

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Peninsula
Sunday November 11th 2018

Sermon: “To Care for Those Who Have Borne the Battle”

I don't remember when I first learned about Remembrance Day poppies. The Royal British Legion has been collecting donations for them since 1921, so the poppies were already a well-established tradition long before the time I was growing up. I do remember putting a few coins in a collection box and receiving a poppy that I'd wear in the week leading up to Remembrance Day, attaching it to my school jacket or my coat. What's more, everyone I knew was wearing a poppy, too. This was something that just about everyone in the United Kingdom was doing every November.

Another tradition was two minutes of silence at 11am on November 11th. My parents explained to me that this was in observance of the Armistice that brought an end to the First World War, going into effect “at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month” of 1918. Today, in other words, is not only the anniversary of the Armistice — Remembrance Day in the United Kingdom; Veterans Day in the United States — but it is also the centennial of the Armistice.

Different emotions were mixed up in these traditions. I don't remember much triumphalism, at least not at home or in church. Maybe in school, amongst boys who liked to play “war”, but not in anything I heard from adults. Rather, there was gratitude and grief. And pain.

The poppy, after all, was a fund-raiser for the British Royal Legion, a charity providing support to those who have served, or who are currently serving, in the British Armed Forces and their families. As the BRL explains, the poppies are “worn to commemorate the sacrifices of our [soldiers] and to show support to those still serving today.” And the poppy was chosen for this task because they were the first flowers to grow on soldiers' graves and because the poppy's red color is a stark reminder of the blood spilled during the war. In the observances, there are expressions of gratitude that the war ended, and also expressions of grief that nine million soldiers were killed in combat, another twenty-one million wounded. Seven million civilians were killed, too. Two minutes of silence hardly seems enough for that loss of life. And there's pain that the “war to end all wars” did no such thing.

There's an excellent article in last week's issue of *The New Yorker* that sheds fresh light on how the First World War ended and how the Armistice set the stage for the Second World War.

As the article's author, Adam Hochschild, explains, the German Army had asked for peace talks because Germany was losing. The Eastern Front was disintegrating, troops were deserting, including at least one general who'd had a nervous breakdown, the Navy was in a state of mutiny, and the Kaiser was practically in hiding in Belgium. The Allied commanders knew they had the upper hand and they took full advantage of it, offering harsh demands for peace with the Germans. In the end, the Armistice was not a mutually agreed upon cease-fire. Rather, the Allies demanded that Germany surrender, and though it brought an end to the war, it was not something that could be justified to the German populace who had no idea that the war had been going so badly for them.

As Hochschild explains, "the country's propaganda for home consumption [...] remained] relentlessly triumphal to the last. [...] Even a few weeks before the Armistice, [Germany's] newspapers were still running stories about an imminent final victory." So when the troops marched home in great pomp and circumstance, looking for all the world like unconquered heroes, the majority of Germans were outraged to learn the harsh terms of the Armistice. They wanted to know who was responsible for this humiliation. And with the circulation of a number of conspiracy theories about who to blame, it wasn't hard for Hitler to claim that the Germans "had been robbed of their victory by the sinister machinations of socialists, pacifists and Jews."

Hochschild also describes "the final spasm of madness" of Armistice Day itself, justifying his article's sub-title of "If you think the First World War began senselessly, consider how it ended." The Armistice was signed shortly after five in the morning on November 11th 1918 but didn't go into effect until eleven. After it was signed, the terms were immediately communicated along the Western Front, and yet the Allied commanders continued to order attacks on the German lines until the very last minute. And that's not figurative. Private Henry Gunther of Baltimore was the last American soldier to be killed, at 10:59. To give you an idea of the scale of the senselessness, more soldiers were killed or wounded that morning than on D Day.

And Hochschild ends his article with a paragraph about the American 92nd Division, which was ordered to make its last attack at 10:30 that morning. What's notable about that is that the soldiers of the 92nd were all black, but the higher-ranking officers were all white, and they were often resentful of being given command of men they saw as inferior. Knowing full well that the Germans were about to surrender their position anyway, these officers sent the soldiers directly into machine-gun fire and mustard gas. The 92nd Division was all but wiped out, for no military or political reason other than racism.

There's no glory in war. There are individual acts of heroism — people rescuing wounded comrades or sacrificing their own lives to save others — but mass casualties can only be lamented. Even victories cannot be truly celebrated, given that the human cost must never be discounted. And this is assuming that the reasons for war are just and justifiable.

