

Veteran's Day: Silent Response

A sermon for All Faiths unitarian Congregation

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Silence has a certain energy to it like no other energy source. It has the power to get people to think and to act, it can help slow the mind down. The trouble with silence is that many people feel the need to fill the void of silence with needless chatter, with TV, with Music, with noise of some kind. Silence can be disconcerting and can make people feel uncomfortable and alone, that's why the world is filled with TV's that have been left on when nobody is watching, for background noise.

What happens when there is silence? We turn our thoughts and focus inwards and gain the power we need to refuel our minds. Our ego is temporarily switched off or at least made to be quiet for a bit, and we start to see the real world as it should be. Our thoughts get in the way of our reality sometimes and we don't see the beauty and needs of the world around us. When there is silence there is time for introspection and to allow our true self to speak not the ego or the conscious mind, but the true self connected to the flow of energy around us. The state of silence is a way of reaching another part of your mind not possible when going about your daily routine. This other part of your mind is connected in every way to the world around you and with practice you can tap into this knowledge.

In 1921, an unknown World War I American soldier was buried in Arlington National Cemetery. This site, on a hillside overlooking the Potomac River and the city of Washington D.C., became the focal point of reverence for America's veterans. This ceremony of burial was largely silence. Thoughts were turned to this unknown soldier in silence. John F. Kennedy once said that "a nation reveals itself not only by the men it produces, but also by the men it honors, the men it remembers." The tradition of setting a day aside to remember the veterans of America dates back to the First World War. That war was a costly and bitter one. America alone lost 116,000 of its citizens at sea, in the trenches, and in the skies over Europe. Finally, on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918, the guns went silent. An armistice was declared and the "war to end all wars" was over. In the years since President Woodrow Wilson made the 11th of November a national day of remembrance, the scope of our observance has changed, from a day set aside to remember the dead from one war, to a day in which American veterans from all wars, as well as those who served in times of peace, could be honored.

If a Veteran gave a Veterans Day message you might expect it to be straightforward - a gung-ho voice celebrating our military, evoking the patriotic feelings we experience when the Veteran's Day parade goes by. The issues of war and service and faith are complicated for veterans, for us all. I have two themes for this Veteran's Day message: as Americans, we should support our vets; and as people of faith, we should think long and hard about wars, particularly the voluntary kind.

First, I believe whole heartedly that we should support our vets, current and future. Long ago I was on a domestic plane flight, and before leaving the gate the pilot announced that we had to wait a few more minutes, for some special passengers. Shortly the hostesses ushered into the cabin a group of young men and women, wearing the fatigue uniforms of our nation's military, as

the pilot announced that they were headed for service in Iraq. The passengers broke into applause. The pilot - obviously himself a veteran - poked his head into the passenger cabin to watch, with a smile. We were all proud of them, our young folks heading overseas to serve and do battle, for us. This is normal in our society today.

Not all vets share that story. Some in our congregation that are vets have not shared that story. I have a close colleague whose service came in the Vietnam War, the most unpopular war in American history. When he traveled around the country in his uniform, no one cheered, no one clapped; people looked anywhere but at him. He told me the rare kind word or smile came only from veterans. When he came home in 1970 from my combat tour in Vietnam, he got off a transport plane at an air force base outside Seattle and walked under a big sign that read, Welcome home, soldier! America is proud of you! 24 hours later, he was dropped off at the Seattle airport by an army bus, and stood on the sidewalk, wearing a new uniform for his trip home and clutching his new orders, discharging him from the Army. He wasn't quite ready to go home. He told me his head was spinning from the abrupt transition from the jungle, thousands of miles away, to a cool April evening in the Pacific Northwest. He found a pay phone and called a college friend, who was then a graduate student in Seattle. Before long his friend Bob was pulling up in his car at the curb. My colleague says, "He did a wonderful thing for me - he took me skiing in the nearby Cascade Mountains for a couple of days. It was a great transition - everywhere I looked people were smiling, no one was shooting, and it couldn't have been farther from the jungle." But before they went skiing, they stopped at the house Bob was sharing with several other graduate students. Bob introduced him and told everyone he just got home from Vietnam! None of them would shake his hand. The sign he'd walked under - welcome home, soldier, America is proud of you - was a lie. America was not proud of him - America was ashamed of him. Definitely a Veteran's Day contradiction.

