

***Honoring Service***  
**Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska**  
**UU Church of Minnetonka**  
**November 9, 2008**

**FIRST READING**

**Navy Beachmaster at the Inchon Landing, North Korea**

Written by Gerald "Jerry" Johnson, Radioman (Member of the UU Church of Minnetonka)

We landed at Green Beach on Wolmi-do in the third wave at 0645 hours on 15 September 1950. Fighting was still going on a few yards away. Several North Korean bunkers were holding out.

...One North Korean bunker some 100 feet ahead had two machine guns firing from it. The rear of that bunker was being covered by machine gun fire from another bunker to its flank. I could see the gunnery sergeant off to my left flank. He pointed to his weapon, then at the bunker, and then at the squad leader of a squad of marines hunkered down on my near left flank. I couldn't hear what the squad leader said in all the noise, but I saw what took place.

A man took position to aim at one of the embrasures. Four other Marines aimed their M-1s at the other. Three men shucked pack harness and started slithering toward the bunker. On signal from the squad leader, the man and his assistant began a steady and continuous fire at one embrasure, four riflemen at the other. Enemy fire from both embrasures slackened, then quit for a moment. In the few seconds before it resumed, all three marines had made a mad dash for the bunker. One was hit, but the other two were up against the bunker, one at each embrasure. Lying flat on the ground, both marines pushed a grenade through an embrasure. There was a muffled explosion, actually two explosions a split second apart, a little smoke from one embrasure, and the North Korean machine guns were silenced. It took less time in the doing than in my telling. With some variation, a similar scene was repeated at the other bunker. The action then moved on ahead where it was lost to my sight.

**SECOND READING**

**Let America Be America Again**

By Langston Hughes (1938)

Let America be America again.  
Let it be the dream it used to be.  
Let it be the pioneer on the plain  
Seeking a home where he himself is free.  
(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed--  
Let it be that great strong land of love  
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme  
That any man be crushed by one above.  
(It never was America to me.)

O, let my land be a land where Liberty  
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,  
But opportunity is real, and life is free,  
Equality is in the air we breathe.

(There's never been equality for me,  
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")

*Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?  
And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?*

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,  
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.  
I am the red man driven from the land,  
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek--  
And finding only the same old stupid plan  
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

I am the young man, full of strength and hope,  
Tangled in that ancient endless chain  
Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!  
Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying need!  
Of work the men! Of take the pay!  
Of owning everything for one's own greed!

I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.  
I am the worker sold to the machine.  
I am the Negro, servant to you all.  
I am the people, humble, hungry, mean--  
Hungry yet today despite the dream.  
Beaten yet today--O, Pioneers!  
I am the man who never got ahead,  
The poorest worker bartered through the years.

Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream  
In the Old World while still a serf of kings,  
Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true,  
That even yet its mighty daring sings  
In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned  
That's made America the land it has become.  
O, I'm the man who sailed those early seas  
In search of what I meant to be my home--  
For I'm the one who left dark Ireland's shore,  
And Poland's plain, and England's grassy lea,  
And torn from Black Africa's strand I came  
To build a "homeland of the free."

The free?

Who said the free? Not me?  
Surely not me? The millions on relief today?  
The millions shot down when we strike?  
The millions who have nothing for our pay?  
For all the dreams we've dreamed  
And all the songs we've sung  
And all the hopes we've held  
And all the flags we've hung,  
The millions who have nothing for our pay--  
Except the dream that's almost dead today.

O, let America be America again--  
The land that never has been yet--  
And yet must be--the land where every man is free.  
The land that's mine--the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's, ME--  
Who made America,  
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,  
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,  
Must bring back our mighty dream again.

Sure, call me any ugly name you choose--  
The steel of freedom does not stain.  
From those who live like leeches on the people's lives,  
We must take back our land again,  
America!

O, yes,  
I say it plain,  
America never was America to me,  
And yet I swear this oath--  
America will be!

