

## "Peace Honors Those Who have Sacrificed"

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This Memorial Day weekend I want to borrow some of the hope of Gandhi and King. They were blessed with prophetic vision, imagined new human possibilities, and helped to bring their vision into reality. I wish to speak about the reality of where we are as a nation and speak very concretely about a vision for America in which our war veterans take center stage.

I will begin with an observation about a painful and widening chasm between the identity of civilians in American and the self-identity of our returning service men and women who have survived the killing and maiming in Afghanistan and Iraq. I will then speak about the healing of the veterans that all of our communities must attend to. Finally, I look to veterans as our wise elders who can lead us as a nation away from our warmongering.

### 1.

As a nation we need to see ourselves for who we are. We are a war-making people, more dangerous to the world and to ourselves than our self-image would admit. We are in the midst of an awful war of our own making. The enormity of the pain it is inflicting grows daily. During the Vietnam War, Dr. King admonished us not to "think that God chose America as His divine messianic force" and warned that behaving like the world's policeman would bring God's judgment upon us. ("A Time to Break Silence," April 4, 1967) The invasion and occupation of Iraq is an all too familiar pattern--and so is effort to conceal its consequences from us. Bob Herbert writes:

The vast amount of suffering and death endured as a result of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq has, for the most part, been carefully kept out of the consciousness of the average American. It's an ugly subject, and the idea has taken hold that Americans need to be protected from images of the war that might be disturbing. As a nation we can wage war, but we don't want the public to be too upset about it. Or about torture of prisoners or intentional killing of civilians often in rage and frustration. Out of sight, out of mind.

Now 60% of Americans say it was a mistake and want it to be over. We regret the harm done, the US casualties and permanently physically disabled vets. Most of us did not have our lives interrupted--but a half million Americans have had their lives profoundly disrupted. They went to Iraq and Afghanistan, sometimes twice or three times. We call them heroes and thank them. But we want veterans to melt back into civilian life and move on, so that we can put this whole five years behind us. But we cannot afford to turn away, neither for their sake nor for our own. For many vets the war comes home with them--inside them it still rages, more painful than it was during the numbing months of combat. The testimony of this vet is typical:

I no longer like to do the things that used to make me happy, and I cannot stand to be in crowds because I feel like I have to be watching everyone. I become so angry at times that I have recurring thoughts of suicide. I don't know what to do as I am a newlywed and just found out my wife is pregnant. It bothers me to think of bringing a baby into this world, the same world where I have seen dead babies and children. These images haunt me in my sleep. I feel like I am spiraling out of control.

Veterans often feel a loss of their very selves. A Vietnam vet laments: "I left Vietnam almost 40 years ago and am still trying to find that part of me that couldn't find its way home." Psychotherapist Edward Tick who has worked with vets for 25 years, conducts healing retreats and leads veteran trips back to Vietnam. The deep lament is expressed as "Why can't I be who I was before?" Or the soldier who blurted out to his mother, "Mom, you don't know who I am." Veterans, says Tick, "know that they have been to hell and back, that they are different." But we expect them to put the war behind them and rejoin the ordinary flow of civilian life. But it is impossible for them to do so--and wrong for us to request it.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are only going to be over when we acknowledge and take some share in the immense suffering of the people whose lives have been forever changed by war. But we don't want to know about their pain. We don't know what to do with it. It is not ours, we might say. But they went in our name and we cooperated unless we went to prison for refusing to.

## 2.

Dr. King said we live in a web of mutuality and must act that way. Tick notes that war is such a "profound immersion in death that revisiting it is in memory is essential for the survivor to recover in heart and mind." Our vets now need to be honored by assisting them on the difficult inner journey to peace. Rather than a conspiracy of silence about their war stress we must offer them our support on the long road home.

In *War and the Soul* Dr. Tick describes three essential rituals used by ancient societies to bring about the healing of veterans so that they could take their place as the wise elders and teachers of their communities. Purification was the first order of business. "Whether or not they actually killed, veterans often feel dirty, sick, or sinful for participating in the taking of life," observes Tick. "The body needs to release the adrenaline rush it still feels and disown the addiction to that rush it developed during war." Veterans often need to be purged of the feeling of sickness, anguish and being cursed. These were the community's problem rather than an individual problem.

Second, veterans must tell their stories and experience them as being heard. The validation of war experiences is critical for the veteran and also for the community's collective wisdom. Tick warns that "without telling their stories veterans become stuck in the role of scapegoat."

Third, society must accept responsibility for what they ordered their armed forces to do. In Tick's words, we must say to our veterans, "We are responsible for you, for what you did, and for the consequences. We lift the burden of your action from you and take it onto our shoulders."

We must heed Dr. Tick's call if a new wave of war veterans are to be healed. In the Milwaukee area a small group of people are preparing to establish safe places in our local religious communities for veterans to tell their stories, to express the truths they carry that need to be heard by the community. A small group of pastoral care workers, pastors, Vietnam veterans, and families and friends of veterans are preparing to host small listening sessions in which to hear from our veterans. We have four church locations so far.

## 3.

We honor veterans by listening to them and heeding their advice. They can warn us about the tragedy of war. Their sobering judgment may prevent others from rushing headlong again into the agonizing experience they have had. Vets can lead us out of our superpower syndrome, our X-box fascination with war. We believe that if vets can regain their health they can lead American society into a wiser future.

"We need people who are awake to human suffering and are willing to guide us to alleviate it," writes Tick. What religious communities hear first hand from their sons and daughters might inspire communal rituals of repentance, purification, healing, and restitution, post-war rites long overdue in America. The wisdom of our veterans, acquired through great suffering, has the power to change us as a nation--if we are willing to listen. I know of nothing else except military defeats like those suffered by German and Japan that will change us. If we honor our veterans by assisting in their healing they can heal our nation.