

CALLING ALL PATRIOTS!

In 1866 in Waterloo, New York, Memorial Day was officially born. The women of the town gathered in a labor of love *and* sorrow to create floral wreathes, which the townspeople then carried in solemn procession and placed on the graves of Civil War soldiers, both Blue and Gray, North and South.

The intent of this event, which was first called Decoration Day, was to mourn and remember *all* those soldiers, without distinguishing among them, in an attempt to transcend differences of allegiance as well as to emphasize the horror and loss of war for everyone. Very similar in purpose to Unitarian Julia Ward Howe's peace-focused Mother's Day Proclamation of 1870.

Now, 142 years later, we still celebrate Memorial Day as a national holiday, but sadly, it bears little resemblance to the original in style or intent. The meaning of Memorial Day has shifted from healing and reconciliation to today's celebration of war and might, complete with parades rather than processions, fireworks, picnics, and parties rather than prayer services. While this change has been slow and unplanned, I think it's dulled our American spirit and clouded our patriotic perspective.

Now I don't quarrel with the conventional understanding that war memories were for the purpose of honoring those who lost their lives in service to their country. Yes, yes, yes with gratitude and reverence, as well as for all those scarred by war, the walking wounded. But I would suggest that while honoring our fallen and broken, we also broaden our community memories of war to stand in alignment with the originators of Memorial Day, in short, to stand as a day of somber reflection and reconciliation.

A day when we might squarely address difficult moral questions such as: What is worth dying or killing for? How do we defend what we value? Who has the right to make those decisions? Who are the victims and who are the victors of combat? Of course, we won't necessarily come to a consensus on these moral issues whether on Memorial Day weekend or ever, but as responsible patriots and religious questors, we can't avoid responding to them simply by ignoring the holiday or by flexing our muscles.

Rather at the core of Memorial Day must be community mourning not unrelenting celebration, a time of silence more than loud noise. For we must impress upon our young that armed conflict is always a tragic last resort, that the memories of war must always contain the seeds of peace, and that those seeds should be tended faithfully by every last American.

So, in tribute to some of the deeper and original sentiments of Decoration Day, I offer my own clumsy ode to what it might mean to be a peacemaker in today's world. It comes in the form of a letter I wrote to a Unitarian Universalist marine some 15 years ago. I've revised the letter, but its core message remains.

I address it to all Americans wrestling with issues of internal, interpersonal and international peace-making, which, hopefully, should leave no one out of its range.

First, some background. A Unitarian Universalist acquaintance from the East Coast had a son in the Marine Corps based here at Camp Pendleton. This young man went UA ("unexplained absence") after experiencing extreme upset in response to something he saw at the camp.

In the throes of considerable personal hell, Bruce returned to the Marines, still confused, and according to his father, in need of ministerial support. There was no fellow

recruit, officer, or chaplain at the Camp who could hear, let alone, appreciate, his raw anguish. So I was invited to counsel with him. My visit proved helpful to Bruce as well as transformative for me. And I hope some of its insights prove useful to San Dieguitans on this Memorial Day weekend in 2008.

Bruce was a reserved yet muscular 19 year-old who for seven years had dreamed of becoming a Marine and following in the footsteps of both his uncle and cousin. He was among the top achievers during basic training, so when he jumped camp, it startled everyone, including his buddies. I think he surprised himself as well.

Bruce was a brave young man saddled with a tormented soul. He still enjoyed the drama and grandeur of Marinehood but had grown to loathe the system. He appreciated the discipline of military life, yet he'd learned an irrevocable truth about himself: he was aggressive all right, but not prone to violence. Bruce simply couldn't kill, in any way, shape, or form.

Bruce confided that he'd always been an emotionally expressive young man, crying openly as a child and youth. Now his inner feelings were stuffed under the standard regimen of the Marines. Just prior to joining the Marines, Bruce was joyfully involved with a group of pre-schoolers as an assistant teacher. In fact, he said that he had but two pressing goals for the future and, now, neither of them was being a career Marine.

The first dream was to own and manage a gym, with special emphasis on bodybuilding; his second mission in life was to teach pre-school children again. Somehow Bruce hoped to blend these visions in one adult life. Now I can rarely recall hearing a 19 year-old male express either of those specific desires, let alone both of them

together. But there was no doubt in my mind that Bruce was the kind of guy who would realize his dreams.

