too, the people in Iraq - the mothers and fathers, the husbands and wives, who each day with terrible dread stand in line at a morgue to try to identify the remains of a loved one blasted in a suicide bomb or in an attack by insurgents, or by Iraqi forces, or by U.S. military. No one knows how many have died, but hundreds of thousands at least. We must remember them, too.

I know that this is sad to talk about. We have so many emotions. But spiritually, we must talk about it. We must remember. We must do this in honor of all those who have died or who have been wounded – Americans

and Iraqis. We must let ourselves experience our emotions and acknowledge them, if we going to be powerful in holding forth the vision of peace and reconciliation, for our own country and for the Middle East.

War is such a terrible evil. As Unitarian Universalists, along with people of many faiths, we hold the vision of a world of justice and liberty and peace for all people as the alternative to war. Yet, none of us is so naïve to think that war has not been sometimes necessary. We remember our war for independence. We remember the civil war which ended slavery. We remember the world war which defeated the evils of Nazism and fascism. We honor those who have served and risked their lives in times of war and in times of peace to defend our country and the ideals which make our country great.

Historically, Unitarian Universalists have not been a tradition of pacifism. We have recognized the hard reality that the use of military force is sometimes necessary to defend freedom, to uphold justice, and to protect human rights. We recognize our shared responsibility to protect civil society and to preserve the rule of law from forces which may seek to destroy these.

But while we know that war may have sometimes been necessary, we also know that war is always a terrible evil. It is never a good. To kill another person. To inflict injury or wounds. To destroy homes or villages, these are evil things. There is no other way to consider them. War is categorically evil. For this reason, responsible societies have developed moral rules to guide decisions as to when a war may be justified, as necessary to defeat a greater evil. The cause must be just. It must be lawfully authorized by the proper institutions and with good intentions. It must be conducted with respect for the human worth and dignity of all concerned and especially of the opponent. And war must be engaged only as a last resort.

The American war in Iraq has failed these tests from the very beginning. More than four years ago, I said in a sermon before the war began that this war was immoral, unjust, and unwise. Nothing has happened to change my thinking, and if anything the passing of years has only confirmed my conclusion. I continue to be dismayed. This war is a catastrophe. It is a terrible tragedy – not only for Iraqis, and the Middle East, but it is a tragedy also for our own country, for our military, and for the men and women who courageously serve. It is costing so very much in

human lives and suffering and in national treasure. Out of fear, we have as a nation allowed our precious heritage of basic freedoms and civil liberties to be seriously compromised and abridged.

I want to be clear. I am not talking about the military. In our democratic system, the responsibility for the policy of war rests with our elected, civilian government, whose decisions the military is pledged to serve. The responsibility for this war belongs to all of us, elected officials certainly, and with us as citizens for not holding our elected government properly accountable. Hopefully, this is beginning to change.

This war is destabilizing the Middle East, as the trouble in Lebanon shows. It has so damaged our credibility and standing in the world as a leader for justice, freedom, and human rights. It has so poisoned the public discourse and paralyzed the conscience of this nation that citizens have been made afraid to speak out for fear of being labeled as unpatriotic or as cowards who would surrender to terrorists. But, there is no greater patriotism, there is no greater love of country than to speak out and uphold the very values that make this nation great – the founding values of justice, freedom of discourse, and protection of human rights for all people, those of our own citizens and even the rights of those who are perceived as fighting against us.

This war is also distracting us from the pressing social issues of poverty, education, and healthcare, and job security here at home. It is squandering precious social, economic, and natural resources. It is taking our attention away from wholeheartedly addressing the crisis of global warming, climate change, and preserving the planet for the next generation.

This is not the place to get into the politics of this war or the many gross mistakes of poor planning, mismanagement, and what can only be described as delusional thinking on the part of certain people in high places. Our purpose here is moral and it is spiritual. From the beginning, this war has been the unprovoked and aggressive invasion of another country by the most powerful nation in history. Yes, the attacks against the United States on September 11 were deliberately terrible and provocative events. They were evil acts. No society can tolerate acts of terrorism against it. But lashing out in fear and anger to launch an unjust, immoral, and unwise war, unleashing a massive military invasion against a country which was known to have nothing to do with the attacks – this war cannot be justified.

The social, economic, political, and religious forces that motivate terrorism are complex. If anything, the folly and tragedy of this irresponsible war has only made the problem far worse. From a practical standpoint, it seems that effective defense against terrorism requires a cooperative and coordinated international response involving intelligence and security procedures at many levels, as European nations are learning. The defeat of terrorism also means dealing with the social, economic, political, and justice problems that motivate terrorism in the first place. Terrorism cannot be defeated with bombs and invasions, which only fuel the terrorism.

