

SERMON – In Service Of...

November 10, 2019 – Veterans Day

There are a lot of people who are very good at speaking in very inflammatory ways about the military...about anyone in a uniform. Personally, I feel motivated to take a more nuanced approach. Not at all because I feel compelled to apologize or excuse any of the injustice that sometimes takes place in the hands of those who are given lethal force, a title and rank to use it, but rather because I think by more deeply considering what we are dealing with...what it means to “serve”, we might actually come up with actionable ways to change the systems that so many of us good liberal and progressive folks would like to see changed. We might actually be able to recognize deep gratitude and honor in the equation and we might be able to recognize some of our own flaws and incapacities as well.

Oddly enough, one of the most inflammatory and offensive things I’ve ever heard uttered in reference to the military was just last week from the “commander in chief” who tweeted:

“we train our boys to be killing machines...”

I know of no one in or near the military who would ever define themselves as “killing machines.” Even with my personally conflicted feelings about military force of any kind whether it is on the actual battlefield or in city streets, the individuals who serve in uniform are not “killing machines.” That is not to say that soldiers don’t kill or that our multi-billion-dollar military complex does not kill. But to reduce the very human beings who serve to a single purpose, a convenient buzzword or catch phrase...specifically to the level of being a device of death shows a gross misunderstanding of every aspect of what it even means to have a military not to mention ignorance about the impact of war on those who’ve been in battle. And it shows an incapacity to feel. Considering the source, there should be no surprise...the President does not understand his oath.

But I worry that this over simplified assessment by the “toddler in chief”, this gross mischaracterization of military service is an assumption that has infected our society of

civilians so that our expectation of people in uniform is that they are only capable of violence, only capable of following the most extreme of orders and only capable of bringing death. It is an expectation that I know gives some people a knee jerk revulsion to anything military and others a fanatic glorification of the same. I find neither position helpful.

I'm presenting this in strong terms this morning because for one thing, I feel incredibly strongly about it. Also, there is a powerful tendency in our culture to promote certain kinds of militarized brutality that are quite profitably cultivated by the media and Hollywood and not necessarily from those who actually serve in the military or ever face any kind of front line or direct personal direct threat. This is the same system that monetizes punishment vs. justice creating a have-and-have-not paradigm that at times feels impossible to change.

Last week, I traveled to Arizona with our Cambridge Interfaith Sanctuary Coalition (CISC) team to support our family in sanctuary. Just to be clear, things went very well and although I can't share any details right now, we hope to have more information in the coming weeks. Regardless, it was an enormously emotional trip for all of us. For our work, we needed to travel to a detention facility. For me, it brought me back to some of what I was exposed to in California when I visited detention facilities and prisons and learned first-hand what happens in these places. The location in Arizona was just like the centers I saw in California...with a big sign outside that identified the organization running the facility as Core Civic, one of the largest contractors for government detention/prison facilities. Core Civic was started in the 1980s as the Corrections Corporation of America in Tennessee by a group of men connected to real estate and corrections for the express purpose of building and running detention facilities to make money. The founders were intentionally keen to activate corrections as a "business" not to mention having direct ties to the Republican Party of Tennessee which provided them a government mandate. They found their first contracts in Houston and managed through their efforts to establish the first for-profit correction facility and a global industry.

If you follow the money in this story it is also connected to the “tough on crime” legislation of the 90’s which makes the whole thing sound like a conspiracy theory...if it weren’t so obscenely evident through the generation of incarcerated men of color...but I digress.

Going back to the detention centers, there is no way for pictures or news reports to actually capture what they are like. They are designed to isolate, humiliate and dehumanize those who are held captive. There is no describing a 30-foot-tall electrified fence with razor wire at the top...let alone two of them. There is no describing the bleach smell of industrial clean. There is no describing the sound of unforgiving electronic gates echoing in a cinderblock and bullet proof glass world. There is no describing seeing people marched in a pen or the vacant eyes of inmates who are forced to live under the threatening sights of an armed guard. There is no describing immigration *prison*.

There is no describing what it feels like to have all of this information first hand and to stand here knowing that at this moment that facility and others like it are sitting out there in the middle of the desert right now full of people who’s greatest crime may have been seeking refuge from unspeakable violence in their own country only to be greeted with the violence of ours.

Give me liberty...

