

War and Peace

Jamaica Plain, November 16, 2002, Rev. Terry Burke

We face the prospect of war. New York Times correspondent Chris Hedges, speaking recently on the PBS television interview program of Charlie Rose, spoke of war as "imminent" and that we were going into it "blind." In his excellent book, *War is a Force That Gives us Meaning*, Chris writes, "the moral certitude of the state in time of war is a kind of fundamentalism." We are entering such a world, where the response to a real terrorist threat has led to an erosion of our civil liberties. The book is a powerful confession of the addictive quality of war, not only for soldiers, but war correspondents, aid workers, and society in general.

I am thankful that public opinion and the calmer council of Secretary of State Colin Powell has led the Bush administration to seek the offices of the UN to destroy Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. Certainly the destruction of those weapons would be a good thing. However, already we see fall-out from a potential war in Turkey, where a secular, pro-Western Muslim democracy, a strong ally of Israel, has voted for the first time to create an Islamist government in Ankara. Such a government will create serious problems for the Jewish, Armenian and Greek minorities in Turkey.

"God is on our side" could be the heading for today's reading from Judges I, one of the assigned Common Lectionary texts for this Sunday. The Israelites conquer the Promised Land, including Hebron, in a Holy War, though some of the conquered peoples continue to live among them. Today, as part of a holy war Muslim suicide bombers kill innocent Jewish civilians, and some Israeli leaders are reported to be considering a "transfer" of all Palestinians out of Israel, an "ethnic cleansing," in the event of war.

To gain some perspective on war and peace in our time, I would like to look at three historical figures out of our Unitarian Universalist tradition. The first served as a

president of the United States, William Howard Taft. Taft helped bust big business trusts; he also sent U.S. troops to the Philippines to maintain America's colonial empire. When Congress declared war on Germany in World War One, Taft was instrumental in persuading the American Unitarian Association to support the war. He argued that it was a "war for democracy and a "war to end all wars."

Taft used language that has its roots in what is known as the "Just War" tradition. I found a good, brief summary of that tradition in a World Council of Churches document from 1973 on "Violence and Non-violence:"

"Not only must the cause be just and all other possibilities be exhausted, but also there must be reasonable expectation that violence ...will attain the ends desired, the methods must be just and there must be a positive understanding of the order which will be established after the violence succeeds... It is the act of freedom which can only be undertaken, with the guilt it brings, confident in the final judgement of God." Note the stress in Just War Theory on the importance of the future order that will be established if the war succeeds; I'm not convinced that issue has been addressed concerning Iraq.

A second understanding of war comes from the 19th century Universalist minister Adin Ballou, whose hymn "Years are Coming" we just sang. Ballou wrote an influential book on Christian pacifism called Christian Non-Resistance. Leo Tolstoy, in his work *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, describes Adin Ballou, Henry David Thoreau, and Quakers such as John Woolman as the three great influences upon his religious thought. Tolstoy's writings on non-violence were influential in Mohandes Ghandi's struggle to free India from British rule. Ghandi's teachings came back home to America to influence Martin Luther King and his non-violent social action in the struggle for African American Civil Rights.

Ballou's Christian pacifism centered on Jesus' admonition to "turn the other cheek" and the commandment "Thou Shalt Not Kill." Ballou founded a commune in Hopedale, Massachusetts to live out his professed values. The commune was highly successful, too

successful in fact. The Draper family quietly bought up stock in the commune's corporate entity, acquired a majority share, then voted to sell all the assets at huge profit to stockholders. The Drapers then established Hopedale as a company mill town. Members of the Hopedale Commune were more fortunate than their Russian counterparts; members of the communes established on Tolstoyian religious principles died in the Stalinist Gulag of slave labor camps.

Of course, we don't separate ourselves from the world, and live in our own religious communes. However, I think that religious peace groups need to guard against withdrawing into their own little enclaves and communities of the like minded. I recently received an email from a peace group that said, "Satan wears a wrist band that says WWCD – What would Cheney Do?" The joke cutely makes fun of Dick Cheney and conservative Christians, but outside of a few progressive bastions, not many would find that funny. Such insider humor does nothing to further the cause of peace. Martin Luther King, on the other hand, took Christian non-violent action out into direct contact and conflict with those who violently disagreed with him. He was willing to put his own life on the line for what he believed in.

