

“Last Year in Kandahar”
Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
Meriden, CT

Veterans Day Sunday
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“Grant us the courage to pay attention...” – mindfulness.

“...to stay engaged so we may listen without judgment...” – compassion.

“...to restore integrity and accept responsibility...” – justice.

Who can argue with mindfulness, compassion, and justice? Any of us who seek to practice them, any of us who put the substance of life lived over life to which we aspire. The words that introduced these concluding phrases of my friend Chris Antal’s “Veteran’s Day Confession for America” were raw with substance. How is it that we wonder at the multitude of our military veterans who return home wounded in psyche and spirit, thousands so wounded that they see no other way to proceed than not to proceed, to end it all?

“We have insulated ourselves from the painful truths veterans carry,” wrote Chris,
“our bumper magnets proclaim, ‘support our troops’
but for too many, suicide is the only panacea
our insulation is their isolation.”

From what exactly are we insulated? I believe it is the raw truth of war experienced that Chris has aptly morphed into a confession.

The notion of confession generally doesn’t go down well with Unitarian Universalists. Our religious history holds this tension, which is likely why it took so long for Unitarians and Universalists to recognize our common ground and merge. The tension is evident in the observation of the 19th century Thomas Starr King, who identified with both Universalism and Unitarianism. When questioned about his dual affinities, he readily responded:

“The one [Universalist] thinks God is too good to damn them forever, the other [Unitarian] thinks they are too good to be damned forever.”

He had no trouble finding common ground between these then distinct denominations that he recognized as “too near of kin to be married.”

The tension lies in the notion of a loving God and the hubris of goodness on the part of humanity. Compassion and resistance to anything smacking of humility are a yin-yang. In so many ways we live that tension in our own time in our own faith community. Whether we call it God or the Sacred or the Universe doesn’t matter. It does matter that we manifest sufficient humility to look at ourselves in an honest mirror and recognize the frailty and folly along with the goodness.

Is there a place for confession in our midst? Is there a place for cultivating a capacity to look into a mirror and love what we see even though what we see, if we look deeply, may jar us?

Being “too good to be damned” stretches well beyond theology. It touches the soul of this nation...most poignantly on the day now recognized as Veteran’s Day. Veteran: one who is seasoned, one who is expert. Narrowing the definition to match the day: one who is seasoned and expert in the ways of war. Then comes the leap to “heroes.”

I believe what Chris did through his Confession was to reach the troubled souls and touch the fragile hearts of the women and men he served as chaplain, women and men who felt not at all like heroes.

Surely he reached the raw nerves of resistance in his superiors, resistance to anything that hinted at war as sin, war as wrongdoing, institutionalized violence as systemic violation. In his pastoral ministry, Chris reaped the whirlwind that comes with prophetic ministry. As a consequence of writing, delivering, and then blogging his confession through the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Larger Fellowship, Chaplain Chris Antal received a “general officer memorandum of reprimand” and was released from active duty.

He fought back. He asked many of his colleagues, me included, to write letters of support. Already ambivalent that he was there, I nonetheless responded to his request. Yet I confess my wishes that the Brigadier General to whom I addressed my letter might read between the lines my hope that Chris would return home. On hindsight, I don’t think that Brigadier General Scottie D. Carpenter read between any lines, if indeed he read the lines.

While released from active duty, Chris is still commissioned as a US Army Chaplain. This past March, he reflected on his “Confession” in a published commentary.

“War is toxic,” he begins. And then: *“War is sin—*as defined by theologian Paul Tillich: ‘a three-fold separation: separation among individuals, separation of man from himself, and separation of all men from the Ground of Being.’ War is toxic and war is sin—not only for the soldier who fights the war, but also for the society who authorizes the war-making in a foreign land and then is all too often separated (geographically, intellectually, and emotionally) from the death, injury and contamination that are the tragic consequences of war.”

We might say that war is not for the faint of heart and evoke something close to a “Duh...!” Yet speaking the truth of war’s horrific realities to those charged with implementing them demands an even stronger heart. Heroes confess. Heroes speak the truth to themselves and to the powers that be, no matter what the consequences. I wonder to what extent Chris took on some forces of our own faith with his contention that:

“Unitarian Universalists would do well to consider Tillich’s view of “sin as separation” and reflect on how war separates us from the ‘Spirit of Life’ and the essential principles that define our faith: the inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity and compassion in human relations; the goal of world community; and respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are all a part. To ignore or disregard the fact of sin just because we don’t like the word is unrealistic and self-deceptive because sin causes great harm to individuals and society.”

Chris decidedly takes on the grist of sin, of wrongdoing, of the need to speak the truth about what one has done and seen and partaken of in the institutionalized violence that is war. The “Confession” was addressed not just to the women and men he served through his constituents at Kandahar Air Field, but to his fellow citizens, “many of whom,” in Chris’s words, “have been all too separated from the consequences of our war-making over the past decade. I wrote ‘A Veteran’s Day Confession for America’ to address this harmful separation, facilitate purification and cleansing, restore connections, and reconcile us to right relationships.”

