

REMEMBER THEM TOO

A Sermon Preached by Cheryl M. Walker
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York
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Where I live the sound of helicopters is not unfamiliar. I live on the river, just south of the George Washington Bridge so, in the morning, I often hear and see helicopters from the various local news channels that give morning traffic reports. The other morning, while I was working at my desk well past the time for traffic reports, I heard not one or two helicopters but several of them. I looked out of the window and I saw Navy and Coast Guard choppers coming up and down the Hudson. My first reaction was one of fear; after all I remember the sound of fighter jets overhead after the attack on the World Trade Center. Living in New York City and knowing that we are a prime target for all sorts of groups, it was not so irrational to wonder and react that way.

But this was a different sound and somehow I knew it wasn't an attack. I began to wonder if someone was lost in the river and the Coast Guard and Navy were on a search and rescue mission. It took me a few moments as I watched them to realize that it was Fleet Week in New York and this was some sort of display exercise. I was immediately put at ease. In hindsight I should have known there would be ships in the river and helicopters above; it's that way every year during Fleet Week. But in these times of war, what we used to take for granted, we are no longer so sure of.

On an intellectual level I knew not to be afraid of the sound of helicopters, but on an emotional level I was not so sure. We, who live in this city and in this country, don't have to worry too much about the sounds of war; we are safe here at home. Yet for nearly 150,000 of our men and women, who serve in the Armed Forces of this nation in Iraq and Afghanistan, the sound of helicopters is part of their daily living and they do have to worry about the sounds of war. The toll that it is taking on their lives is something we, who are safe at home, cannot fathom.

Tomorrow is Memorial Day—a day set aside to remember those who have died in war while serving their country. As of yesterday there have been 3,451 members of the US military who have been killed in the Iraq War and tens of thousands of Iraqi citizens who have died as well. We don't know the exact count of civilian deaths; they don't walk around with dog tags, and so we cannot know for sure. But one thing we know of all of them—none of these people wanted to die. Like you and me they wanted to live long lives, have families, fall in love, grow old with someone and have their dreams become reality. This is not to be for them.

The 3,451 American servicemen and women who died in combat knew they were taking the risk of dying when they enlisted. Most of them didn't think it much of a risk when they signed up in peacetime, yet each of them knew it was a risk they were taking when they decided to serve their country in this way. I have heard it said that their lives were wasted, but they weren't. What has been wasted is their dreams and their potentials, but no life is wasted in service.

Now you may think that serving one's country on a battlefield is not the best way to serve, and you might be right. But there is one thing we can say of those who died, that few of us can say of ourselves: they chose to serve. And if for only that reason, we must honor their lives, for they chose to serve their country.

As you enjoy your day off from work tomorrow, take a moment and remember that there were people who chose to serve and they gave their lives in service. Don't let your feelings about this government's actions obscure the fact that 3,451 women and men have given their lives because their country asked of them this great sacrifice. Remember them, these men and these women; remember they did not ask to die.

And there are others we need to remember too, those who survived the war but came home wounded and broken of body or spirit. While Memorial Day is a day to remember the dead, it should also be a day to remember the wounded. We don't have a day for them, a time set apart for those who must live their lives with the permanent scars of battle. Yes, we have Veteran's Day, but it is not enough, we need time to especially remember our wounded. Thanks to our advances in modern medicine and armor technology, less and less of our military personnel are dying on the battlefield, and more and more of them are coming home seriously wounded. As this war is teaching us, there will be more and more of our service men and women coming home not in coffins but in wheelchairs.

In the Civil War the ratio of the number of people wounded to the number of people who died was less than one. In other words more people died in the Civil War than those who were classified as only wounded. During the Civil War they died on the battlefield and they died in the hospital tents from infections and diseases that were a result of the injuries they suffered. In fact more people died after the battle, as a result of being injured, than those killed on the battlefield.

As time has progressed the ratio has grown larger. During World Wars One and Two the ratio was just under two, and just under three for the Vietnam War. Today, the ratio of those wounded to those killed during the Iraq War is over seven. This means that seven times as many people are coming home seriously wounded as those who died. So many of those who, in past years, would never have survived the injuries they sustained are not dying but living. Advances in the field medicine have dramatically increased the odds of coming home alive.

Yet to what kind of life are they returning? Most of us saw the deplorable conditions at Walter Reed Army Medical Hospital in Washington D.C. Rat droppings, broken water pipes, filth and squalor in some of the buildings are just a few of the conditions that our soldiers were being asked to live with. And it's not just Walter Reed Hospital but the entire Veteran's Administration that has fallen apart. The wait for outpatient services is months not days, and some returning soldiers never get any of the services they need and have earned. We were unprepared for them to come home alive. So they languish in understaffed and under-equipped hospitals or they are sent home with little or no follow up, left to fend for themselves and contend with a bureaucracy more interested in

controlling costs than in healing their wounded bodies and minds. Who is remembering them? Where is their day? On this Memorial Day let us remember them too.

And where is the day of remembrance for the people who must live with the grief of losing someone they loved? Who is remembering the mothers and fathers, the sisters and brothers, the husband and wives, the friends and lovers of the dead and the wounded? We all know about Cindy Sheehan and her fight to end this senseless war, but what of the thousands of other mothers who have lost their sons or their daughters? What are their names and who will help them get through the loss no parent should ever have to endure?