The third voice from our tradition, Emily Greene Balch, grew up in this Jamaica Plain congregation, where, at the age of 14, she decided to dedicate her life to serving the causes of peace and international justice that were espoused by our minister, the Rev. Charles Fletcher Dole. Dole was a leader of the Anti-Imperialism League, (putting him in conflict with his co-religionist Taft) and a pacifist during World War One.

Balch was part of the first generation of university educated women, and after graduate study in London and Berlin became tenured faculty at Wellesley College. Because of Balch's opposition to WWI, the school Trustees fired her, even though she had tenure. Along with her friend, Unitarian Jane Adams, she founded the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. Balch and Adams pioneered the idea of "continual negotiation;" they traveled the globe to get combatants to talk peace terms while fighting was still going on, to try to settle disputes without one side having to lose the war. Balch

joined the London Friends' meeting in the 1930's, discouraged at Unitarian support for militarism in WWI, and at the current denominational theological fashion of non-theistic humanism. During WWII, Balch broke with fellow pacifists and supported the war against Hitler. Through her international contacts, she knew about the death camps, and felt the Nazis had to be stopped at all cost. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1946. Emily Greene Balch leaves us a legacy of pragmatic pacifism, a willingness to get involved in messy work for peace.

We've heard about William Howard Taft, and Just War Theory, Adin Balou and Christian Pacifism, and Emily Greene Balch and her pragmatic pacifism. Let's hear from a soldier. One of the many things I like about Chris' book is that it doesn't trash ordinary soldiers. He quotes from William Manchester's autobiographical *Goodbye Darkness* as to what it was like for Manchester to kill a Japanese soldier in WWII:

Not only was he the first Japanese soldier I had ever shot at; he was the only one I had seen at close quarters. He was a robin-fat, moon-faced, roly-poly little man with his thick, stubby, trunk-like legs sheathed in faded khaki puttees and the rest of him squeezed into a uniform that was much too tight. Unlike me, he was wearing a tin hat, dressed to kill. But I was quite safe from him. His Arisaka rifle was strapped on in a sniper's harness, and though he had heard me, and was trying to turn toward me, the harness sling had him trapped. He couldn't disentangle himself from it. His eyes were rolling in panic. Realizing that he couldn't extricate his arms and defend himself, he was backing toward a corner with a curious crablike motion.

My first shot had missed him, embedding itself in the straw wall, but the second caught him dead on in the femoral artery. His left thigh blossomed, swiftly turning to mush. A wave of blood gushed from the wound, then another boiled out, sheeting across his legs, pooling on the earthen floor. Mutely he looked down at it. He dipped a hand in it and listlessly smeared his cheek red. His shoulders gave a little spasmodic jerk, as though someone had whacked him on the back; then he emitted a tremendous, raspy fart, slumped down, and died. I kept firing, wasting government property. Already I thought I

detected the dark brown effluvium of the freshly slain, a sour, pervasive emanation which is different from anything you have known. Yet seeing death at this range, like smelling it, requires no previous experience. You instantly recognize it as the spastic convulsion and rattle, which in this case was not loud, but deprecating and conciliatory, like the manners of the civilian Japanese. He continued to sink until he reached the earthen floor. His eyes glazed over. Almost immediately a fly landed on his left eyeball. It was joined by another. I don't know how long I stood there staring. I knew from previous combat what lay ahead for the corpse. It would swell, then bloat, bursting out of the uniform. Then the face would turn from yellow to red, to purple, to green, to black. My father's account of the Argonne had omitted certain vital facts. A feeling of disgust and self-hatred clotted darkly in my throat, gagging me.

Jerking my head to shake off the stupor, I slipped a new, fully loaded magazine into the butt of my .45. Then I began to tremble, and then to shake all over. I sobbed, in a voice still grainy with fear: "I'm sorry." Then I threw up all over myself. I recognized the half-digested C-rations beans dribbling down my front, smelled the vomit above the cordite. At the same time I noticed another odor; I had urinated in my skivvies. I pondered fleetingly why our excretions become so loathsome the instant they leave the body. Then Barney burst in on me, his carbine at the ready, his face gray, as though he, not I, had become a partner in the firm of death. He ran over to the Nip's body, grabbed its stacking swivel-its neck-and let go, satisfied that it was a cadaver. I marveled at his courage; I couldn't have taken a step toward that corner. He approached me and then backed away in revulsion, from my foul stench. He said, "Slim, you stink." I said nothing. I knew that I had become a thing of tears and twitchings and dirtied pants. I remember wondering dumbly: Is that what they mean by "conspicuous gallantry?"

