

**Becoming a Congregation Where All Bodies Count:  
Memorial Day, Fallen Soldiers, and Civilian Casualties**

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My father who fought in WWII, he tried to tell me that, “War is not as glamorous as they make it out to be.” But I was too stubborn and bull-headed to listen. When you are young, you want to get that experience for yourself . . . and, boy, I asked for it. I really found out. I saw more than I really wanted to see. . . . You [see] how war affects the civilians in the area. Every house you look at has bomb craters or bullet holes in it . . . . It makes them put their humanity aside to make it in a war zone. You see all that stuff and you see how it affects you and everyone around you, and you say, “Why are we even doing this anymore?” [I found out] we were in the area of Iraq that was supposed to be the Garden of Eden, the cradle of civilization where [humankind] began. I had to ask myself, “Why am I carrying around an M16 in the Garden of Eden?”

— Kevin Benderman, Combat Veteran, U.S. Army,  
*[Soldiers of Conscience](#)*

When I listen to people’s plans for Memorial Day and Labor Day, including my own many years, these occasions can sometimes seem like little more than three-day weekends marking the beginning and end of the summer vacation season. But **Labor Day is much more than a federal holiday on which many Americans don’t have to labor. At its best, it is about celebrating the working class and protecting the rights of workers.**

Memorial Day is also much more than a federal holiday. It is meant to honor and remember all who have died while serving in the U.S. Armed Forces. And on this Memorial Day Weekend, I would like to pause at the beginning of this sermon to drop one more stone into the water in recognition that **as we sit in the peace of this sanctuary, we remain in a time of war and many soldiers remain at risk.**

On this Memorial Day Weekend, it is also significant to note that this past Thursday, President Obama delivered a long overdue speech on national security. In that lengthy address, the section that stood out most to me was the following:

I intend to engage Congress about the existing Authorization to Use Military Force, or AUMF, to determine how we can continue to fight terrorism without keeping America on a perpetual wartime footing. The AUMF is now nearly

twelve years old. The Afghan War is coming to an end. Core al-Qaida is a shell of its former self. Groups like [Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula] must be dealt with, but in the years to come, not every collection of thugs that labels themselves al-Qaida will pose a credible threat to the United States. Unless we discipline our thinking, our definitions, our actions, we may be drawn into more wars we don't need to fight or continue to grant presidents unbound powers more suited for traditional armed conflicts between nation states. So I look forward to engaging Congress and the American people in efforts to refine and ultimately repeal the AUMF's mandate. And I will not sign laws designed to expand this mandate further. Our systematic effort to dismantle terrorist organizations must continue. **But this war, like all wars, must end. That's what history advises. It's what our democracy demands.**<sup>1</sup>

I can only hope, as with many of President Obama's speeches, that his inspiring rhetoric becomes backed-up with concrete action.

A timely presidential speech on national defense is one way of commemorating Memorial Day and all those who have died in the struggle to "insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence . . . and secure the Blessings of Liberty." But on this Memorial Day Weekend, I would also like to invite us to consider how we as a congregation commemorate Memorial Day. To do so, I would like to share with you the practices of two other Unitarian Universalist congregations.

My colleague The Rev. Kathleen McTigue served as the senior minister of the Unitarian Society of New Haven for 21 year before last year becoming the Director of the new [UU College of Social Justice](#). McTigue, in her 2011 book *Shine and Shadow*, wrote the following about the practice of that UU Congregation in Connecticut that she served for more than two decades:

**In church on Sunday mornings we read aloud the names of the American soldiers killed in Iraq or Afghanistan each week.** Alone in my study the night before, I speak each name out loud and then wonder about the stories. I imagine

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<sup>1</sup> "Text of President Obama's May 23 speech on national security (full transcript)," available at [http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/president-obamas-may-23-speech-on-national-security-as-prepared-for-delivery/2013/05/23/02c35e30-c3b8-11e2-9fe2-6ee52d0eb7c1\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/president-obamas-may-23-speech-on-national-security-as-prepared-for-delivery/2013/05/23/02c35e30-c3b8-11e2-9fe2-6ee52d0eb7c1_story.html).