As I read those words, I knew that I needed to speak directly with Chris. It was good to hear his voice, and he remarked that it was good to hear mine. While he continues as Consulting Minister to the UU Congregation of Rock Tavern, New York, Chris has begun a doctoral program on “Contemporary Religion and Public Life” at Hartford Seminary, paid for by...yes, the GI bill! He works with a group called Soldier’s Heart, traveling, training clergy, and filling pulpits. This morning, he’s in the pulpit of Boston’s Arlington Street Church. This afternoon, he’ll fill the pulpit of the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst. With permission to quote from our conversation, I can share that his drive to get a just resolution from the military is ongoing.

Chris reported that Sarah Lammert, our UUA Director of Ministries and Faith Development, took my letter of support and others to a Washington, DC meeting with Chaplain Colonel Brian Walker, Director of Personnel for all the chaplains in the US Army. Her quest was recognition of wrongdoing and a just resolution. Chaplain Walker responded by recommending that Chris resign his Army commission. He hasn’t done that; he won’t do that.

Chris is as clear and firm as ever. He spoke of how “we as a nation need to move beyond the deception of a civil religion that touts our own goodness.” “Moral pain” is appropriate and healing. “What happens to the veteran,” he asks, “when society doesn’t allow this appropriate moral pain...to be shared? What happens is isolation, and often suicide.” He said more. When society, including our Unitarian Universalist congregations, can’t hear the pain, the guilt, and the deep sorrow brought into our sanctuaries by our veterans, our veterans can’t heal. When all we do is tout the heroism of our returning women and men, we blot out their need to speak their inner truths.

Ninety-five years ago today an armistice was signed, a healing of hostilities as a prologue to peace talks. It was effected at 11 AM on the 11th day of the 11th month, 1918, and was one of many armistices, or truces, in what was later dubbed “the war to end all wars.” That initial armistice was good for 30 days. It was the Treaty of Versailles, signed on June 21, 1919, that officially ended the “Great War.” Yet the language of that treaty held the promise that hostilities would simmer in the national psyches of those nations at whom the finger of accusation was decidedly pointed. While this understanding doesn’t render those nations innocent, the key players of the Allied Powers in all the talks leading to that treaty ran roughshod over what U.S. President Woodrow Wilson had set forth in the early days of 1918 as a basis for lasting peace—his proposal of “Fourteen Points.” The first and the fourteenth served as bookends for the others:

- I. Open covenants of peace, openly arrived at, after which there shall be no private international understandings of any kind but diplomacy shall proceed always frankly and in the public view.

[and fast forwarding to the fourteenth point]:

XIV. A general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.

Imagine, a covenant of peace—language as religious, as biblical, as it is political. A promise secured by mutuality. Imagine, a “general association of nations,” which wouldn’t take form for another 27 years with the founding of the United Nations.

Yet the Treaty of Versailles held the language of polarization. *They’re guilty; we’re not. They bear full responsibility for the loss and devastation; we do not.* Hear the narrative of Article 231 of this treaty:

“The Allied and Associated Governments affirm and Germany accepts the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies.”

There is not one iota of “confession” for what “we” have done. “We” are innocent.

It was the veterans who bore the scars of memory and more who sought to change the terms of November 11 from “Armistice Day,” from a day celebrating a temporary cease of hostilities, to “Veterans Day.” It began in Kansas 60 years ago. Congress complied the following year; and in October of 1954, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, native of Kansas and five-star General, signed it into being. While he called upon citizens to remember the sacrifices of our veterans, he beseeched them also to work for a lasting peace. Perhaps his own memories called him to honor those who held their memories so recent and raw.

An Armistice that moved into a treaty that bore no trace of covenant, no trace of “moral pain” on the part of the victors, no trace of a promise secured by mutuality, holds the seeds of another war waiting to break ground. Indeed the War secured by that treaty was to be followed by at least 150 wars into our own time.

The gift of a Veteran’s Day is the possibility that we might hear and partake of a Confession for America. How shall we “support our troops?” How shall we forge a lasting peace? How shall we heed the truth of war from the women and men who do return? And how shall we speak the truth of war to ourselves? We honor neither the dead nor the living by becoming, in Chris’s words, “people of the lie.”

On this Veteran’s Day Sunday, may we turn from the path we are on. May we be together in covenant to replace our indifference, callousness, and self-deception with compassion for all who bear the burdens of *our* wars. In the name of God or Love or both, may we “pay attention” and “stay engaged” so that we might “listen without judgment, restore integrity, accept responsibility, keep promises, and give honor to whomever honor is due.”

So be it and Amen.

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