We live with this brutality like it is normal. Something has gone horribly wrong that we aren’t all screaming at the top of our lungs about the fact that a group of men who wanted to make some money, managed to leverage the vulnerability of migrants to create a billion dollar industry. This should be illegal.

Apparently, we are numb.

The reason I tell this story on Veterans Day Weekend is because I believe the numbness that allows us to sit idly by while our government pays billions for industrialized concentration camps is the same numbness that allows the President of the United

States, the Commander in Chief refer to his military as “killing machines” and get away with it.

As you well know, I am pointedly critical of this country’s history of slavery and genocide. I am rabid about the forced servitude and second class citizenship of women and the objectification and violence against women’s bodies, the stark and racialized brutality of police, the ongoing murder of transgender women the messed up 1st Amendment excuses that excuse white supremacy and certainly I am physically ill over the deep sickness of guns and gun culture. These are all things that I have spoken of and will continue to rail against and at the same time I’ll be damned if I let our military be reduced in concept or word to killing machines.

“I, _____, do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; and that I will obey the orders of the President of the United States and the orders of the officers appointed over me, according to regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice. So help me God.”

Every time I’ve spoken with veterans, regardless of the country from which they hail, they have been very clear that whether they joined or were conscripted they were proud to “serve.” They are acting out of a sense of duty and a belief in the ideals set forth in the US Constitution. They are not pawns for political ends, though clearly some politicians try to make them such. What is more, the military...the *service members* that I personally know who have taken lives cannot speak about it without grave emotion. It is the most catastrophic act any of them have engaged in and I have wept with them even many decades after the act. The military is tasked with an impossible set of goals: serve a set of wildly lofty ideals and values, protect their work partners, stay alive for their families and be ready to take someone’s life if they pose a lethal threat to the other goals even if it is against their deepest convictions. It is a complexity that I only barely understand and one that I cannot say I would willingly offer to try to fill.

I know no service member who is in service for financial gain or fame or power. They are in service of this deeply conflicted and often contradictory thing we call a “nation”...and sometimes it is not even that clear. Sometimes they are fighting for some distant thing called “justice” that shifts and changes depending upon who is looking at it and who is asking for it. Yes, they are acting on the orders of the President of the United States, but the expectation by military personnel and by civilians everywhere is that *that* person is supposed to be acting on significantly higher ideals than one would find in an episode of Mad Men.

After all this is real life and death...not just ratings and profits.

I can only offer gratitude to anyone who would physically place themselves between me and harm with so many unpredictable and sometimes variables at hand. Gratitude. Respect.

And so, on this Veteran’s Day Weekend, I turn the question around and rather than interrogate the service member and their motivation, I have to ask: what are *we* asking them to serve? Are we asking them to defend gross inequalities in standards of living, precarious health, a lack of rights to our own bodies? Are we asking them to defend white supremacy? Are we asking our military to defend the practice of imprisoning people fleeing violence? I don’t think so. We must uphold our part of the bargain and not just *resist* demagogues and fascists but we must *actively take them down*. That is the role of democracy and democracy is OUR job not the job of the military. The military exists to defend our right to *exercise* democracy and live in our full humanity and practice our personal faith. The 5th Unitarian Universalist principle affirms THE RIGHT OF CONSCIENCE AND THE USE OF THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS WITHIN OUR CONGREGATIONS AND IN SOCIETY AT LARGE. Creating this society...the beloved community...is OUR job.

With the mandate to defend democracy, the military is willing to be our presence in the world that must be asked to be far nobler than any killing machine...and we can never tolerate it if they are or if our leaders attempt to make them such. Our global service

members have been peace-keepers, refugee transporters, food providers, weather predictors, firefighters, disaster responders, environment cleanup crews, nurses, doctors, chaplains and so much more.

We must ask ourselves in what feels like a very delicate time politically, environmentally, socially and ethically...what do we truly want our military to be in service of. Is it a culture where we expect them only to hand out death? Lord, I hope not, and I know neither do they. Personally, I'd love to see us create a world where we have a military that needs no weapons other than the tools to cultivate sustainable and bountiful life for everyone and everything they interact with.

I was a child when I saw that image of the hippie putting a daisy in the barrel of a gun and it stuck. Yeah, my aspiration for a non-military military may be a total fantasy...but the sense of duty and honor with which members of the military serve is real.

Let us not forget to do our part in making a better world for them to do their duty.