these soldiers as the babies they once were, held in someone's arms at a baptism or naming ceremony. The proud relatives gathered around as the name was formally bestowed, and everyone beamed as the baby cooed or wailed or fidgeted. There was so much gladness and pride in each moment of naming, and not once did anyone imagine that the road their baby walked would end eighteen or twenty years later in a mix of blood and dust halfway around the world. As part of a witness for peace on Memorial Day, a cairn of stones was built at a busy downtown intersection in Hartford, each stone bearing the name of a fallen American soldier, or one of the tens of thousands of Iraqi and Afghani civilians who have died in these wars. How do you choose one name from thousands, to symbolize so much carnage and loss? I finally brought three stones to the cairn, one for each of my own three children. Each stone bore the name of a child who had died on the birthday of one of mine. As I placed the stones, I wondered about their names. Always there is a story.

From time to time, I hear of congregations with similar practices, and I will confess that my initial reaction is usually a mix of heaviness, pain, inspiration, and challenge. I can't help thinking, "That's a lot to hold each week": all those names, all those stories, all that brokenness and loss.

We come to this sanctuary, this place of unity and peace, each week for many different reasons: for comfort and challenge, for peace and perspective, for insight and inspiration. We also come to confront the problems of the world and to combine our efforts in making this world a better place for all people. And what does it mean that every day for more than a decade soldiers and civilians in far away lands have been deeply affected by war, yet weeks sometimes go by where none of that is explicitly acknowledged here in our public worship.

At the same time, I suspect that this and other socially progressive congregations wrestle publicly with the ethical problems of war and peace much more frequently than many more traditional religious communities. But my sense is that **there are extremely few congregations who consistently "read aloud the names of the American soldiers killed in Iraq or**

**Afghanistan.”** If we were to adopt a practice like that, how might it affect who we are individually and who we are becoming as a congregation?

Of course, there are many ways to engage, hold, and transform the pain of the world, so I’m not insisting that a regular roll call has to be our practice. But I do want to offer it to you as one congregation’s attempt to shape its focus and mission.

To offer a related example even closer to home, this morning the First Unitarian Church of Baltimore here in Maryland is at this very moment in the middle of its third annual Memorial Day service in which all those in attendance are invited to take turns reading aloud the names of all Maryland and Delaware servicemen and women who have died in the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars. The [list](#) grows longer each year. The organizer behind this ritual writes:

This service grows out of my unease that **Memorial Day commemorations often obscure the reality of death and the responsibility that we all have as citizens to think carefully about putting the lives of fellow Americans at risk.** We use evasive language such as ‘the fallen’ and [rarely] ask ‘Why?’<sup>2</sup>

As with the weekly roll call practiced by our New Haven congregation, this annual memorial list of names would be meaningful and moving, but also challenging and heavy.

Although I have never attended a service in either of these two congregations, it may also be significant to note that at least to my knowledge, neither of their practices involve keeping regular track of the civilian casualties that result from U.S. military intervention — what is sometimes called “collateral damage.” The U.S. policy toward keeping track of enemy and civilian casualties of war was perhaps most succinctly and infamously addressed in 2002 by Gen. Tommy R. Franks, who said curtly to the press, **“You know, we don’t do body counts.”**<sup>3</sup> Around that time, a British military spokesman echoed these sentiments: “We don’t do head counts, and we certainly don’t publicize them.” I want to offer one more quote along these lines. Capt. Frank Thorp of the Navy, who is Central Command’s chief spokesman has said,

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<sup>2</sup> *“This service grows out of my unease”* — Email from Dr. Michael S. Franch, Ethical Culture Leader Affiliate Minister, First Unitarian Church, Baltimore.

<sup>3</sup> *“we don’t do body counts”* — John Broder, “U.S. Military Has No Count Of Iraqi Dead In Fighting” (April 2, 2003), available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/02/world/nation-war-casualties-us-military-has-no-count-iraqi-dead-fighting.html>.

“Ultimately, the numbers are not knowable. And besides, that number may not be an indication of anything.”