He told me that the pre-school children were like little trees that he was summoned to cultivate, prune, and nourish. Now in the Marines he was being trained to cut down similar, if older, trees, and his soul was utterly torn in half. He couldn't just stand up and quit the Marines, because he was the kind of guy who honored commitments; plus, to get out of his military contract at this stage would require extreme measures. Although trapped in severe conscience-pain, Bruce vowed neither to commit suicide nor assault anybody.

I reminded Bruce that quitting the Marines was complicated, to be sure, but quitting on his soul, an even tougher move, was ultimately at stake. I asked him to remember the trees: the little ones he was tending back in Michigan, the foreign trees he was being trained to cut down, and the ever-growing tree he represented himself. I gave him my phone numbers, lest he ever need me again, whatever decision he made. When I got back to my car, I found myself quivering with deep tears for both red-blooded Marines and nonviolent ministers, and for all those conflicted with elements of the warrior and the peacemaker clashing in our very consciences.

And I was reminded of the wisdom of that hard-nosed pacifist, A.J. Muste, who wrote in 1965 that “those who go into war having seriously thought their way to a decision are on a higher moral level than the smug pacifists who have little notion of the fierce ambiguities the decision involves!”

So I wrote him a heartfelt letter.

Dear Bruce,

I want you to know that our lengthy conversation on February 8th was a powerful one for me. And what follows may say more about me than be useful for you, but it's all my soul can offer.

From a young age on I've been motored by a peaceful, accommodating personality. Cops and robbers never held much fascination for me. I can't ever remember desiring a Red Ryder rifle for Christmas, although there was a period in my life when I was enthralled with water pistols. And the only time I ever handled or shot a real gun was in a Boy Scout drill during a camp-out. I not only flunked the exercise physically but emotionally as well. I came away from that experience fearful that shooting at tin cans might be a warm-up exercise for shooting at animals or humans. And I remember feeling weird, because other scouts seemed to get a real "bang" out of firing guns.

Even when I played sports, which I did with fervor and excellence (I'm reminded, Bruce, of your passion for wrestling and weight-lifting), my prime drawback was lack of aggressiveness at "crunch-time." My natural meekness would fade into a kind of unwanted passivity. In a nutshell, I seemed "too gentle to live among the wolves," let alone run with them.

Oh, by the way, Bruce, none of my close male relatives were war veterans, and due to age and academic status, I always managed to avert conscription. I was too immature, perhaps cowardly as well, to obtain "conscientious objector" status, although that was clearly what I believed and who I was. No wonder I became such a devoted CO counselor during the Vietnam War, Bruce, helping braver ones than I pursue what my conscience had sidestepped.

Peace activist Walter Wink describes himself thusly: “I don’t see myself as a pacifist. I see myself rather as a violent person trying to become nonviolent.” On the contrary, Bruce, I view myself as a coward-type, a sanitized pacifist if you will, struggling the road toward becoming genuinely non-violent as well. Wink and I dwell at different spots on the continuum; nonetheless, both of us require more creative aggression to reach our mutual destination of forceful nonviolence. How would you review yourself in this regard?

Bruce, let me say, first off, that your resistance to taking another person’s life is at the heart of nonviolence. By refusing to kill human beings you’re proclaiming the supreme worth of every single individual, not only your compatriots but also our enemies as well. To kill is perhaps the height of arrogance; for it means playing God, who alone gives life, and who entrusts it to us to cherish and develop, as a gift received with grateful love. Like those trees you’ve been talking about.

As Unitarians you and I believe in the sacred dignity of every human *unit*. As Universalists we contend that transformation is *universally* accessible to everyone or to no one. And the only salvation worth having must always include brothers and sisters, known and foreign, buddies and foes.

More confession, Bruce. Being tranquil by temperament and conciliatory by conviction, I’ve had considerable spiritual difficulty in becoming a more tough-minded, stouthearted peacemaker. I can all too easily become a smug, self-righteous ideologue: mouthing peaceful platitudes yet far removed from the raging battles of reality. Sometimes, my resistance to burgeoning, obstinate evils has been so passive that no one even noticed I was resisting, because I wasn’t. I was wearing cowardice in disguise.

