

# White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Down by the Riverside

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**FIRST READING** *adapted from an essay by David Abrams*

I was in the Army for 20 years and over the course of those two decades, I worked with liars, adulterers, gamblers, and murderers.

I also served alongside mothers with tissues tucked up their sleeves, ready to swipe at runny noses; a blues musician who'd give B.B. King a run for his money; marathoners with calves strung taut as bows; a beer-bellied dude who published poems in obscure literary journals; and a woman who kept so many exotic birds in her house, I always left her parties picking feathers out of my mouth.

In short, my Army contained multitudes. We were the good, the bad, and the mild median. We were snowflakes in the proper sense of the word, before it was corrupted by the alt-right: no two of us were alike.

When I see war movies or listen to the words that torrent out of politicians' mouths, I don't recognize the people I worked with. Far too often, those who serve are cast as a collection of clichés: either clean-cut, impossibly perfect heroes who go around yelling "Let's do this!," or PTSD-addled warriors ready to erupt in spree-shooting rage. The regular working class in camouflage are virtually invisible.

Where are the ordinary in-betweens? I want to see more people like the soldier who once had a reputation as "the Wheelie King" of Miami after he removed the front tire from his BMX bike and, popping a wheelie, rode back and forth to work like a non-stop Evel Knievel. His easy-going charm and backward-leaning skills even earned him a spot on the local news. But we know a different side of this soldier, Sgt. La David Johnson. He makes headlines for being the victim of an ambush in Niger and, worse, the victim of a blundering presidential phone call, and all sense of his life before the headlines is glossed over. In all the rhetoric about La David Johnson's military service—the adjectives ballooning from the glory-struck mouths of politicians—where are the stories about his determination to ride several miles each day on one tire? Likewise, where are the infantrymen who moonlight as beekeepers, or the foot-stomping guitarists, or the stamp collectors, or the weirdoes who love their cockatoos more than they should?

*Top Gun*, *American Sniper*, and that Tom Clancy novel you hold in your hands are all sexy falsehoods working overtime for the military recruiting machine. That explosion you see blooming in the distance behind the actor's helmet can look like a halo edged by heavenly light. That squeal of descending mortars can sound a lot like the trumpets of angels. But it's all illusion: I know of few soldiers who've ever actually attained action-hero glory - nor are any of them reaching for heroic laurels.

"Supporting the troops" borders on something like holy reverence in our country. But building fake heroes, combined with our unhealthy lack of skepticism, wreaks havoc with the soul of our democracy. If we thought of our service-members as more flesh than steel, more blood than flag, maybe we'd put the brakes on blithely sending them a thousand miles away to a desert war.

If we saw our warriors as people thicker than cardboard cutouts, maybe we'd take a sharper scalpel to the defense budget.

As much as we'd like to pedestal-worship our military, the fact is that those in uniform are pockmarked with defects, just like all of us, and with problems, just like all of us, some large, some small, but enough to keep everyone more closely resembling a human than a comic-book avenger.

So, on this Veterans Day, I am asking us to remember that the military is a melting pot: We are snowflakes. We are transgender. We are bigots. We sing in church choirs. We feel stuck in ruts. We look in the mirror and, depending on the day, we either like ourselves or loathe ourselves. We are happy, sad, ambitious, and lazy. We are everyone. We are you.

**SECOND READING** *Oscar Romero, Archbishop of El Salvador*

Peace is not the product of terror or fear.  
 Peace is not the silence of cemeteries.  
 Peace is not the silent result of violent repression.  
 Peace is the generous, tranquil contribution of all  
 to the good of all.  
 Peace is dynamism.  
 Peace is generosity.  
 It is right and it is duty.

