

“Too Much to Bear”

On March 19th, the fifth anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, there were anti-war demonstrations across the country. The numbers have dwindled significantly. In previous years, tens of thousands marched through U.S. cities. Leading up to the invasion on several occasions more than 100,000 gathered. One of the largest gatherings in Washington this year only mustered a few hundred.

The mother of an Army soldier from Louisville, Kentucky who had finished a tour of duty in Iraq, was quoted as saying she's afraid the worsening U.S. economy has made Americans forget about the war: "We're not paying attention anymore. My son has buried his friends. He's given eulogies, he's had to go through things no one should have to go through and over here they've forgotten. They just go shopping instead."

There were two demonstrations in Burlington on the fifth anniversary. A group including University of Vermont students held an early morning rally at General Dynamics Development and Design Facility. They protested the millions of dollars in tax subsidies given to support General Dynamics and called for an end to this form of corporate welfare.

The other demonstration was an expanded vigil of the group that gathers every weekday evening from 5:00 to 5:30 p.m. at the top of Church Street outside of our meeting house. I was grateful for the opportunity to stand with the over 50 people who came. A number of them like myself had been alerted by David and Sally Conrad's e-mail. Kathy Ford, a former member of our congregation, receives their e-mail in Rome, where she now lives with her husband who works for the United Nations. She happened to be in town and joined us, thanks to the e-mail.

From January 2002 to 2006, the Conrads faithfully sent out a newsletter called *One Hour for Peace*. They suggested ways in which the recipients might spend at least one hour for peace each week. The letter offered six or seven ideas for actions, everything from writing a letter to the editor, contacting your congressman, to attending a seminar on peace-making. This newsletter was their way of responding to the build-up to war after 9/11. Since 2006, Sally and David only send out special editions of their newsletter given the fact that other organizations like the Peace and Justice Center and Move On have been alerting the public to peace-making opportunities.

I find the fidelity of people like the Conrads both inspiring and challenging. Often as I'm leaving the building between 5:00 and 5:30 in the evening, I see the small group of faithful witnesses keeping their weekly vigil. Just recently, I saw one lone figure easily recognizable by her small frame, red cape, and black hat. Sylvia Holden was standing with her sign calling for peace. It takes courage to stand alone as cars and pedestrians pass by. I would be tempted to either wait for others or go home.

Sylvia reminded me of the well known peacemaker A. J. Muste. Into his 80's he was an indefatigable activist. He migrated to this country at the age of six. In 1940 he became

the executive secretary of the leading religious pacifist organization, the Fellowship of Reconciliation. He was eloquent in his opposition to the Cold War and critical of the theologians who justified the resort to nuclear threats and the eventual militarization of the U.S. culture.

The following is from an essay of his counseling young men to resist conscription: "Nonconformity becomes a virtue, indeed a necessary and indispensable measure of spiritual self-preservation, in a day when the impulse to conform, to acquiesce, to go along is used as an instrument to subject men to totalitarian rule and involve them in a permanent war. To create the impression of at least outward unanimity, the impression that there is no 'real' opposition is something for which all dictators and military leaders strive. The more it seems that there is no opposition, the less worthwhile it seems to an even larger number of people to cherish even the thought of opposition" (Ellsberg, p 73).

There's a famous story about an exchange between Muste and a reporter. As he was maintaining a solitary vigil, not unlike my friend Sylvia, this time outside of a nuclear weapons site, a reporter questioned him as to what good he thought he was doing. Muste answered: "I don't do this to change the world. I do it to keep the world from changing me."

Eventually he became one of the chief architects of the broad anti-war coalition that formed in response to the Vietnam War. At age 81, Muste was arrested for attempting to demonstrate in front of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. A year later, he travelled to North Vietnam as a first-hand witness to the consequences of U.S. bombing. Others marveled at his vitality which didn't seem to need tangible results. His secret may be in these words he wrote: "Joy and growth come from following our deepest impulses, however foolish they may seem to some, or dangerous, and even though the apparent outcome may be defeat" (Ibid p 73). He died at 82 in 1967, shortly after returning from North Vietnam.