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,  
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,  
We, the people, must redeem  
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.  
The mountains and the endless plain--  
All, all the stretch of these great green states--  
And make America again!

***Honoring Service***  
**A Sermon for Veteran's Day**  
**Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska**

Celebration and grief are difficult strands to braid into the feelings we hold at this time. This week many people celebrate the election of a new United States President, a man who is seen as the attainment of a dream articulated by Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., many years ago. Yet in the same election – in Arkansas, Arizona, California and Florida – many of the same people who voted for a new mixed-race President also supported referendums or constitutional amendments that ban same-sex marriage and legalize bigotry.

This coming Tuesday, November 11, is also Veteran's Day. Veteran's Day, as we now know it, was originally called "Armistice Day," a day to commemorate the end of World War I, the "war to end all wars." The Armistice was signed on the 11<sup>th</sup> hour of the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month of 1918. Since that day the world has seen, among various hostilities, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the first and second Iraq war, the wars in Afghanistan perpetrated by the Soviet Union and the United States, the civil wars in Eastern Europe, and the tribal slaughter in many African countries. In retrospect, World War I was not a "war to end all wars," but merely a precursor to the modern era of mechanized killing.

So the separate strands of celebration and grief are interwoven here with us today. We Unitarian Universalists are not officially a "peace church" as are the Quakers or Mennonites. We count many in our faith – especially in cities like Annapolis or Houston – who are active in military service. We also count many UUs, in places like Rock Island, Los Alamos, and Minneapolis, who work at the Rock Island Arsenal or Honeywell, institutions involved in military research or the production of conventional munitions, cluster bombs, missile guidance systems, napalm and land mines. Yet large numbers of our people in our congregations also work in organizations like Amnesty International or Doctors Without Borders to create a world without war, a world at peace, a world full of justice and mercy.

This congregation, too, has a conflicted history between peace activists and military service. After forming in 1960 we bought this building in 1965. This congregation called the Reverend Robert Brownlie as its first settled minister in 1966, a year after the United States sent the first combat troops to Vietnam. At the same time, some founding members of this congregation were scientists working at Honeywell. At some point it was discovered that Reverend Brownlie was using the parsonage, the building next door, as a way station for Conscientious Objectors fleeing to Canada. This difference of philosophy and practice is one of the issues that led to Reverend Brownlie's decision to resign less than three years after he arrived. Twenty-five members left this congregation in dissent over the war.

As part of my personal history, my parents were 30 years old in 1965, and held great admiration for Martin Luther King, Jr. They were involved in the Civil Rights movement and educated my brother and me about the compassionate and nonviolent teachings of Jesus, Thoreau, Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Our country has not had a draft since Vietnam, but when I was in high school President Reagan instituted registration for a draft. By the time I was 18, a law existed requiring all young men who wanted government financial aid for college to register for the draft. And since it was only “registration” for the draft, and not the draft itself, no one could acquire official Conscientious Objector status. My grades were not good enough to earn any scholarships, and my family could not afford to pay for college. Without government financial aid I could not attend college. So at age 18, I succumbed to government blackmail and registered for the draft. But before I turned in my registration at the post office, I wrote the words “Conscientious Objector” in big black letters across the entire surface of the card.

So I admit, I feel some trepidation at the prospect of honoring military veterans. But my seminary education and my training as a chaplain at Methodist Hospital in St. Louis Park gave me new insights. The first class I attended after entering seminary full-time was “Introduction to Pastoral Care,” and it began on the night of September 11, 2001. Over the course of my ministerial training I became acquainted with clergy from many faiths, including UU clergy and others who served as chaplains with the United States military.

I also observed a shift in American attitudes toward the military after 9/11. Growing up I heard stories about veterans returning from Vietnam who were spat on by anti-war protestors. With our current wars and occupation, it seems as though people differentiate more between the soldiers and the government. This is evidenced by the many signs that say, “Support Our Troops, Bring them Home.”

