

## **The Human Cost of War: A Sermon in Honor of Justice Sunday**

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The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said “A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching a spiritual death.”<sup>1</sup> King preached these words in a sermon entitled “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence.” The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee suggested this quote in honor of Justice Sunday 2008 which asks the question “The Cost of Iraq: Who Pays the Price.”

I chose to preach on the UUSC theme because of this quote. We talk about war, body counts, lost dollars, but in the process I, and I suspect many of you, have become numb, because we have lost sight of the people involved. There are too many of them slipping by, laid into body bags, waiting in mosques, cemeteries, and along roadsides to be buried. And of course there are the walking wounded – those whose bodies now give testimony to war.

As the human beings slip by, the civilians and our soldiers, we approach a spiritual death. Our unbalanced military spending is a symptom of our inability to meet the eyes of those marked by war, which is our civilian obligation. A country that sends its children to war, and will not fight for them upon their return (their access to health care, jobs, insurance, and yes, the end of their tours of duty), is a country facing a spiritual death. Just this last week we heard a pastor, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, derided as un-American, unpatriotic for criticizing American involvement in Iraq. Oh no, my friends. He is not un-American for this critique.

It is those of us who can not, and will not speak of the complexity of leadership, active combat, civilian casualties, and the spirit-breaking work of war, who display conduct unbecoming to American values. I will name four: Paul Wolfowitz, one of the creators of the plan in Iraq, President George Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, and former Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, who have served among themselves a total of 0 days of armed combat, who display conduct unbecoming. When recently asked for a response to the fact that 2/3 of Americans disapprove of the war in Iraq, Vice President Cheney, who received five deferments during the Vietnam War, responded “So.” Would he say the same if his son died on the battlefield, if his wife were killed in a bomb that fell on her house while she cleaned the kitchen floor? “So” is the response of spiritual death. This sermon is an outraged response to “so.”

I am not a pacifist. There are interpersonal and political realities everywhere from the school yard to invasion that require force. But for every war or armed conflict I have supported, I have mourned, questioned, suffered, and doubted, knowing that the cost for

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<sup>1</sup> “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence,” delivered April 4, 1967 at Riverside Church, New York City.

some humans, the civilians and soldiers, will be greater than any human should ever have to pay and this is a moral dilemma I can not reconcile.

As Unitarian Universalists our first principle is a belief in the “inherent worth and dignity of every person.” Our second is “justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.” How can it be just that some human beings live in a war zone? It isn’t. How can war respect the worth and dignity of every person? It doesn’t. Yet since the historical lesson of the Holocaust, I would never remove the option of war to end genocide because it is also possible to spiritually die through the willful neglect of human beings. But genocide is a specific situation that America has ignored in Darfur while pursuing lesser economic and financial (particularly oil) interests in our current war zones of Iraq and Afghanistan.

It is the Sunday after Easter. Cincinnati finally warmed enough this week so that I saw the first blooming daffodils, hyacinth, and crab apple blossoms of the season. While preparing for this sermon I could not reconcile the new spring with the unremitting death and suffering of war. Then I began to consider that the way through spiritual death back into life is to find, know, and speak the truth. Yes, it hurts. Yes, it is demoralizing, infuriating, and paralyzing, but this costs less than selling our spiritual and moral lives into silence. So, to the truth of war.

The numbers themselves are astonishing. In 2008, it is estimated that Louisiana taxpayers will pay \$1.2 billion for proposed Iraq war spending. For the same amount of money, over 14,000 affordable housing units could be built, or over 24,000 elementary teachers could be paid, or health care provided for over 780,000 children. That’s just in the state of Louisiana, still reeling from Hurricane Katrina. In the last five years since we have been at war in Iraq, the money spent on the war could have financed over 4 million housing units and health care for over 277 million children.<sup>2</sup> We know that 4,000 American soldiers have died. Estimates of civilian casualties run from 60,000 to 800,000.