**Down by the Riverside**

A prayer for Veterans Day, from Barbara Pescan, Unitarian Universalist (adapted):

*Spirit of Life,  
 whom we have called by many names  
 in thanksgiving and in anguish—  
 Bless the poets and those who mourn.  
 Send peace for the soldiers who did not make the wars  
 but whose lives were consumed by them.  
 Let strong trees grow above graves far from home.  
 Breathe through the arms of their branches.  
 The earth will swallow your tears while the dead sing  
 "No more, never again, remember me."  
 For the wounded ones, and those who received them back,  
 let there be someone ready when the memories come  
 when the scars pull and the buried metal moves.*

*And let there be forgiveness for those of us who were not there,  
for our ignorance.  
And in us, veterans in a forest of a thousand fallen promises,  
let new leaves of protest grow on our stumps.  
Give us courage to answer the cry of humanity's pain.  
And with our bare hands, out of full hearts,  
with all our intelligence,  
let us create the peace. Amen.*

Let us create the peace.

In a book called *Nonviolence: 25 lessons from the history of a dangerous idea*, an historian observes that there is no word in English, no positive word, to express what we mean when we speak of the effort,

the activity,  
the steady, principled, sometimes crazy attempt,  
the mindset,  
the orientation of the spirit and the heart,  
the theological, political, sociological, ethical experiment,  
or commitment,  
sometimes even-unto-death commitment,  
to practice in speech, action and intention,  
to breathe in and breathe out

a living, sacred dedication to the opposite of violence.

There is no word for that, not in English nor, as far as he knows, in any other language; no word that does not already have violence itself embedded. Nonviolence has no synonym; there's no way to say it or speak about it without invoking what it's not. Even in Sanskrit, in India, where the political principles and spiritual practices that we understand as active nonviolence first took form, the word is *ahimsa* (the word Gandhi used), *himsa* meaning "violence" and *a-himsa* meaning "not doing that." Unless you are a really nerdy kind of person who finds linguistics exciting, this may seem very trivial, just a matter of semantics – but words matter, and there are other words like this in our language, that shape the way we think and act and understand our world, the way we live and die and fight and love upon this world.

Words matter. The word *woman* may be the most common example. In its oldest form, in Old English, it was two words, which when placed together meant *wife*, or *servant*, to a *human being*, which was the word *man* – the default term. That linguistic reality has had ramifications; it still does. Which comes first, the way we experience the world, the way it actually is, or the way we talk about it? Words carry heavy, ancient freight, and unless we watch our language, words will define us and confine us without us even knowing it.

Mark Kurlansky, who wrote this book about nonviolence, wonders what it would be like if there were no word for war in English, if whenever you wanted to talk about armed conflict or

occupation or invasion or defense of the national border or military spending or a nuclear exchange with North Korea, you'd have to say, "non-peace." *What kind of world would that be?* he asks. *It would not necessarily be a world without war, but it would be a world that regarded war as an aberrant and insignificant activity,* peace being the premise of our understanding, and the prevailing expectation. He says about nonviolence:

*The only possible explanation for the absence of a proactive word to express nonviolence is that not only the political establishments but the cultural and intellectual establishments of all societies have viewed nonviolence as a marginal point of view, a fanciful rejection of one of society's key components, a repudiation of something important – but not a serious force in itself. It is not an authentic concept, but simply an abnegation of something else.* He goes on, *It has been marginalized because it is one of the rare truly revolutionary ideas, an idea that seeks to completely change the nature of society, a threat to the established order. And it has always been treated as something profoundly dangerous.*

What is the premise of human co-existence, and what is the exception to the rule?

We say:

This is human nature: we're wired for conflict. Our reptilian brains can't yet and maybe will not ever move past "fight or flight;" we're animals, not angels.

And more than that, it's common sense, we say:

in these troubled times we need to be pragmatic ("troubled times" meaning since last year's election, or since September 11, 2001, or since the end of the Cold War, or the end of the Peloponnesian War... "Troubled times" go on and on). It's common sense, we say: in these times of mass migration, insurrection, instability, terrorism, it's common sense and prudent not only to provide for the national defense but to blur the line as needed between defense and offense.

It's our right, our destiny, our mandate, we say, or some say: to democratize the world.

Most of us in this room have lived all of our lives, *every single day*, amidst nuclear weapons, chemical weapons, these great global stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction, and frequent and infrequent, hot-and-cold threats to deploy them. Non-peace is always our default. But what's truly normal, or truly possible, for a species like ours at this stage in our development? When, if ever, do things shift? I want to think about that not only descriptively, in terms of what obviously *is*, but prophetically, in terms of what could and should and yet one day shall be. That's what religion is for, to behold this life bifocal-ly, both as it is and as it might, by grace and by our will, become.

