

# Sunday Service

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Berkeley Fellowship Of Unitarian Universalists

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## The Legacy of War: A Son's Story

There was an ongoing tension in the room. Around the table in one of the meeting rooms in the Berkeley City Hall complex, sat an array of Berkeley City officials, military personnel and military retirees and Berkeley citizens. The tension rose out of an ancient conflict: How can people take up weapons against others, even if they believe it is for a just cause, and remain morally, ethically and spiritually balanced?

The tension in the room that day rose out of the sincere desire to honor the Berkeley women and men who were serving or who had once served as military personnel, many of whom faced that ancient conflict throughout their time in uniform---the tension rose out of the desire to honor them, while at the same time ... refusing to back away from exposing war for exactly what it is: a failure of human wisdom and compassion, a human failure of the very worst sort.

When I first entered the room, I was immediately worried. The group I had thought would be there, who had attended the previous meeting, a group of less than a dozen civilian men and women with a couple of military representatives, had expanded. Half a dozen elder military retirees, and two young men in uniform had swelled the ranks of the

committee. One of the uniformed men was a young Marine, sharp in his olive dress uniform, with a large and muscular build. "Oh G-d," I thought, "now we're in for it." I imagined that he and his navy partner, equally sharply dressed, would try to dominate the meeting, pushing some hyper-patriotic vision of how the memorial should be conducted. How very wrong I was.

Once the meeting began, and the tension began to build, I watched the young Marine closely. He stayed quiet ... until about half-way through. The argument that had gripped the room was whether a Gold Star Father, well known for speaking publically about the loss of his son in Iraq, whether his presence would raise a controversy by focusing on opposition to the Iraq war instead of focusing on honoring Berkeley's veterans. It was clear that some of those present believed that allowing the father to speak, especially because his name was known and was associated with opposition to the war, was unacceptable. Their fervor and adamant refusal to allow the father to be a part of the service seemed to be creating an immovable wall against the possibility of his presence.

It was then that the young Marine chose to speak up.

In a voice softened by a Carolina lilt, but charged with well restrained emotion, he said, "With all due respect, I joined the Marines and have committed myself to serve just so people like this Gold Star Father could speak up without fear of harm ... just so he, or others, could speak out, even if I disagree with him." There was a visible flinch that crossed the bodies of the military retirees; their resistance to his words was evident, but the power with which he had spoken, squelched any open, verbal reaction.

But for me, it was a moment of epiphany. The first epiphany of two that would come to me through the whole experience with that Veteran's Day event. In that first epiphany I saw something very powerful. The insight was this: My veteran father had given his life for the very belief that that young Marine had spoken to us all.

The only problem was that my father had "given" (and that word is in quotes), he had "given" his life at the end of a long and horrific tunnel of emotional and mental turmoil more than twenty years after he had left the service. He had given his life ... but, more tragically, his life was taken by his own hand. He committed suicide at the age of 54 (in the throes of Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, or PTSD, as it is most often called).

Here, at this point in writing this sermon, I hesitated. "Should I really tell the details? Shouldn't I keep my father's personal struggle secret ... to protect his integrity ... to retain some shred of honor and dignity for his life, and his person ... eventhough he has been dead, to this life, for almost forty years?" But then I realized that to remain quiet about his story and its details would be to feed into the very kind of forces that led to his death in the first place. It would feed the shame of being mentally unbalanced and reinforce the idea that he and he alone was responsible for killing himself by overdosing on sedatives. His suicide was perpetrated out of his terrible fear that he would have to go to jail. He had been caught smuggling drugs across the Mexican border, drugs that he needed in order to feed his addiction. But his real addiction was not sedatives, it was alcohol. His misinformed psychiatrist, trying to stop my father's alcoholism ... without understanding its causes ... had prescribed antabuse, which makes the body severely sick if alcohol is consumed.

To remain quiet would push all of that shame and confusion into the closet.

To remain quiet with you here would also feed the idea that it is morally permissible for countries to conduct war, even if in self defense, without simultaneously recognizing and publically affirming war's fundamental abuse of the human spirit---because it involves abusing the earth, violating other human beings---and, because most corrosively, it involves killing. To remain quiet would feed that belief, a belief that is probably one of the most destructive to the planet and to human kind that we, as a species, have created. And ... it would also lock the shame my father felt into a dank cellar of moral catatonia ... it would lock that shame into the same hell hole where we have imprisoned our genocide against the indigenous peoples of this land, the same pit where slavery is buried, the same immoral crater where the realities of every war our country has perpetrated is hidden ... and festering.

My father gave his life for this country ... but he didn't know it. He didn't know it and he sure as hell didn't get to appreciate it. My father gave his life for his country, by his own hand, because his country was ignorant, perhaps willfully ignorant, about the moral and psychological consequences of war ... and because it was too spiritually and ethically bankrupt to offer him true solace.

My father only killed one person in his life. Himself. He never killed another soldier. He never killed another human being, neither woman, man nor child. But his participation in war drove him to finally become a killer, a killer of the only soldier who could stop his suffering, himself.

He died, on the battle field of his own misery and pain; he died from the ravages of what we now call Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome.

Basically, PTSD, is the psychological inability to escape the very intimate memories of the trauma of war, or of any other violent experience ... the inability to escape the psychic, neurological, and personal impact that trauma works on the whole human person. It is a newly named disease that has actually been with human kind as long as humans have been conscious---arising from massive and violent trauma, either naturally caused, by earth-related phenomena---or "unnaturally" caused by fellow humans.