What of the men and women who one day kissed goodbye a healthy person as they went off to war and now must live only with the memory of that once strong body gone forever? When the day has past when someone presented them with a folded flag and words of condolences and gratitude from the government who will be there to heal their wounded hearts? After the casseroles have all be delivered and the cards have stopped coming who will dry their tears in the dark of the night? Who remembers them? Where is their day? Let us remember them too.

I don't know how many of you personally know someone who is serving in Iraq or Afghanistan. I don't know if any of you know someone who died or was wounded. If you do our hearts and prayers and hands are with you. As a community of faith we are here to support you in these times of sorrow. We remember that you are here among us not just today but everyday and we will do what we can to ease your suffering.

If you do not know someone who has died or was wounded pray that it may be that you never do. Pray that no one else ever has to know the pain of losing someone to war. And when your prayers are done, then do the work of building a world where war is a distant memory.

War has been with us so long, it seems we have come to believe it is inevitable. And maybe it is. Maybe we as a species have within us such a streak of violence that we cannot help but wage wars, over land, or oil, or water or religion. Or maybe we are better than that. Maybe we have within us a streak of peacemaking even greater than our propensity towards violence. I believe that we do, because I believe that our ability for compassion is greater than we our ability to hate. History has so far proven me wrong, but I pray that the future may yet prove me right.

So let us work for peace, and as we work for peace let those who have fallen in war always be in our hearts. Let everyday be Memorial Day for those who have died, for those who have come back less than whole and for those who loved them both. Let us learn their names and their stories for they must be real people in our memory, not just statistics on a page. We need to be ever conscious of the facts of their lives. They need to be more than theoretical and distant people whom we are free to make assumptions about; they need to be remembered as real flesh and blood. We must remember that they laughed, they cried, they did the same things we do. They ate real food, they wore real clothes, they had real families, they had real hopes for the future and the living still do. They are us and we are them.

Remember that they are people who made a choice. They chose to serve their country in the military. There is no draft, though I do agree with my Congressperson, Charlie Rangel, that if America wants to start wars then she must be willing to send all of her sons and her daughters to fight them. Even if that daughter is the child of a president. But that's another topic for another day; today I am thinking about the people who did choose to serve. Everyone serving in the military does so by choice. And liberal people need to stop making assumptions about the people who have made that choice. We need to stop thinking that this was their only choice; if it's the only choice then it's not a choice at all, and everyone who serves did have a choice. Maybe some people didn't have a lot of good ones, but most people did. They just chose this particular path for a whole bunch of different reasons. When you see a person in uniform, don't think you know them until you've met them. Hear their story, treat them with respect and dignity. They are not the enemy.

You could learn an important lesson from them and you can ask yourself an important question: how might I serve my country? Remember the words of John F. Kennedy at his inaugural address when he said we should "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." It is a question that is just as important today as it was in 1961, perhaps more so. We seem to have lost a sense of service our country. We are very good at feeling entitled to what we might receive from our country, a good education, low interest student loans, social security benefits when we retire, but how good are we at saying what we are willing to give to our country?

We say we pay taxes and think that is enough, but taxes build roads—they do not build peace. The question before us is whether we are willing to give our most valued commodity to our country -- our time. For America to become the country we wish it to be we must be willing to give to her the one thing we value most: our time. The people we remember today gave their time and gave even more: their lives.

I am not suggesting that we all need join the military, not at all. A country where everyone was in the military would soon become a country built on and sustained by instruments of destruction. No we need not all join the military, but we can all serve our country in some way. If we are to be true to our Unitarian Universalist ideal of "deeds not creeds" then we need to start working on those deeds that will make America and the world a better place to live. It is not just a question of where we are spending our money. Money is too easy. It is a question of how we are spending our time. What service are we doing? Everyone, and I mean everyone, can do something to serve this country. We only need ask, "what can we do for our country?"

In our reading this morning, Rebecca Parker said that we can choose to bless the world or curse the world with our gifts. Perhaps the worst curse is to keep our gifts only for our personal gain. If we spend our days for the betterment of our lives only, more money, a bigger house, a better school for just our kids, then indeed we have cursed the world. Or we can decide that we will bless the world through the service of sharing our gifts and our time. Each of us has gifts to share, and in the sharing there is a blessing. We are blessed and we have blessed the world. We have a choice. Which one shall we choose? Bless the world or curse it.

Tomorrow is a day of remembrance and contrary to the many advertisements for new cars and sales for just about anything, Memorial Day is more than just a day off from work, or a day at the beach enjoying the freedom and many blessings we have received. It is more than a day for parades and planting flags on the graves of the fallen. It is more than a day for a president to lay a wreath at the tomb of the unknown soldiers. It is much more than that. It is a day to remember.

Remember these things -- 3,451 women and men have been killed, over 25,000 have been seriously wounded, there are thousands of people who are grieving the loss of someone they loved, and we remember them best by working for a world of peace. Their lives were not given in vain, for they gave them in the hope of serving their country. Let each of us commit that we will honor them by doing the same.

Amen and blessed be.