

reading (flanders fields)

In Flanders Fields

By: Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae, MD (1872-1918)

Canadian Army

sermon

war is a terrible thing. There is no doubt, no question about that.

But so is unstoppable force.

So is genocide.

So is the hatred that runs deep enough to destroy a culture, a people, a world.

We live with the possibility of both.

Every morning we hang in the balance.

In a democracy, each individual has some responsibility for holding that balance.

Leading us in this work are political powers, activists, civilian leaders, aid workers...

and military personnel.

Of us, only the military have promised not to walk away when they no longer believe in the fight. That commitment, that attitude, begins in boot camp, thousands of miles from where most of them will serve. They turn themselves over to a future they cannot know, for reasons as diverse as they are. When they come out they put their lives on the line because we, the voters in a democracy, ask it of them.

It's not much different from our church. Almost anyone can go to seminary, and we come to it for all kinds of reasons. We are transformed, and when we come out we give our lives to this work because you, the voters in a democracy, have asked it of us. But unless we serve as military chaplains, your clergy are much less likely to end up dead when we answer your call.

In fear and controversy, in the political conflict, something seems to have gotten lost: our interconnectedness, the shared story, the call-and-response nature of our relationships, each to the other.

We are the flow.

We are the ebb.

We are the weavers;

We are the web.

If we make armies and we make war, it is up to us to see that something good comes of it; that something sweet comes from the destruction. It is up to all of us to call the phoenix from the ashes.

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In Canada, Remembrance Day is this weekend, but the rituals start in early November, when people begin to wear red poppies on their lapels every day. In Ottawa, on November 11th, people gather near Parliament at the War Memorial. The atmosphere is solemn, and the crowd is silent, absolutely silent, except to applaud for soldiers as they go by. There are speeches and songs, and then at the end, when everyone has spoken and the soldiers have been honored, they open the barricades separating the crowd from the memorial. At the foot of the memorial is the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and there, a few at a time, most people leave their poppy on the tomb. When the crowd parts the tomb is covered with scattered red flowers.

It is the most beautiful ceremony I have ever seen for veterans anywhere, and it seems that everyone is participates.

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Here in the US, Postsecret is a website that started as a community art project, devoted to artistic, postcard-sized anonymous confessions. Recently, one woman sent in a postcard covered with US Marine Corps seals. Over it she had written, “The fact that you think this is the best use of your talents makes me feel like a failure as a mother.”

Ouch.

In his 1997 book *Making the Corps*, journalist Thomas E. Ricks follows one platoon of recruits from the bus which takes them to Parris Island all the way through boot camp to their graduation. At graduation some of the parents are stiff, but it is on their first leave immediately afterwards that they encountered stronger resistance. Ricks writes,

In Boston, Pvt. Charles Lees, trying to keep the weight off his huge frame, extends his usual eight-mile run to ten. The new route takes him through Harvard Square. There, a knot of teenagers...shot at the reservist in his distinctive yellow Marine T-shirt and green Marine shorts. One kid says that Lees should be ashamed of himself. “I wanted to hit him, but I knew that wouldn’t be good for the Corps. I started to walk away. But it really bothered me.” So Lees walks back to the loudest kid, puts his hands on his hips, and quietly says, “Look, I’m willing to die to defend your right to say that. Just don’t say it to me.” Then he jogs off. (Thomas E. Ricks, *Making the Corps*, Scribner, 1998. p. 231.)

Some of their grueling training has been in combat, some in history, but the strongest component of Marine boot camp is learning to support the team, and by extension the Corps itself.

Especially when they go on leave this calls for restraint at least as often as it calls for action.

Lees’ is the right answer—quiet defense of his choice and his new family, tempered by the restraint he cultivated during eleven weeks of punishing, inconsistent, and irrational demands carefully designed to break him down and build him into a Marine. It is that level of calm and assurance that the all military personnel need when their families, communities, and even sometimes their churches refuse them support.

Ever since Korea, our veterans have had a hard time. Not since WWII have we had a clear enemy and a common understanding that the war at hand must be fought and won. When the American public is conflicted about a war, it tends to leak into uncertainty about the personnel who are fighting it. Between individualism, pacifism, and the general discontent with our political leadership, the last sixty years have been a tough time for the US armed forces. Not one of my peers who has served went into the military under the illusion that she or he would be universally lauded for the choice. Especially in religiously liberal contexts, choices to go into the military are often met with horror, disdain, or despair.

It’s heartbreaking, really. Our congregations, for example, are full of servicepeople. We have Unitarian Universalist clergy serving in the military as chaplains, and UU laity serving in most ranks and branches of the service.

It’s called *service*. We idealize service. We strive to serve. Service is part of how we live our values. And for some, living their values leads to the military, and into war. For some, it rises to the level of call—the same kind of call that brings me to your pulpit on Sunday mornings. It is

possible to hold Unitarian Universalist beliefs and serve in the armed forces with integrity. And who needs church more than people whose lives are in danger?

We don't have to believe in the cause of the moment to understand that.

We don't have to back the war of the day to understand the need to belong to and serve something larger than ourselves. These people are serving *all of us*, with a kind of unconditional love I think many of us are challenged to understand. It doesn't matter what we believe, or what we say about the military or the government, our armed forces do what they believe is right and necessary to protect us. As Pvt. Lees said, they are willing to die to defend our right to speak our minds. That's an incredible commitment.