So, where do we go from here in Iraq? Frankly, I cannot claim any special insight. But it is becoming increasingly clear that the United States must withdraw military forces from Iraq - both for moral reasons and for practical ones. As an occupying power, we are a major, if not *the* major, aggravation for the violence in that country. History shows this about occupying powers over and over.

But if history is a guide, we must do all that we can to withdraw in a careful and planned way so as to minimize the potential for chaos which could enlarge the catastrophe. Again, we cannot be naïve. The potential for chaos is very great, because the web of tensions, fears, and hostilities among different groups and countries in the region is so very complex and deep-seated – Sunnis, Shiites, Kurds - Iran, Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia - to name a few of the parties concerned. The entire region could fall into regional strife for decades to come. That is a possibility. Maybe not. But we don't know.

But given the possibility, I believe that our leaders have the responsibility to do all that we can to engage these neighboring countries, plus Russia and the European Union in a broad diplomatic initiative to constructively manage the situation as the United States withdraws. This means a more constructive and imaginative engagement by the United States with Iran than threatening bombardment. At some point, too, it seems that we will need to help finance the rebuilding of Iraq under Iraqi leadership, not unilaterally but through international programs.

Our country also has the urgent moral and humanitarian obligation to provide asylum and resettlement for tens of thousands of Iraqis who have

assisted American forces in Iraq and are now marked for assassination. Our present policy of blocking immigration for Iraqis is unconscionable.

Again, it is not our purpose this morning to solve the practical problems involved with ending the war in Iraq. But it is our moral task to do what is in our power to end this war. It is our spiritual task to continue to imagine peace and continue to give witness for peace and to give witness for an end to this war. We would know that we not alone. Thousands and thousands of thoughtful, concerned people all over the country are giving such witness. The movement we see beginning in Congress, as slow as it is, is testimony to the power of this witness.

Our spiritual task is also to remain strong in hope. No one knows what will happen in the Middle East. We know we cannot stay in Iraq. This would be wrong, and it would be so costly in so many ways. But when we leave, which we must, I can easily imagine that the region will go through ten, if not twenty, or thirty years of trouble, chronic violence, and even regional war before peace can be established. And maybe not. No one can know. But our task is to remain strong in hope, to continue imagining a better world, and to keep giving witness to this dream.

Perhaps I am naive, but the trend of history since the end of the Second World War seems to suggest a slow, at times halting, but positive progression towards peace, at least peace between nations. Within the European Union there seems to be a remarkable commitment to permanent peace, after so many centuries of brutal warfare. The Cold War ended peacefully without violence. Apartheid has been ended in South Africa. The warring factions in Northern Ireland are now joining in a mutual pledge to govern peacefully together. We can imagine a Middle East that one day will be prospering in a new peace with social justice and opportunity for all. The road will be very difficult and it will be long. Our task is to keep hope and to persevere in our hope.

Forty years ago, on April 4th, 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr. went to Riverside Church in New York City. This nation was involved at that time in another tragic war – Vietnam. It was tearing the country apart. It was squandering our national resources and obstructing the struggle for civil rights and for ending poverty. It was perpetuating the evils of racism in the way it was distracting the country from the movement for civil rights, the way it was squandering social resources, and the way it was unjustly calling

on racial minorities and poor people to serve and die in disproportionate numbers.

In an historic speech, Dr. King spoke out clearly and boldly against that war, and indeed, against all war. He called for a new moral vision and for a new spiritual vision. He called for “a revolution of values.” Such a revolution of values required a new view of humankind that was global and inclusive rather than sectional. “Every nation,” he said, “must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind as a whole in order to preserve the best in their individual societies.” As the richest and most powerful nation in the world, it was for America to lead the way. “There is nothing,” he said, “except a tragic death wish, to prevent us from reordering our priorities, so that the pursuit of peace will take precedence over the pursuit of war.”

Forty years have passed. Are we ready to hear again these words and take them to heart? The work of reordering our priorities for peace instead of war is still before us. This work is first of all spiritual work. It is to hold all people in an all embracing and unconditional love. Such love is not a sentimental or weak response. It is, in King’s words, “the force which all great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life.”

This then must be our work – to hold remember and hold in our thoughts all the people of the world in the spirit of unconditional and universal love - those who are consumed by hatred and bitterness as well as all those who are oppressed and abused, those who make war and oppress others with tyranny and those who suffer the violence and cruelty of war. Our work is to remember humanity’s ancient and universal dream of peace and an end to war and to make that dream live in our lives.

“Now let us begin,” said Dr. King. “Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter – but beautiful - struggle for a new world. “