This man's spirit as a pacifist has challenged many, myself included. The first time that I seriously came to grips with my own position regarding the "just war" theory *vis a vis* pacifism was in the 80's after the Sandinista Insurrection and overthrow of the Somozan regime in 1979.

Many may remember how the Reagan administration illegally funded the Contras, an army of insurgents and former Somozan troops, headquartered in neighboring Honduras. The Sandinistan government's policy of social reform threatened U.S. economic interests in Nicaragua.

In the attempt to overthrow a government of the people, the Reagan administration was repeating the same overbearing, illegal strategy used in both Guatemala and Chile. In both of these Central American countries, the U.S. government supported the military overthrow of reformist regimes elected by the people. In 1954 it was the government of Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala and in Chile it was the government of Salvador Allende in

1973. Both Arbenz and Allende had been accomplished and gifted leaders. They were replaced by military dictators, protective of U.S. interests.

In the case of Nicaragua, the people had suffered fifty years under the Somoza family, a dictatorship that was described as being in the back pocket of the U.S. When the Sandinistas overthrew the Somoza regime, they did an unusual thing. They offered amnesty to all of Somoza's troops that had fought against them. In this historical moment I knew that I could not be a pacifist if I supported the insurrection. Given my own country's shameless policy in Central America, the Nicaraguan people had just cause to rise up, to resist an aggressive power.

Any theory, whether it be pacifism or "just war," has to grapple with the complexity of the historical, political reality. That's why it's so timely that in June of this year at the General Assembly of our denomination this provocative question is being posed: "Should the UUA reject the use of any and all kinds of violence and war to resolve disputes between peoples and nations and adopt a principle of seeking just peace through nonviolent means?"

Actually, this question was posed two years ago at the 2006 General Assembly. This began a four-year thoughtful process that will lead to a "statement of conscience" to be considered by the 2010 General Assembly. In order to involve all UUs in this reflective process, each congregation received a study guide that puts the question this way:

Should we, the UUA and member congregations, adopt a specific and detailed 'just war' policy to guide our witness, advocacy, and social justice efforts?"

Paul Razor, a UU theologian who will be addressing this issue this coming June at the Assembly wrote a clarifying article in the spring issue of the *UU World*. There, he says: "I suspect the denomination as a whole is ambivalent, as I suspect are many of us as individuals. I do not see any inevitable outcome, no single 'right' answer to these questions. Unitarian Universalists have historically followed the just war model, but there have always been pacifists among us and we have long affirmed peace as a value."

Razor points out that it is wrong to assume that just war and pacifism are in opposition to each other. Both are antiwar traditions and have much in common. In the effort to limit the use of violent force, their proponents almost always find themselves on the same side. Any statement of conscience will necessitate moving beyond old divisions in order to arrive at a position that integrates the two traditions.

An argument has been made for a third antiwar theory: peace-making. And yet, as crucial as practices that prevent violent conflict are, many believe that pacifism or just war theories are still essential in helping us make moral judgments regarding actual wars. Rather than replacing these two traditions, peacemaking complements them. By the way, a full discussion of Razor's article will be held here on April 13 following the 11 o'clock Sunday service.

Thanks to the commitment of our Denominational Affairs Committee, under the able leadership of David and Sally Conrad and Pat Allen, we have had four or five different peacemaking programs. In the most recent one, held after a Sunday service, members heard from Matt Howard, a Marine during the Iraq invasion and now a leader of Iraq Veterans Against the War. At present, he is a first year student at St. Michael's College.