Not many things in the world are black and white, or right and wrong. The world is a garment woven with the intertwined strands of history and circumstance, time and place, religion and practice, culture and personality. We humans aspire to great things and fall short of those aspirations; we are, sometimes at the same time, both the oppressed and the oppressor, the perpetrator and the victim, the racist and the minority, the noble leader and a fallible creature, the innocent and the condemned, the loved and despised.

As a minister, I hear the calling of the task to lift these things up, the shadow and the light, the shining jewel and disintegrating ashes, in both hands, at once, at the same time. The pressure of the world tears us apart, divides us into boxes, into compartments, even within our own life, our own psyche, our own soul. One purpose of religion is to tear down walls, to take these things out of their boxes, out of their compartments, and to unite them – to put ourselves together as whole people, and to walk around here, together, on a Sunday morning and through the world of each week, and show ourselves to each other as we truly are. The purpose of religion, the purpose of our faith, is to give us back to ourselves, to see and hold one another without a veil between us, to cherish and to forgive, and to walk together through the rugged world with pride and humility.

It is in this spirit of a desire to create wholeness that I honor the service of both military veterans and conscientious objectors and their families.

This past week I spoke with six men in this congregation who served our country in a time of war: Bernie (Fleugleman?), who served in the Navy during World War II; Jerry Johnson, who served in the Navy during the Korean War; Bill McKnight, who served in the Navy during the very early part of the Vietnam War; and Dave Balzotti, who served in the Navy toward the end of the Vietnam War. Later in the week I spoke over the phone with John Dennis, who served as a medic in the Army in Europe during World War II. I also spoke over the phone with Robert Meyer, who shared with me his story of being granted official status during the Vietnam War as a Conscientious Objector.

The service of these men covered three wars over the span of 33 years. Some did not see any fighting, and some, like John Dennis, were deeply and repeatedly involved in many battles. Several spoke about entering the military at age 17 or 18, only because they didn't know what else to do with their lives, or because they were drafted, or because of the threat of a draft.

Bernie Fluegleman, a construction worker with the Navy Seebecs, sailed from Norfolk, Virginia, through the Panama Canal, and over to Hawaii toward the end of World War II to begin training for an invasion of Japan's mainland. Bernie made clear his disagreement with Tom Brokaw that World War II veterans were not "the greatest generation." If any American generation is the greatest, Bernie said it should be the one during the Civil War – or any people from any country where the actual war is fought on their home soil.

Bill McKnight, who spent most of his Navy service in the Mediterranean, said he never felt like he was serving his country, he just felt like he was holding down a job. He said his wife and family were the real heroes because they picked up their roots to follow him. Bill said he never saw combat and that, more than anything, by being stationed in Italy, he felt his country served him because he got to travel and see the world.

Bob Meyers related a story of receiving notice, when he retired, that he would be getting a small pension from his government service. He did not discover for quite some time why he would be getting the pension. Then he realized it was from his two years of service as an orderly at the University of Minnesota hospitals while he was a Conscientious Objector. Bob was raised Catholic, and was immersed in the strong tradition of Catholic pacifism. Using those traditional arguments along with passages from the Bible and from Leo Tolstoy, Bob obtained his CO status at the age of 18.

Dave Balzotti served as an electrician in the Navy toward the end of the Vietnam War, but was stationed in Guantanamo Bay and on a NATO flagship in the North Atlantic. After seeing a sign that said, "My Country, Right or Wrong," on a commander's desk in a room where he was repairing the wiring, Dave began to think about that phrase and questioned both himself and others about his service. Eventually those questions, as a result of that sign, led him to become a pacifist.

Jerry Johnson, whose story we heard a portion of earlier, entered the Navy in 1948 when no war was going on, but in 1950 was sent across the Pacific Ocean during a typhoon as a radioman during a beach landing invasion of North Korea at Inchon. But for Jerry, the most moving part of his military service occurred at a 50-year reunion in Korea in the year 2000. During the Korean War, he and his buddies often shared their C-rations with the local people. During the reunion visit, in a gesture of reciprocal thanks, a little Korean girl approached Jerry and gave him some candy, and her reaching out to him touched him deeply.