I find this last number range alarming. It indicates how much we don’t know about Iraq and the human beings who live and suffer there. The suffering is not new. Many Iraqis suffered terribly under the leadership of Saddam Hussein –there was murder, torture, disappearances, bribery. Iraq suffered then and now. But the latest wave of suffering, since March 2003 is American initiated. Not American-caused all the time, but we invaded, and deposed Hussein, dismantled the Iraqi army, and sent all those trained soldiers home unemployed... and with weapons.

Immediately after the invasion there was no fire department, so fires burnt for days and weeks, no police department, and no army. There was looting (of private homes and national treasures – the American army was ordered to guard the oil ministry and nothing else), rape, murder, and by the summer of 2003, car bombings and attacks as rival religious groups fought for control. And this is how it has remained for five years in Iraq. Would anyone here want to live in Iraq at this moment? This is no “So.”

Civilians and soldiers who survive become the walking wounded. I have a photo that I saved from the New York Times, taken in March 2003. It shows an Iraqi man holding a girl wounded after air strikes. Her coat is frayed away, like a fuzzy, fashion fabric, only I realized with some horror that the fabric probably melted away from the blast. She is unconscious, dirty and bloody. Her clothes are ripped. She almost looks to

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<sup>2</sup> “Justice Sunday 2008, *The Cost of Iraq: Who Pays the Price*,” UUSC, 2008.

be smiling in her sleep, but there is blood coming out of her mouth. The man holding her is much older, maybe a grandfather. His brow is furrowed, his hands gripping her so tightly you can see the whiteness. Did she survive or was this the day her family began to live in hell without her? What happened to her parents, siblings, and house?

This photograph is a daily occurrence in Iraq and Afghanistan. Daily. I wanted to know more about civilian life under war so I contacted the Benningas and asked them to tell me what it was like and how it changed them. Benno Benninga and his wife Carla, were Jewish teenagers in the Netherlands during WWII. They both went into hiding to escape. They survived, but 20 members of their families were killed. Benno wrote to me about this story of a non-Jewish family forced to make terrible choices, “The father of a family where Carla was hiding was killed because their son, who was working in the underground was not at home when they came to pick him up. The son never overcame his guilt-feelings and he died young after a long time of mental problems.” These are daily choices, losses, cruelties, and deaths in a war zone. Benno wrote of this impact

I still bear the results of this living in fear. My father was not able to run his company any longer because of the blow he received [financial and emotional] having to bail us out every time with the abusive woman where we were in hiding . . . My sister never got married and still suffers in many ways from the experience. Myself, I have not been able to shake the feelings of fear and worries . . . I have never talked much about what I went through. I never told the people I worked with, that I was Jewish (FEAR).

Those of us who know Benno know he is a gentle, reflective, kind man. He survived the Holocaust. He has been free for over sixty years, and he is still haunted by fear. A human cost of war. I can't hear this, and look Benno in the eye and think “So.” What an insult to his human dignity and the cost of his suffering. What an insult to any human being living, dying, and suffering through war.

And then there are the soldiers. One of the best articles I have read about armed combat was published as the cover story, “Battle Company is Out There” in *The New York Times Magazine* on February 24, 2008. The author, Elizabeth Rubin, spent several months with an army unit in the Korengal River Valley in Afghanistan. American soldiers have been in Afghanistan for over six years, and the situation is only becoming more violent for soldiers and civilians. In “Battle Company is Out There” we meet 26 year old Captain Dan Kearney, charged to subdue an area full of insurgents, ancient Afghani feuds, and multiple American Marine and Army failures. The Korengal Valley has bested them all and now Kearney's soldiers are becoming its latest ghosts. It's a creepy, realistic article about the hyper-vigilance and violence of warfare.