From the perspective of Unitarian Universalism — and speaking at least for myself — I cannot be satisfied with those responses. Our First Principle is “The inherent worth and dignity of every person.” In my reading, **every person means just that: every person — friend and enemy, soldier or civilian.** That is not to say that there aren’t consequences to our actions, but transparency about *all* casualties seems essential to me in raising awareness about the consequences of our nation’s actions in a government that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people” and with armed forces that are supported by our tax dollars. And as one theologian has said, **“by becoming a [congregation] that does body counts,” the hope is to, “become a [congregation] in which all bodies count.”**<sup>4</sup>

More recently, the U.S. government has been disclosing more statistics on all casualties, but many media sources estimate that their numbers skew low.<sup>5</sup> And although Memorial Day is principally about remembering U.S. soldiers who have died while serving, remembering all the casualties at some point — whether on Memorial Day or at another time — seems also vitally important. Along these lines, “A 2001 study on civilians in war by the International Committee of the Red Cross showed a shift in a stark statistic: **In World War I, 9 soldiers were killed for every civilian, while in today's wars 10 civilians die for every soldier.**”<sup>6</sup>

Related to this statistic about the changing ratio of soldier to civilian casualties, there has been an accompanying change in the percentage of the U.S. population involved in war:

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<sup>4</sup> Katie Grimes, “A Church That Does Body Counts: The Immorality of Unmanned Drone Strikes” (September 25, 2012, available at <http://womenintheology.org/2012/09/25/a-church-that-does-body-counts-the-immorality-of-unmanned-drone-strikes/>).

<sup>5</sup> Sabrina Tavernise, “U.S. Quietly Issues Estimate of Iraqi Civilian Casualties” (October 30, 2005), available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/30/international/middleeast/30civilians.html?pagewanted=all>.

<sup>6</sup> “A 2001 study on civilians in war” — “U.S. Quietly Issues Estimate of Iraqi Civilian Casualties,” available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/30/international/middleeast/30civilians.html?pagewanted=all>. See also **Iraq Body Count**, available at <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/>.

The average age of WWII soldiers was 29, and 12 percent of Americans served; for Vietnam it was 23, and about 9 percent of the population served. **For the Global War on Terror, the average age of a soldier being deployed for the first time is only 19, and less than 1 percent have served.**<sup>7</sup>

I am part of that 99% who have not served in our nation's armed services. And as I look back at my family's history, I can see the shrinking statistics of military service carved into my own family tree. On my mother's side, my uncle served in the marines, and during my childhood I vividly remember visiting him, my aunt and cousins not only when they were stationed in California (which meant we got to visit Disneyland in Anaheim), but also when they were stationed in Oslo, Norway (which meant we got to visit the original Legoland theme park in Billund, Denmark, which opened back in 1968). My father served in the army during the Korean War, but only stateside, and my maternal grandfather was in the navy. My Uncle Wilber was killed in action during World War II.

In contrast to these names from previous generations within my own family, I know only a few people, inside or outside my family, who are or have been stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan in these years of perpetual war that have followed the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001. I knew a few people in college who were in ROTC, and then served overseas. And my seminary roommate is a chaplain in the 176th Medical Brigade of the U.S. Army Reserve. Also, from the seven years I spent in Louisiana as an associate pastor, at least three members of the Young Adult group I started have enlisted in the Air Force. I find those numbers somewhat troubling only because there is a strong sense in which the decision these young people made to enlist was motivated by economics — what some critics have called the “poverty draft.” As one theologian has said, “If our society provided a living wage in any job, affordable housing, free universal health care, and high-quality education through college, it is not clear how many young people would still volunteer for military service.” And if those social benefits were in place, then

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<sup>7</sup> Logan Mehl-Laituri, “How to Treat Veterans in Your Church: Recognizing them and their service doesn't mean making them stand up on Sunday morning,” available at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/november-web-only/how-to-treat-veterans-in-your-church.html?paging=off>.

it would likely also be the case that, “the struggle of combat veterans to receive adequate treatments and be restored to civilian life would be greatly eased.”<sup>8</sup>

To be clear, my intention with that last quote is not intended to be antimilitary. I am a pragmatist, not a pacifist. I have great respect for the many people who freely choose to join the military for a host of different reasons, including many people in this congregation at various points in their lives. And I’m grateful to all those who have risked or sacrificed their lives to protect the freedoms we enjoy — including the freedoms we enjoy in this congregation: the freedom of the pulpit and the freedom of the pew, the freedom to say and do what our conscience dictates without any outside orthodoxy forcing us to tow the party line or support a state religion.