Since the election, we've heard next to nothing about the caravan of Central American migrants heading from Honduras to seek asylum in the United States. The migrants are still weeks away, and the Pentagon's own assessment found no threat to the US, but that didn't stop the caravan from being described as a hostile invasion during rallies leading up to the election. Thousands of troops were sent to the border with Mexico, with threats to send thousands more, making it a larger US military offensive than the combined operations in Syria and Iraq, and costing hundreds of millions of dollars. Since we've heard nothing more about it, I guess it really was a publicity stunt after all, transparently intended to rile people up so that they'd go vote.

But what will happen when, sooner or later, the migrants do reach the US border? What will our soldiers be ordered to do? I'm not talking about the mere stupidity of treating someone throwing a rock as if they were shooting a gun. Rather, how will they respond to being told to "defend" the United States against people with whom, given the cultural and racial make-up of the military, they have more in common than the white policy-makers issuing these orders? This is fertile ground not only for a humanitarian disaster but for mass moral injury.

Moral injury is what happens when an otherwise healthy person who knows the difference between right and wrong either is involved in or responsible for inflicting harm or witnesses harm. Unlike PTSD, which is a “reaction to danger [that] produces hormones that affect [the parts of the brain] that control responses to fear”, moral injury “results when [people] violate their core moral beliefs, and in evaluating their behavior negatively, they feel they can no longer live in a reliable, meaningful world and can no longer be regarded as decent human beings.” It’s a spiritual malady, not a physiological condition, and so it’s not treatable with psychotherapy and pharmaceuticals. Rather, it requires a spiritual response, preferably in a religious setting that offers the healing benefits of community.

For the last few years I have been preaching on the subject of moral injury and how we, as a congregation in an area with significant military presence, are called to minister to veterans and their families, both those suffering hidden wounds of war in particular and those making the transition to civilian life generally. Last Fall, as part of my sabbatical, I attended a conference on the subject of moral injury, considering how it impacts not just veterans but also police officers and people in prison. In fact, I realized, just about all of us suffer from some degree of moral injury, if in a much less severe form. As one of my seminary professors, the late Larry Graham, put it,

“Moral injury is the erosive diminishment of our souls because our moral actions and the actions of others against us sometimes have harmful outcomes. It rises from our attempts to do the right thing as individuals and as communities. Moral injury is personal, interpersonal and collective. None of us escapes moral injury. We all bear the costs of attempted goodness.”

Each of us has both a sense of right and wrong and a conscience, so any of us is susceptible to moral injury because sometimes, in spite of our best intentions, we cause harm. But imagine the greater susceptibility, the amplified harm for someone who is armed and who has been specifically trained to fire reflexively. This isn’t to say that every veteran suffers from moral injury, of course, any more than every veteran suffers from PTSD or physical injury. Still, there’s growing recognition that moral injury is experienced by a great many veterans, and it contributes to a suicide rate that is much higher than that of the general population.

The Hampton VA, for instance, is developing a program to help veterans suffering from moral injury. This is part of the Department of Veterans Affairs' chaplain service, which also provides supportive spiritual care for those undergoing treatment at the VA hospital as well as pastoral counseling in regard to emotional and psychological problems and a family support program. Last month I attended a prayer breakfast held by the Hampton VA chaplains as part of Spiritual Care Week, and I was pleased to hear moral injury mentioned. So I followed up, and I had a conversation with Chaplain McGlen in which I emphasized the role that faith communities need to play when it comes to healing moral injury. As a result, the VA chaplains are going to work on building into their program partnerships with local congregations like ours.

In their book, *Soul Repair*, Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini describe a few requirements of a place that can help heal moral injury, and they fit right into the mission of any decent church. First, there needs to be friendship. "Friends," they explain, "probe and question and challenge each other to make each other more complete." "With friends, we discuss intimate questions, hold each other's confidences, learn to tolerate disagreements, support each other through life's struggles and joys, and explore the profound questions of life's meaning."

Second, "conversations about moral injury require deep listening. In being open," they write, "we must be willing to take in what we hear as part of ourselves, to be moved, even by what is difficult or painful to hear, and to struggle to understand profound questions about moral conscience." "Deep listening requires us to set our own needs aside and to offer, simply, respect."

Third and fourth, "recovering from moral injury also requires a renewed sense of life purpose and service. A society that ends a war with a parade and returns to its entertainments, consumerism, celebrity worship and casual commitments in order to forget its wars offers no purpose worth pursuing," they explain. "Whatever we think of a war, the crucial responsibility is to accompany the journey home of those who return and remind [ourselves] that, as a society, we don't just leave wars [or our veterans] behind."

First, friendship. Second, deep listening. Third, life purpose. Fourth, service. Sounds a lot like what we enjoy and promote right here. As we explore these paths to the Beloved Community, I offer up the words of Abraham Lincoln regarding the unifying task of reconciliation and reconstruction: “to care for [those who] have borne the battle” and “to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.”

So may it be.