

An Uncommon Life: A Veterans' Day Service  
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This truly is a time for questions that are more profound answers. We have many questions at this time, and I have few answers for you, if I'm honest. I don't know who's going to be president, or how we make meaning out of so many destructive wars, or how we heal from unspeakable loss. Our liberal faith offers permission for your spirits to search. I can help us ask the right questions, and help us find that frame of mind that says it's okay to feel vulnerable, confused, and worried about our country. In these times of uncertainty, it is questioning and seeking that empowers us.

And so I pose the same question I did to the children earlier – does anyone here have friends or relatives who went to war? How was it for them when they returned? It depends which war it was, doesn't it.

You may be aware that there's an awfully high suicide rate among veterans - the official current stat is 20 per day. Everyday, 20 service-people take their own lives. As a vet of Vietnam, Iraq, or Afghanistan, you are at greater risk of suicide than you were of dying in combat.

Now, most of the suicides are of older veterans. In 2014, of all veteran suicides, 65% were aged 50 and older. These were vets more likely from the Vietnam War than the more recent wars. Indeed, it's important that I don't communicate all veterans are broken because they're not. David Finkel, who wrote "The Good Soldiers" and more recently, "Thank You for Your Service", puts it this way:

*Two million Americans were sent to fight in Iraq or Afghanistan. Home now, most of them describe themselves as physically and mentally healthy. They move forward. Their war recedes. Some are even stronger for their experience. But then there are the others, for whom the war endures. Of the two million, studies suggest that 20 to 30 percent have come home with post-traumatic stress or traumatic brain injury . . . which is some 500,000 mentally wounded American veterans.*

So it's a lot, but not even half of them. I don't count any recent veterans, injured, wounded, or not, among the people I know, the friends and family of my community. I wish I did, because it might add to my understanding of the world, what modern day war is really like and as Russ alluded to earlier, the stamp it leaves on a soldier.

Instead of knowing veterans, I have literature to read, which is a way we can show respect to veterans, by learning what their experiences are like. The David Finkel non-fiction books are excellent, there's Sebastian Junger, there's the fiction titles like *The Yellow Birds*, *Redeployment*, or *Preparation for the Next Life* by Atticus Lish. There are the books that just tell the stories, like *For Love of Country*. Why read this stuff when it can be awfully sad?

Because it's not all sad, for nothing is completely all good or all bad. The men and women who go to war gain new skills and self-confidence, they find family there, bonds so strong it is painful to let them go once they are sent home. They find on the war front camaraderie that is rare in modern America, except for in places like the community spirit of this church I am coming to know. We don't find that camaraderie as much in the work place as previous generations did, when you worked for the same company for decades.

I probably don't know any vets because it's part of the current, cultural divide in our country. The military attracts families for whom armed service is a tradition, passed down the generations; the military has strong conservative roots. How better to espouse the values conservatives hold sacred – loyalty, authority and tradition – than via the military?

It didn't used to be that way. When there was the draft, everyone got sent to war, across the political spectrum. My dad was lucky, he didn't have to go to Vietnam because he was in college at Duke University. But his roommate flunked out, was sent to Vietnam, and didn't come home. My husband's father was a draft dodger, and became a dual Canadian citizen. If he hadn't had the courage to refuse war, his life might have been cut short or gone another direction, and I wouldn't have the amazing family I'm blessed to have today.

So, the draft is a frightful thing. No one with children young enough could support bringing back the draft, could they? This is one of my questions, a question I turn over in my mind this time of year, or when I'm aghast at the waste of wars we should not have waged. Would we have waged war in Afghanistan, and particularly in Iraq, had there been a draft? There is a line of thinking that says if the middle and upper classes had to send their kids to war, Senators would not vote so readily for war.

Here's another question. Had we not fought those gainless wars in the Middle East since 2001, would we have had the wherewithal to help the people of Syria and not hesitate in our war-weariness? Might we have been able to prevent the worst refugee crisis since WW2? I look back at our recent history, and I wonder, would we have been more judicious with the battles we chose had there been more skin in the game, not only the skin of the military-class? With everyone's skin in the game, there might be less war, or at

least, we might only fight the wars that truly need to be fought, and be seen as a leader of humanitarian strength.

I do know some Vietnam vets and like we heard from Russ, the stories are . . . unreal, stranger than fiction. The horror of Vietnam took the draft off the table. I suspect we are weaker as a country for it, for now we have this division. There are those of us, most of us, who need not think very much about war or military service, while there are the others, fewer, for whom war and service has defined their lives, and the lives of their families. But we are not the red states of America, we are not the blue states of America, we are the United States of America, as President Obama so infamously once said.