John Dennis served in the Army in Europe from 1943 to 1946. First he was a medic in one of the waves following the Battle of the Bulge, and then, because he spoke Ukrainian, Russian, and some German, he was used as a translator in some of the concentration camps after they had been liberated from the Nazis. During his entire time in the army, John also had his violin nearby, and played for dances and concerts for General Omar Bradley, General George Patton, and once, even for the Lady-in-Waiting for the Queen of England.

After sharing some of his stories with me, John said he did not want any of his kids or grandkids to be in our current war in Iraq, or in any other war. Near the end of our talk, John expressed his joy in seeing Barack Obama elected president, and expressed his deep hope that this president "will bring our people home."

Langston Hughes wrote:

O, let America be America again--  
The land that never has been yet--  
And yet must be--the land where every man is free.  
...call me any ugly name you choose--  
The steel of freedom does not stain.  
From those who live like leeches on the people's lives,  
We must take back our land again.

War breeds leeches – those who are human, or institutional, or that gnaw at the inside of our souls – who feed on the lives of both the people who serve in the military and those who remain civilians. No one is untouched by war. In the face of this, we must take back our land and our spirits again.

Any time we endure trauma in our lives, we want it somehow to be affirmed and honored as worthwhile and for a good cause. I know that one of the most frightening things we may endure, possibly even more than trauma itself, is the thought that the trauma we experience may be meaningless. In our human struggle to discern a path of war or a path of peace – and in the particularity of the tension in our Unitarian Universalist struggle – we are often unsure how to proceed if we are opposed to war because we feel it to be brutal and meaningless, but then discover in our midst people who have served, or are serving, in the military. To remain silent in the face of this means we believe there is not a place for people to process their life experience within their own religious community.

What some veterans need is an affirmation that their experience was not meaningless, and was not in vain. Yet if there are those among us who feel that our United States wars, especially in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, were not noble causes, and were not worthwhile, then we are unable to provide the substantive affirmation some veterans so relentlessly pursue. This aching, unmet need is something that none of us can fix.

What we can do is to be present to these life stories and experiences. We can listen with curiosity and compassion so that we may “hear into speech” feelings of shame, embarrassment or loss. We can be non-anxious companions in the midst of chaos, despair and pain.

And so, at this time, I’d like to be present to those in our congregation who served our country in a time of war. I invite you to stand and be recognized if a description applies to you. I will conclude with a poem by Pablo Neruda.

Please stand:

- if you are on active duty with any branch of the military;
- if you are or have been in the army reserve or national guard;
- if you are a military veteran of any war;
- if you engaged in alternative service, including as a conscientious objector.

Now please stand:

- if anyone in your family is on active duty with any branch of the military;
- or in the Army Reserve or National Guard;
- or a military veteran of any war;
- or if any member of your family engaged in alternative service, including being a Conscientious Objector.

**Keeping Quiet**  
By Pablo Neruda

Now we will count to twelve  
and we will all keep still.

For once on the face of the earth let's not speak in any language;  
Let's stop for one second, and not move our arms so much.

It would be an exotic moment without rush, without engines;  
We would all be together in a sudden strangeness.

Fishermen in the cold sea would not harm whales  
And the man gathering salt would look at his hurt hands.

Those who prepare green wars, wars with gas, wars with fire,  
victories with no survivors, would put on clean clothes  
and walk about with their brothers in the shade, doing nothing.

What I want should not be confused with total inactivity.  
Life is what it is about, I want no truck with death.

If we were single-minded about keeping our lives moving,  
and for once could do nothing,  
perhaps a huge silence might interrupt this sadness  
of never understanding ourselves  
and of threatening ourselves with death.  
Perhaps the earth can teach us  
as when everything seems dead  
and later proves to be alive.

Now I'll count up to twelve  
and you keep quiet and I will go.