Chris Hedges writes of the struggle in the human between Thanatos/Death and Love. There is a line of Death and Love that runs through our hearts, and every heart. We need to act in ways that expand the portion of love. When we must act in the ways of war, we need to remember Chris Hedges' advice to do so with humility, compassion, and repentance. As the Taoist sage Lao Tze wrote, 'conduct a military triumph like a funeral,

because people have died.' I pray that the conflict with Iraq can be resolved peacefully and suggest we act to that end.

Readings

Chris Hedges War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning

The moral certitude of the state in wartime is a kind of fundamentalism. And this dangerous messianic brand of religion, one where self-doubt is minimal, has come increasingly to color the modern world of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Dr. James Luther Adams, my ethics professor at Harvard Divinity School, used to tell us that we would end our careers fighting an ascendant fundamentalist movement, or as he liked to say, "the Christian fascists." He was not a scholar to be disregarded, however implausible such a scenario seemed at the time. There is a danger of a growing fusion between those in the state who wage war- both for and against modern states-and those who believe they understand and can act as agents of God...

I wrote this book not to dissuade us from war but to understand it. It is especially important that we, who wield such massive force across the globe, see within ourselves the seeds of our own obliteration. We must guard against the myth of war and the drug of war that can, together, render us as blind and callous as some of those we battle.

We were humbled in Vietnam, purged, for a while, of dangerous hubris, offered in our understanding and reflection about the war, a moment of grace. We became a better country. But once again the message is slipping away from us, even as we confront the possibility of devastating biological or nuclear terrorist attacks in Washington or New York. If the humility we gained from our defeat in Vietnam is not the engine that drives our response to future terrorist strikes, even those that are cataclysmic, we are lost.

The only antidote to ward off self-destruction and the indiscriminate use of force is humility and ultimately, compassion. Reinhold Niebuhr aptly reminded us that we must

all act and then ask for forgiveness. This book is not a call for inaction. It is a call for repentance.

From Judges 1

After the death of Joshua the people of Israel inquired of God, "Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?" God said, "Judah shall go up; behold, I have given the land into his hand." And Judah said to Simeon his brother, "Come up with me into the territory allotted to me, that we may fight against the Canaanites; and I likewise will go with you into the territory allotted to you." So Simeon went with him. Then Judah went up and God gave the Canaanites and the Perizzites into their hand; and they defeated ten thousand of them at Bezek. They came upon Adonibezek at Bezek and fought against him, and defeated the Canaanites and the Perizzites. Adonibezek fled, but they pursued him and caught him, and cut off his thumbs and his great toes. And Adonibezek said, "Seventy kings with their thumbs and their great toes cut off used to pick up scraps under my table; as I have done, so God has requited me." And they brought him to Jerusalem, and he died there.

And the men of Judah fought against Jerusalem, and took it, and smote it with the edge of the sword, and set the city on fire. And afterward the men of Judah went down to fight against the Canaanites who dwelt in the hill country in the Negeb, and in the lowland. And Judah went against the Canaanites who dwelt in Hebron; and they defeated Sehshai and Ahiman and Talmai. From there, they went against the inhabitants of Debir... And the descendants of the Kenite, Moses' father-in-law, went up with the people of Judah from the city of palms into the wilderness of Judah and they went and settled with the people. And Judah went with Simeon his brother, and they defeated the Canaanites who inhabited Zephath, and utterly destroyed it. Judah also took Gaza with its territory, and Ashkelon with its territory, ..And Hebron was given to Caleb, as Moses had said,; and he drove out from it the three sons of Anak. But the people of Benjamin did not drive out the Jebusites

who dwelt in Jerusalem; so the Jebusites have dwelt with the people of Benjamin in Jerusalem to this day.