In the 1970's, the Marines went through what many call their lowest ebb. Violence, drugs, and general malaise did more damage than any number of battles could, because they eroded morale and the Marines' sense of identity, so core to their existence. The man chosen to pull them out of it was Al Gray, "a fifty-eight year old ex-sergeant on the cusp of retirement" with a lot of combat experience and no college degree. In addition to encouraging independence and turnover of top staff, he assigned a reading list to inspire and inform the troops he commanded. But according to Ricks, the real transformation was his return to the focus on fighting. Ricks writes, "He set the blunt tone of his term during his first moments as commandant. "We're warriors, and people who support warriors, and we must always keep that focus," he lectured at his induction. "Some people don't like to hear about war—people who fight don't like to have to do it, but that's what we're about." (Ricks, 129)

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A few weeks ago I was at a congregational event here where someone mentioned that the UUA is not a Peace Church.

It's true. We're not. But there were a number of people there who were shocked and dismayed to hear that. The UUA history on both the Unitarian and Universalist sides is a very mixed bag regarding war and service in the military. We as a tradition do not stand firmly against war or against armies. We as an assembly do not say that it is never right to fight. We as an association have covenanted to accept and work to understand our individual differences, our individual paths to faith and truth. We as an association are not of one mind on this. And we must begin the work of living up to our ideals.

Unitarian Universalists often struggle with the Catholic Church's "love the sinner, hate the sin" approach to the flaws of its members. But it has the effect of making space in an exacting tradition for the inevitable frailty of humans, real or imagined, and our inability to live up to anything that looks like perfection. However you define sin, no one is perfect. As a religion that seems to measure faithfulness by compliance with ideals, we can be even more demanding than one that believes in salvation by grace. But our exacting standards have to live alongside our understanding that there are many kinds of holiness, and at least as many paths to get there. When we come together with a common set of principles it is easy to start to believe that we have a common set of methods.

Easy, but wrong.

Diversity is a hard call. Whoever we are, we can't make people like us; we can't make people want to join us; we can't make other people do anything. We can be ourselves, and change ourselves. If we wish to attract members or gain standing in the community, we must lead by example. Our identity and integrity must be so compelling that people who may have none of the usual social commonalities will all find a home here, and who we all are must be more powerful than who we all are not. It is not surprising that institutions with a more centralized understanding of self have an easier time attracting people who lack other things in common. We seem to think we need to have non-religious things in common because we don't have a single unifying theology. But there is more to religion than theology. There is more to religion than belief. Unitarian Universalism is unified by its culture and structure, and, ironically, by the flexibility of both culture and structure that we call "living tradition". Learning to grow, worship, and participate in this tradition is akin to balancing on a log in whitewater while juggling a machine gun, a water balloon, and a fifty-cent bouncy ball. We can get off balance or get wet pretty easily, or we can make errors fatal to us, to others, or to our community. Our faith requires skill, experience, training, and intuition. As an institution we have a responsibility to provide what we can in the way of instruction. That is why our children's and adults Religious Exploration and Education programs are so important. But as individuals we have to engage with the process and remain engaged, continually involved with the making and remaking of our spiritual identities.

The UUA offices follow their mandate, using the structure we have created to provide support to the congregations' ongoing processes. There are a wide variety of materials available for use in our work. In the realm of diversity training we have curricula for race and sexual orientation and theology and even for UU identity itself. As congregations we are winding our way toward those transformations. In the fashion of democratic and consensus-based bodies, we don't tend to make direct progress, and we have to live with the consequences of that. But also in the fashion of democratic bodies, we are living out our tendency to make some very unhealthy assumptions about who we are and who we might be, based on who we see around us. Those assumptions--that we are necessarily significantly alike in anything other than spirituality--mean that we tend to keep our message of good works, considered faith, and community growth by personal transformation under wraps, convinced that our appeal is very limited.

This is small thinking, and it does not serve the world. (Marianne Williamson in *Return To Love*.)

It also doesn't serve us.

Our faith has very wide appeal. Wide appeal means diversity in our sanctuaries. Diversity in our sanctuaries calls us to a profound mindfulness. Mindfulness is hard work, but it is our duty. We must become aware of the assumptions we make, because more than any training, our behavior in our life together shows us and the world whether we are managing to be who we dream of becoming.

Seven weeks into boot camp, an African-American recruit from the violent side of Washington DC is assigned to a pup tent with a white supremacist from Alabama. The message, writes Ricks, is clear: "if these two are going to be Marines they are going to have to overcome their

prejudices and learn to look at each other as comrades.” (Ricks, 53) It’s a valuable lesson for all of us.

Luckily, this is one place our Puritan heritage can help us out. The easy way is no good. If it looks hard, it’s probably right. Like boot camp, the challenge is bigger than any individual conflict. We have to learn to work together, to struggle together, to see our similarities *and* our differences as strengths. And we have to find the places where our assumptions limit our ability to do that.

On a day like Veteran’s Day, what we need are the ideals we can all honor together—not the things that divide us. We have most of the year to talk and even argue over violence or warfare or military involvement in a particular conflict, when we can talk about our UU principles and how the armed forces do or don’t support those ideals. But this weekend is set aside for honoring the people who offer us their lives. Few careers require the 24/7 dedication of on-call service: doctors, clergy, and a handful of fire and police professionals carry their work home with them, but few are paid as little or risk as much, as often, as the people in our military.

War is never easy, not for anyone. And not even soldiers want war if we can have peace instead. What can we all honor? We can honor commitment, we can honor service, we can honor lived belief, we can honor life given to a cause, we can honor our call answered: not just today, but every day.

I invite those who are serving now or have served in the armed forces to stand if you are willing.

Please remain standing. Those with a loved one in current or past service, please stand if you are willing.

Let us recognize these people with a moment of silence.

Thank you.

you may be seated.

From the ashes, a phoenix,
and from the fields, poppies, red as blood, red as our hearts, red as the fire of commitment that
burns in each of us.

blessed be
and amen.