My father served his first military tour of duty in the Navy during the terrible violence of the Second World War in the South Pacific. He returned to our home in Philadelphia with a jungle induced skin disease he called the "crud," and also with an unrest that caused him to lead our family to the west coast where he took a job with the San Diego Gas & Electric Company. He served his second tour of military duty four years later in the Korean conflict. Though war was never declared there, it was waged on that unlucky peninsula with all the violent force that a triumphant US could bring to bear, and with all the insane willingness to sacrifice thousands of troops in Kamakazi like assualts the Chinese and North Koreans were willing to launch.

My father returned from Korea broken. He was sent to the Navy Psychiatric facility on Treasure Island. He emerged from there a violent, abusive, self-hating and rageful man. He had always been a sensitive, artistic and gregarious man, and it was that sensitivity, I believe, that the ravages of war so deeply distorted. Those ravages led him to live out the

remainder of his life in an ever downward spiral into self hate, violence and social dysfunction that lasted twenty years.

It is the way of war. Its legacy is always, always and always as bad as its violent center. Jimmy Carter, a much better ex-President than he was a president, said in his acceptance of the Nobel Prize for peace, "War may sometimes be a necessary evil. But no matter how necessary, it is always evil, never a good. We will not learn how to live together in peace by killing each other's children."

The second epiphany I had that came through my participation in the Veteran's Day memorial last year was when I prepared to offer the Benediction to the assembly of citizens, musicians, military personnel, city officials, and Code Pink members who were protesting (particularly their belief that the event would take place without the Iraq war being mentioned). That epiphany, that waking up, came as I realized in writing the prayer, that my father's "shell shock" and "battle fatigue" labels, given to his condition by naval doctors, had in fact been PTSD ... which means that the wars in which he had served, and then that inadequately treated syndrome were the real cause of his suffering and his death. It had nothing to do with his character, his person or his moral center.

To end my sermon I want to offer that Benediction again this morning. I want to offer it to you because most of you were not there last Memorial Day. I want to offer it, again, as a further tribute to my father ... because having had a year to think over the insights I had last year, I now have an even deeper respect for a man I condemned for most of my life. Respect and compassion, both for him, whose abandonment by his government led him into the valley of the shadow of death from which he did not

emerge, and compassion for myself, for I have struggled with the legacy of his violence for close to sixty years. I want to offer it again ... despite my ambivalence of lifting up Veterans of war and not also of peace---or at least both ... I want to offer it again, because despite the fact that Joe McDonald has led such a service for the last six or seven years, the City of Berkeley basically refused to support any kind of service this year. May our time here today fill that void.

Here is the Benediction with my opening words:

Let us join our hearts and minds in prayer and meditation for our closing Benediction.

I want to offer this Benediction, not only for all the Veterans here, but also for my father, Arthur A. Kuhwald, who died as a result of his undiagnosed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder from his service in the Pacific and in the Korean conflict. This prayer is for you, Dad.

Gracious Sacred Power of Love and Peace, Courage and Humility:

May all gathered here this day know the deep, deep blessings of peace, and the abiding power of love, love that stands against all inequity and that heals all wounds caused by violence and hate.

May we this hour and this day harken to the call of President Dwight D. Eisenhower who served as Commander in Chief of all allied forces in the second war in human history that engulfed the entire world. In October of 1954, after Armistice Day had been changed to Veterans' Day, President Eisenhower fervently called all citizens of our country to observe a day of remembrance of the sacrifices made by women and men who, casting aside all thoughts of their own

safety, put themselves in harm's way for the preservation of human freedom and human rights. May we heed Ike's words to rededicate ourselves to the task of promoting an enduring peace, the very peace that all who have served this country have sought so diligently.

May our observance here today leave us with a feeling of deep humility, the humility that comes from fully recognizing our simple humanity, our fragile vulnerability, and our capacity for a fierce courage to stand tall for human integrity, and to stand down when we are misguided by anything that leads us away from honor, from love, from peace and from anything that lessens our humanity.

May our simple, earnest, yet flawed attempts to find a way to peace, not only on the terrible fields of armed conflict, but right here in our beloved city, in the small committees that work to find a way to honor what is good and to bring us into harmony without causing further division---may those attempts lead us to greater compassion, and a deeper respect for each other, which are the underpinnings of true peace.

What the women and men whose presence we call to our attention this day know is that to give beyond one's self, to give service even when the costs are frightening and very, very dear, is a task of the greatest spiritual significance. A task that calls us further, calls us always, to a healing that is beyond conflict.

Abraham Lincoln, standing on the edge of that horrific battle ground called Gettysburg, knew the truth of that need for healing---and he reached all the way across we the living to lift up those who had given the final sacrifice, thereby honoring all who serve and who love freedom, and calling us to a further task. Listen again to his words:

It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us. . .that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion. . . that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain. . . that this nation . . . shall have a new birth of freedom. . . and that government of the people. . .by the people. . .for the people. . . shall not perish from the earth.

May our observance here today serve, in some small way, to further that resolve and that freedom.

May all that is holy, all that is Sacred, all that is love, abide with us as we leave this place.

Blessings on you all.

Aho.

Ashé. Amen. Amien. Shalom & Blessed Be.

Gracias y Namasté.