At the same time, as I explored in a sermon back in February — in addition to our training and funding our armed forces for when we need them — **we also desperately need to train and fund citizens to be equally as committed and as highly trained in the nonviolent activism of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. as U.S. soldiers are committed and trained in the techniques of modern warfare.** We need, as a nation, to see that risking death and even dying in nonviolent activism, working for the cause of social justice, is equally as courageous and vital as the willingness to risk death in war. Indeed, there are many times when nonviolent activism could provide an alternative to war without sowing the seeds of future conflicts.<sup>9</sup>

I should also clarify that although I titled this sermon “The Right of Conscience and the Crystallization of Conscience,” through the sermon writing process, I realized that I had much more to say about Memorial Day than I originally projected. So, I suspect another sermon is forthcoming on conscience and military service. However, for anyone who came this morning specifically hoping to hear about the advertised topic let me say briefly that the first part of the sermon title, “The Right of Conscience,” refers to our Fifth UU Principle: “The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.” The second part of the sermon title, “The Crystallization of Conscience” refers to the

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<sup>8</sup> “If our society provided” — Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini, *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury after War*, 98.

<sup>9</sup> “equally as committed and as highly trained in the nonviolent activism” — see Carl Gregg, “Zero Dark Thirty: Torture, Disavowal, and the Oscars,” available at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2013/02/zero-dark-thirty-torture-disavowal-and-the-oscars/>.

phrase the military itself uses for the process by which active duty soldiers become Conscientious Objectors: they are said to undergo a “crystallization of conscience.”

I have a long-term interest in the ethics of Conscientious Objector status, and my interest has only heightened since becoming a Unitarian Universalist. I think it is vitally important for us to publicly wrestle with the tension between our tradition’s commitment to individual conscience and democracy in contrast to the military’s hierarchy and current demand that CO status can only be granted to those who oppose “participation in war in any form.” In response, **a growing number of people are calling for CO status to be expanded to allow for those who conscience objects to *particular* wars.** I do plan to preach another sermon soon that explores these dynamics around conscience more fully. In the meantime, if you are interested, I encourage you to explore the website of the [Truth Commission on Conscience in War](http://conscienceinwar.org/), which launched on March 21, 2010 with a Public Hearing at the historic Riverside Church in New York City with the stated goal “to honor and protect freedom of conscience for our nation's service members.”<sup>10</sup> We need to give our soldiers, when necessary, the freedom to follow their conscience in the same way that boy did in the story Lora told earlier.<sup>11</sup>

For now, as this sermon draws to a close, let me leave you with one final thought. I said earlier that, when we aren’t careful, Memorial Day can become either just another holiday or drenched in shallow platitudes that do not respect the reality of war. So, I leave you with this quote which challenges all of us to follow our conscience — to have the tenacity to do what we know to be right within our deepest self. The quote goes like this:

Love without courage and wisdom is sentimentality,  
as with the ordinary church member.

Courage without love and wisdom is foolhardiness,  
as with the ordinary soldier.

Wisdom without love and courage is cowardice,  
as with the ordinary intellectual.

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<sup>10</sup> “Truth Commission on Conscience in War: to honor and protect freedom of conscience for our nation's service members,” available at <http://conscienceinwar.org/>.

<sup>11</sup> “Story 1: The Wise Teacher's Test,” available at <http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/tales/session2/sessionplan/stories/123165.shtml>.

The one with love, courage, and wisdom is the one in a million  
who moves the world.

On this Memorial Day Weekend, when we honor those who have died in military service, may the memory of their lives inspire us to choose lives of love, courage, and wisdom that together we might move the world. May we remember. And may it be so.

**Films for Further Study**

Soldiers of Conscience

The Ground Truth

The Invisible War

Lioness

Restrepo

Stop-Loss

Taxi to the Dark Side