*May all beings be peaceful,* said the Buddha.

*Thou shalt not kill, nor covet, nor steal,* said the Hebrew Scriptures.

*What actions are most excellent?* asked the Prophet Muhammed. *To gladden the heart of a human being, to feed the hungry, to help the afflicted, to lighten the sorrow of the sorrowful, to remove the wrongs of the injured. That person is the most beloved of God who does most good to God's creatures.*

Everywhere and always runs a radical, insistent alternative reality, or at least the whisper of an aspiration, the whisper of a prayer.

*These are the works of mercy,* said the Christian church, the corporal, physical, tangible works of mercy: *to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to give drink to the thirsty, to house the homeless, to care for the sick, to ransom the captive and visit the prisoner, and to bury the dead.*

In all these teachings and in others, we find a users' guide for how to grow our souls in this lifetime, and how to serve the world, an alternative playbook which lays down radical rules, simple, plain-spoken rules, for how to be a person, a proper person with a conscience and a soul, and how to be a community or a society; how to be an upright, biped species at a certain stage of its slow but steady moral evolution.

These rules, these commandments, these reminders of what the heart already knows, stand diametrically opposed to the rules of the market or the battlefield. They do not make sense there, anymore than the rules of the market have much to do with feeding the poor or welcoming strangers or caring for the sick. From the earliest origins of these religious ways, in which our own way, Unitarian Universalism, is rooted, from the very beginning people have understood that we live in two realities at once, and at some point you have to choose. You give your life, your heart, your work, your imagination to one premise or the other. For most of us, that point come every day, several times a day.

Years ago, I had a little card printed by the Catholic Worker movement, a woodcut print on a postcard. On one side there were listed the works of mercy: feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and so on. On the other were listed what someone called "the works of war:"

*destroy the crops and land,  
seize the food supplies,  
destroy homes,  
scatter families,  
contaminate the water,  
imprison dissenters,  
inflict wounds and burns,  
kill the living.*

It seems so obvious what we ought to do, and most of the time we're trying, even as we quietly know, in the back of our minds, the back of our souls, that our comfortable and peaceful lives are made possible in part, in countless invisible ways, by works of war, inflicted in our name upon the earth and on people none of us will ever meet. *We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality,* as one prophet reminded us not so long ago, *tied in a single garment of destiny.*

And so we muddle on – and I do believe it matters how we hold the struggle, how we choose our words. Is peace a corny, idealistic, unrealistic, sentimental fairytale for naïve bleeding-hearted liberals, or is it a rigorous and concrete moral aspiration toward which we are steadily moving, step by hopeful and heartbroken step? Is war the baseline, disappointed premise of our lives together on this earth, or is it a backward and forlorn failure of imagination, the terrible exception to a brighter, harder and more worthy rule? This is a question about what kind of religion you are.

I see you practicing all the time. The ways you struggle now, the ways we all are struggling, in these “troubled times,” to stretch across the borders of religious difference and political difference, to speak in reasoned and respectful voices with relatives who disagree with us, with friends who see the world completely differently and who voted and would vote again, completely differently – all this is the practice of non-violence, this longing to connect, to stay in right relation with no winners and no losers, except the common good. These conversations are so painful and so brave, and they really do require us to go *down by the riverside and study war no more*, to lay down not only our sword (rancor, righteousness, and rage) but also – and as importantly – our shield, the barriers we throw up to protect ourselves from injury and insult, all of our defenses. *I’m gonna lay down my sword **and shield**, down by the riverside, and try to meet you face to face, , try to love you, comprehend you, even when the stakes are very high, and climbing.* This is the practice of nonviolence. This is how we trouble the waters of war.