What I'm urging in a nutshell, Bruce, is for folks like you and me to be brave, not spineless...to become aggressive but not violent.

While we're at it, Bruce let's wrestle a bit with another thorny concept that the Marines talk a lot about, namely, being a warrior. The term warrior is sullied, perhaps irredeemable, what with its history of paid soldiers whose sole mission is to find and destroy the opposition. Usually in our modern world, when the word warrior is uttered, war is spoken as well.

Yet in current women's and men's sacred literature, a compelling interpretation of the warrior archetype denotes those individuals who are protectors of righteousness, boundary-setters, and guardians of goodness. For example, Greenpeace, the activist coalition of environmentalists, insistently promotes its mission as tough "Rainbow Warriors."

Warrior energy, at its healthiest, aggressively pushes toward humane possibilities. Yet if disconnected from compassion, the warrior can surely be driven by a zeal for cruelty. The shadow side is exemplified in any governmental, religious, business or military enterprise that employs its power to abuse and destroy life.

So, on the one hand, I stand ready to retire the concept of "warrior" until we've shown a sincere willingness, for example, to dismantle nuclear weapons worldwide. Yet, on the other hand, I know, Bruce, that in my efforts to approximate justice and combat wrongs I could use greater guts, more aggressiveness.

There's another twisting truth on my heart. It's tempting to place all the so-called "good guys" in the non-military camp, yet I want you to know that, in your own heritage of Unitarian Universalism, there have been brave champions within our American

military establishment. Did you know that the Secretary of Defense under Clinton, Republican Bill Cohen from Maine, is an active UU layman? Cohen happens to be a very introspective man who writes poetry and, yes, worked hard to master the mysteries of the Pentagon. Cohen reminds us that in Chinese culture, the generals and warriors, as well as political leaders, were often poets.

What I'm driving at Bruce is that it's naive to stereotype military leaders as being violence-mongers. Some are and some aren't. And to complicate matters, I've known my share of public pacifists who were physically abusive at home.

Again I confess, my friend, that truth is stubbornly complex, yet I beckon you to dwell in its messy midst, as you valiantly sculpt a life of holy aggression.

Nonviolence invites you and me to find creative alternatives beyond violence, to seize the moral initiative, to assert your own dignity as a human being, to discover inner resources of power you didn't know you had, to expose the injustice of the dominator system, to be willing to suffer rather than retaliate, to force the oppressor to see you in a new light, to be willing to undergo the penalty of breaking unjust laws. Wow, there's nothing soft or feeble about any of those actions, Bruce, is there?

And my friend there will be situations that are crushingly tragic, where nothing we can possibly do will help. Holding hands and singing "Give peace a chance" sometimes doesn't stop warlords from stealing food from starving babies. There exist woeful binds when the violent and the nonviolent alike are forced to suffer the agony of irrelevance and may themselves reside among the victims.

Furthermore, there's nothing magical about nonviolence. It requires courage, self-discipline, and a well-integrated spirituality. It entails a willingness to learn from our

enemies. It demands the ability to desire their safety as well as our own, to love the part in them that tries to hurt others, even while we refuse to cooperate with it.

And no matter how nonviolent we purport to be in theory or practice, Bruce, you and I must never envision evil as if it were something arising outside ourselves. We must confess our complicity in the very evils we abhor. So, beware, Bruce, of the sin of self-righteousness, as you struggle with your conscience to stay in or leave the Marines.

In closing, Bruce, your final allegiance must be paid not to the Marines or to our shared religious heritage of Unitarian Universalism or even to your parents, but to an innermost voice that impels you to stay truthful to yourself and in loving alignment with the greater Creation.

And, above all, my friend, be patient with and kind to yourself, knowing that there's no decision that you can ever make—however honest, brave, and compassionate—that will prove pure or pain-free.

Your soul-brother... Rev. Tom

**** Friends, I wish I knew what happened to Bruce, you probably do too, but, you know what...that's not the point of our mentoring exchanges in life...our job isn't to reap certain results or garner personal gratification, our job is simply to listen deeply, then speak our truths in love. I was blessed that my path crossed with that of Bruce!

May 25, 2008
Tom Owen-Towle