He didn't tell anyone he was a veteran. He pushed Vietnam into the back of his mind, and buckled down to building a life for himself. My colleague explained to me that some 15 years later, another vet stuck his head into his office and called his attention to the Veteran's Day parade outside; he said there were Vietnam veterans marching, and they were being cheered. Time had passed, attitudes had changed. But he was never be able to shake the memory that he once put everything he had on the line for his country, and his country was not grateful. Vietnam - and Korea - were departures for Americans. The wars that had gone before were easy to understand: the Revolution to make us free, the Civil War to keep our country together and abolish slavery, - and above all World War II: the worldwide struggle against tyranny, totalitarianism, hatred, cruelty, the Holocaust. And all Americans dug deep for that one. No matter what support the vets; it's the right thing to do. That said, back the Vets, but question the wars.

We have to read history to remind ourselves that a lot of blood was spilled here in the United States by our forefathers to get us to the liberties and luxuries we enjoy today. New York City was occupied by our enemy during the Revolution. There were battles on Long Island, in White Plains; George Washington moved his army across the Hudson River right where the GW Bridge is today. We haven't had a war on American soil since the Civil War. In today's global society, we send our troops far away. And the troops we send are volunteers. Fools say they know what they are getting into, but we know racism and classism are at the root of recruitment tan the desperateness of volunteering. Just imagine receiving a letter giving you a mandate to go to war as so many of our veterans have.

Today there is no draft. Today's wars are borne by our professional military, supplemented by the Reserve and the National Guard, all of them volunteers. One thing ties all wars together: they tend to be declared by older people, our politicians - and fought by young people. Wars have always been fought by young men - why? Young men think they'll never die, they think war will be an adventure. Think about it: older people are less likely to cooperate. Picture the World War I scene of the troops in the trenches; an officer shouts, over the top, boys! Charge! The troops in the trenches, average age say 65, respond: my back's a little stiff today, it's not really a good day for a charge. Maybe tomorrow. They're also more likely to argue: why should we charge? They've got machine guns! It's dangerous, not to mention pointless. This idea could be the end of warfare - at long last.

Support the vets. But the best thing we could do for our vets is to save their lives; decide NOT to wage a voluntary war on the other side of the world. Question the wars our politicians propose. These are important moral issues. Maybe we could find some guidance in our faith. Well - if there are any two features of this world more intertwined than religion and war, I don't know what they are. In the 2000 years since the birth of Christ, try to find a war that wasn't fought over religion; that didn't invoke religion on one or both sides; that didn't represent people trying to pull God into their human disputes. There's hardly been a period in Christian history without a Christian war going on somewhere: Christians against Muslims, Catholics against Protestants, Protestants against Protestants. Everybody against other faiths, considered non-believers, like Aztecs, Incas and other Native Americans. Wars without declaring war, like the Inquisition, in which the only Christian church of the time virtually declared war on its own people over minor matters of church dogma, all in the name of Christ.

That's a lot of conflict, for a holiday. There's a parade, with bands, waving flags, cheering children, and a lot of old men marching in uniforms that are a bit too tight. The Shriners show up at a lot of these parades, and buzz around in their little cars. Maybe we ought not to take ourselves so seriously; maybe we ought to forget about contradictions and conflicts, so natural to our human condition. Maybe our veterans just ought to bask in the cheers and thanks of their countrymen, however flawed, and not worry about their equally flawed selves. After all, they're only human. And maybe that's the answer: just to do our best. And that's what veterans did, all of them, in every war: they did their best. So let's do our best for them, take care of our veterans, and maybe at long last, we can all believe in that sign: welcome home, soldier! America is proud of you. Let's give a silent response to them, just for today, taking the time to turn our hearts and minds away from the noise and offering them silent gratitude.

May it be so.