*Peace is not the product of terror or fear*, said Oscar Romero, bishop of El Salvador, who was killed there and who testified right until the end:

*Peace is not the silence of cemeteries.*

*Peace is not the silent result of violent repression.*

*Peace is dynamism.*

*Peace is generosity.*

*It is right and it is duty.*

We practice and we practice. A few years ago we held a conversation here for those who had been called to serve in Vietnam. Over four weeks, more than 30 people met in a circle, maybe 45 different ones in all, mostly men, and also women. It was uncanny: almost everyone had been born within a two year span of one another. They were all in their early 60’s, reaching back four decades to their late teens and early 20’s. Some had enlisted, some had been drafted; some became officers, others did not. Some had evaded the draft in risky ways that haunted them still, not with regret but with an old anxiety; others had resisted defiantly, conscientious objectors risking prison, careers and college loans, and the scorn of almost everyone. One night two people in the group realized they’d been at the same demonstration at the University of Minnesota on the same exact day, one in the military police and one a protestor. They’d been friends at church for years and never known this. No one in the circle believed that war had been anything but wrong. No one felt proud, entirely, if at all, no one felt triumphant. They were still amazed all these years later, that their young selves had survived it, that the terrible choices they’d been forced to make had not broken them entirely. We were all in a classroom, on plastic chairs, trying to make sense of the past and the present in the only way that humans can, the sharing of

true stories. It was a poignant, sacred thing. We muddle on, and peace prevails when we lay down our swords and shields, and all we want to do is to forgive and be forgiven.

I think about that every year when we hold this Veterans observance, how Lowell Hanson, who has since died, came to me in 2002, just as we were voting, the entire congregation, to oppose the war in Iraq. Lowell supported that vote, that cry against insanity, but he felt strongly that for a progressive Unitarian church to also honor veterans would signal to the world and remind us every year that these things are complex, that people choose what's right in difficult and different ways, and people change. And so I wrote the litany, and with deeply mixed feelings go forward every year. Last month someone else, a veteran of Vietnam, told me that the first time that he came here, reluctantly brought by his wife, he wept. It was the veterans observance, and he said that to see that row of people standing in the front, to see the congregation rise and reckon all together with a sorrow he had thought for years was his alone to bear, changed everything. This was Tim Stoddart, who also has since died, who was a soldier for a little while when he was a young man, but who was never in his life anything but a maker of peace, dedicated to the works of mercy.

So we honor the veterans.

Honor the young men and women whom they were, and the people they are now.

Honor their honesty, honor their struggle, their intention, their courage.

Honor their fear, their confusion, their repentance, their pride, their call to service and their suffering. They are, you are, as David Abrams reminds us in the reading, not soldiers, mostly. They are mothers with tissues tucked up their sleeves, blues musicians, marathon runners, beer-bellied poets. *We are snowflakes*, he says, *we are transgender, we are bigots, we sing in church choirs, we look in the mirror and either like ourselves or loathe ourselves; we are happy, sad, ambitious, lazy. We are the Wheelie King of Miami. We are everyone.*

Honor them and on another day, in fact, incessantly – the way that you pray without ceasing - honor everyone who's trying to be good, trying to do right in a harsh, embittered world a troubled world filled with angry absolutes and no absolute certainty.

Honor everyone raising children, raising awareness, raising hell.

Honor those fighting for peace by disrupting complacency, supremacy and violence, even when the methods seem shrill and dramatic. Nothing is as shrill or dramatic as sending our beautiful young people into combat, so honor those who resist by placing their bodies on a different kind of line.

Honor the righteous and honor the brave, who teach school, offer food, protect the land, keep the faith.

Honor the caregivers who for weeks and months and years and years give up everything, stop everything, to care for loved ones or other peoples' loved ones, raising dignity as their only flag and compassion as their only weapon.

Honor the warriors with mental illness who gird for every day as if it were a battle for survival.  
Honor the survivors and the fallen in that war.

Choose your words, choose your sides with care.

Imagine the impossible and commit to dwelling there.

Name all the lovely and beloved names.

*silence*

From Langston Hughes:

*Give us a peace equal to the war  
Or else our souls will be unsatisfied,  
And we will wonder what we have fought for  
And why the many died.*

*Give us a peace accepting every challenge --  
The challenge of the poor, the black, of all denied,  
The challenge of the vast colonial world  
That long has had so little justice by its side.*

*Give us a peace that dares us to be wise.  
Give us a peace that dares us to be strong.  
Give us a peace that dares us still uphold -  
Throughout the peace - our battle against wrong.*