Matt was among those 100 or so veterans who testified between March 13 -16 in D.C. at the "Winter Soldier Investigation." Iraq's antiwar veterans have revived a venue used by their Vietnam predecessors who first held this type of event in 1971. In this program, veterans make public testimonials of war crimes and atrocities committed under orders. At considerable risk to themselves, they tell what is really going on as distinct from the distortions presented to the American public by the mainstream media.

A mini-version of the Winter Soldier Investigation was held at the UVM Davis Center in early March. I regret not having attended. Pat Brown, the Director of Student Life and of the Davis Center Student Life Building practices his own kind of peace activism. On a large field next to his home in Williston he plants as many memorial flags as there are U.S. soldiers who have died in Iraq. When I asked Pat what had inspired him, his response was simple and direct. He said: "I live on a busy street and I wanted people to think and just remember." He was also deeply concerned that the media wasn't doing anything to inform the public about the cost of the war, a staggering \$500,000 per minute which equals 720 million dollars a day. The toll that it has taken on our economy is second to the devastating impact it has had on the Iraqi people. Their death toll, including civilians—mostly women and children—exceeds our own by the tens of thousands. Their water system has been so polluted that it is difficult for university students to find water to drink in order to be able to take exams.

Pat Brown also spoke of his concern about the disengagement of the UVM students from the war. During the summer when the field has to be mowed often he invites students out to help him replant the flags. When he began his practice on November 19, 2006, the death toll was 2,867. On February 18 of this year it had risen to 3,963. To date it has passed 4,000 soldiers—men and women. On occasion, people stop by to help Pat replant his flags, a process that takes at least two and a half hours.

Pat's motivation for his practice, wanting people to think and remember, reminds me of what the TV talk host Phil Donahue said motivated him to co-produce a documentary entitled the "Body of War." Like Pat, he wanted people to pay attention, to see the pain and not sanitize the war. He was appalled as well by the failure of the media to inform the public, to even buckle and comply when warned not to photograph the coffins returning from Iraq.

When Donahue visited Walter Reed Military Hospital, he decided to use as the subject of his documentary the life of a veteran in his early 20's. Thomas Young had been paralyzed by a gunshot wound just beneath his shoulders. As a consequence, he could not control any of his bodily functions. The film brings home the profound and painful reality of one injured soldier's post war experience. It references the false manufactured

evidence that drew our country into an illegal war. Scenes of Thomas dealing with the almost insurmountable odds of rehab and post traumatic stress syndrome are interspersed with footage of a gala affair attended by the Washington Press Corps along with President Bush and members of his administration. At one point in his speech, Bush makes fun backed up by a film showing himself looking under his desk and behind drapes for weapons of mass destruction in his oval office. All the while young Americans are paying the price for the tragic, misguided judgment of their elders. The 28,000 emotional and physical injuries far outnumber the death toll of 4,000.

The power of this documentary is not dependent on statistics. At this point, we are all relatively informed if not numbed by the overwhelming cost of the war. The last estimate was \$10 billion a month. The power of the film lies in the up close, intimate exposure to the cost of war on one young man's body.

Who hasn't been tempted to look away from graphic portrayals of the ravages of war, a war funded by our tax dollars. How often have we seen the picture of the naked little Vietnamese girl, arms outstretched, running down the street, her body burning from napalm? Many have credited this photo with bringing home the reality and horror of the Vietnam War.

Two weeks ago a *Free Press* story reported that when the Winter Solider hearings in D.C. were shown at the Williston library, midway through the program the audience turned off the TV. The stories of the atrocities committed under orders were too much to bear.

I give thanks for the peacemakers in our congregation and in the broader community who will not let us turn off our uneasy consciences, who make us pay attention to our moral responsibility when we are tempted to despair. Blessed are they for they know that the difference between hope and despair is struggle. Blessed are they for they continue to be guided by their faith in the human community and in the empowering Spirit of love for whom all is possible. May each of us be energized by that creative Spirit to use the power that we have in the service of what we say we believe.

###

Ellsberg, Robert, *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time* (New York, Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997)