Understanding the experiences of the current military class is another way to build bridges of understanding and mutual respect in our divided country.

But it also raises another tough question, perhaps the key question of this sermon:

How do we honor veterans, respect the armed forces, and still fight for peace? The peace movement is not in tatters, but it's not as united and strong as in the days of MLK. As Dr. King tried to help us understand, the fight for Civil Rights and the fight for Peace are inter-related. Black Lives Matter asks the country to wake up to the disaster of the criminal justice system, where men of color are drafted like soldiers to serve long and harsh prison sentences, making money for the criminal-industrial complex. Meanwhile, the wars make money for the profiteers of the military-industrial complex. There were so many tanks and other instruments of war produced that no one knew what to do with them, so they ended up in our local police departments, transferred from the war on terror to the war on drugs.

We can fight for peace when we begin to wake up and realize that the wars on terror, drugs, and immigrants are all related. There is a diversity of veterans of these wars, but what they may all hold in common is being of common means.

Finally, my last question asks us to consider a particular social contract, and how broken it is.

Many social contracts have gone out the window in recent decades - by social contract I mean agreements between the tax-paying participant of our free society and a certain group of people – for example, the social contract for equal public education across the board, which we've never had. But one we used to have was between civilians and the soldiers who fight our wars. In exchange for possibly losing life or limb, we won't send you to battle *unless* the fight is truly worth it, unless our national security or great humanitarian disaster is surely at stake.

Dr. King was so right to connect civil rights with our foreign policy concerns. When we throw habeas corpus out the window, we corrode the principles of justice our country was founded on and everyone's rights are corroded. When we wage endless war abroad, we have fewer resources to wage the wars at home that must be fought, such as the opiate-addiction crisis that is killing more people than car accidents. Instead of going off to fight pointless wars, we could be putting our young people to work in a new green economy, instead of participating in the enterprises of the single biggest polluter in the world, the US military.

Yes, with violent extremists such as ISIL and ISIS, it would seem the peace movement is dead. Who dares say we should not be on the offense with such threats? That's what the hymn is talking about, in O Young and Fearless Prophet, my favorite hymn, that perfect encapsulates the teachings of Jesus. In this case, I'm

thinking of the line *to make our thoughts and actions less prone to please the crowd.*

It won't please the crowd, but we must stick up for Muslims, the majority of whom are moderate and peaceful. We must stand up for habeas corpus, for civil liberties, for closing Guantanamo Bay. Civil rights and liberties are in relationship to our attitudes of who we are in the world. Are we tough, authoritarian, a militarized police state? Or do we keep in place a system of checks and balances that allows justice to prevail? How much power should our commander in chief alone really have? Should he or she be able to pick off anyone at will via drone strike?

There is much we can do, to fight the good fight for liberty, peace, and justice, *and* honor and respect our veterans. Like anyone who's not like us, we can learn about others by reading about them, and even seeking to be in the same room with them. We can visit our local non-profit that serves veterans and see how we can help out. If anyone would like to take me up on that, let me know, I'll go with you. There are many non-profits that provide direct aid to our veterans who are in need now – one of very high repute is the Semper Fi Relief Fund, you can Google it, and donate. Semper Fi, always faithful.

You know, I've always thought of Bruce Springsteen as, when all else fails, the great patriotic unifier of our country. Most love The Boss, and he has a great song on a recent album where he sings, "we take care of our own."

Do we? We're getting better at it. There are examples of civilians, the military and the government stepping it up. The stigma around post-traumatic stress is lessening. There are men like Peter Chiarelli, former vice chief of staff of the army, who is fighting tooth and nail to find the best treatments for PTS and TBI. The

homeless population in LA has exploded, but not for veterans, who have been given housing vouchers.

Today, our wars are not fought by commoners, they are fought by people of common means who have bravely chosen to live an uncommon life. There are many ways we can learn the specifics of how uncommon that life is. A lot of veterans don't want to talk about their experiences, and that should be respected. As Russ said, there are things so beneath humanity, they are better left alone. So let the artists, the writers, and the journalists enlighten you. It's not enough to just thank veterans for their service, though it's important we do so, *and* in deed and gesture, beyond the words. Learn a little of what it's like to be them, that we may come to understand that peace is worth fighting hard for again, as hard as Dr. King fought for it.

And now, before I conclude, I invite all of our military veterans present with us, to please stand.

Thank you for your service.

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