Rubin describes an evening spent with the unit

One full-moon night I was sitting outside a sandbag-reinforced hut with Kearney when a young sergeant stepped out haling the garbage. He looked around at the illuminated mountains, the dust, the rocks, the garbage bin. The monkeys were screeching. “I hate this country!” he shouted. Then he smiled and walked back into the hut. “He's on medication,” Kearney said quietly to me. Then another soldier walked by and hooted, “Hey, I'm with you, sir!” and Kearney said to me, “Prozac. Serious P.T.S.D. from last tour.” Another one popped out of the HQ

muttering. “Medicated,” Kearney said. “Last tour, if you didn’t give him information, he’d burn down your house. He killed so many people. He’s checked out.” As I went to get some hot chocolate in the dining tent, the peaceful night was shattered by mortars, rockets and machine-gun fire banging and bursting around us. It was a coordinated attack on all the fire bases. It didn’t take long to understand why so many soldiers were taking antidepressants. The soldiers were on a fifteen month tour that included just 18 days off. Many of them were “stop-losses,” meaning their contracts were extended because the army is stretched so thin. You are not allowed to refuse these extensions.

The rest of the article reads like a movie. The soldiers go out, they are ambushed. One soldier, Specialist Sal Giunta tries to help his buddies, one named Brennan who is being dragged through the bushes by the insurgents. Giunta later recalls

I started shooting. I emptied that magazine. They dropped Brennan. He was a mess. His lower jaw was shot off. He was still conscious. He was breathing. He was asking for morphine. I said ‘You’ll get out and tell your hero stories,’ and he was like ‘I will, I will.’ . . . Hugo Mendez, their platoon medic, was back in another ditch, calling “I’m bleeding out, I’m dying.” Giunta saw Brennan’s eyes go back. His breathing was bad. Giunta got Brennan to squeeze his hand.”

Brennan and Mendez both died later. Many of you wrote to me about the active duty veterans in your families. Keley Smith Keller wrote of her father-in-law, “He is 89 years old and STILL has nightmares about the torture that the Chinese soldiers inflicted on their Japanese prisoners . . . Every time a new war effort starts for the U.S., his nightmares surge.” Jan Connelly’s former husband, who served in Vietnam became depressed, could not hold a job, turned to alcohol, and would never cry. Jan’s experience was that the Vietnam War so changed her husband, that after many years, divorce was her only, painful alternative.

Amy Hunt wrote to me about her father who served in New Guinea during WWII. He came home with malaria, various fungi, and had jungle fevers even ten years after he returned home. Amy remembers “He never passed a drinking fountain without getting a drink. He was meticulously clean. He often slept with a light on.” She remembers that when he finally began talking about his experiences fifty years later, he experienced insomnia and nightmares. Amy remembers “He said he would stay up all night reliving the war.” Amy also remembers her father’s brother who went to war and never came home. She explains “You can tell by looking at a picture of my grandmother whether it was taken before or after his death. The look on her face is unmistakable. Take that anguish and multiply it by all the families on all sides of wars. What a loss!”

What a loss. And I care, and you care. About our soldiers and their families, about the civilians on the “other side” and their families. There is no “So” at First Church. It has been six years in Afghanistan, five years in Iraq. These are hard times for those of us who care. But will not stop caring. We are not paralyzed. We will not forget the human beings who suffer, the child, the father murdered “for the son,” the dead medic, the veteran with nightmares.

At First Church we try to live our religious values in a complex, compromised, and compromising world. We support the peace camps here in Avondale that Dr. Rega

told us about. We donate money to the UUSC and to Hurricane Katrina relief. We just finished our second week of housing homeless families through IHN.

We have supported refugee families from Kosovo and the Sudan. We donate money to the Carter Fund so that children can graduate from high school and utility bills can get paid. We canvass for CeaseFire, and in May will offer our building for one of the concerts to promote peace. We are an official friend of the Collaborative agreement. We listen to and learn from others different than us. We have welcomed a Buddhist monk and rabbi to our pulpit this past year. A teacher from the Islamic Center will come to a class in May.

There is much we can not do. But there is much that we can and will do for peace, for justice, for humanity, so that we don't slide into spiritual death regardless of what our leaders say or do. If you want to do more for peace in this world, go forth and spread the good news. Next month, Peggy Gish will be here to tell you about her five years in Iraq as a member of the Christian Peacemaker Teams. Please go and listen and learn. Whether you work to end violence in Avondale or Afghanistan, keep going. The work brings hope in a world of suffering, confusion, and cruelty. "So" will never be the final answer at First Unitarian Church of Cincinnati. We begin with love.

