

When Warriors Cry
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October 1, 2006

Some of you may know this, but I happen to have a pretty interesting job, as a government contractor, directing the vocational troop rehabilitation program for transitioning servicemembers leaving the military. Most of these servicemembers are separating from the service due to severe injuries, such as a loss of limb, hearing, eyesight, burn injuries, as well as psychological disorders from traumatic stress in combat. It has been both a very rewarding and necessary profession for me, given I had served 30 years in the military myself, although not in combat situations, as well as an opportunity to at the same time put my faith into practical use.

As I noted, my military career in the U. S. Coast Guard, though interesting and at times dangerous having been placed in harms way a great number of times involved with sea rescues and as a maritime law enforcement boarding officer, it just doesn't compare to the uncertain dangers that our service men and women are facing today engaged in the war in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I do want to make this clear – today's sermon is not about the war, whether we should be there or not, who's right or wrong, or any side of the view on the current political policies and views about today's situation. Instead, I want to talk about the people. The men and women who are serving in these hazardous conditions, the families they leave behind while serving, and the many who come home, the challenges and perils they continue to face because of their service.

Why talk about it today, here in a church and as a sermon topic? What does it have to do with our faith? And, if this isn't to be a politically motivated discussion – what's the point bringing all this up anyway?

To be quite honest with you – I had been giving this sermon topic some thought for over a year, when I started working in this program. It really occurred to me while following one of my daily rituals, reading the morning comic strip, 'Doonesbury' in the Washington Post about a cartoon character name, 'B.D.' created by the award-winning cartoonist Garry Trudeau. Trudeau's comic strip series on 'B.D.' provided those of us who followed it with a vivid illustration of life during wartime. 'B.D.' was an Army National Guardsman who lost his leg during the battle of Fallujah in Iraq and suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, or commonly referred to as 'PTSD.' While sometimes Trudeau's characterization was satirical bordering on humor, nonetheless he used his comic strip character 'B.D.' to raise the visibility and awareness of just what happens physically and mentally of those who answer the call to duty and placed in harms way.

Several months ago, I had the pleasure of meeting Garry Trudeau, and orchestrated an opportunity for him to visit with the severely wounded troops who are patients at nearby Walter Reed Army Medical Center, and Bethesda Naval Hospital. I also escorted him down to Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, TX where the severely injured

burn patients are located. It's interesting to note here how Trudeau has become somewhat of a 'folk hero' to our injured servicemembers because of his comic strip series has lessened the politicization of the war from the troops perspective, and personalized the real issues on care and support for those who have served and sacrificed.

In a discussion with Garry Trudeau just this past Tuesday while we were visiting with the troops at the military hospital, he said, "America in general has not been asked to sacrifice much for this particular war. Their world has nothing to do with the military world. I think it's important, if you're given a platform that I've been given, to try to bring those two worlds together and say, 'Look, these guys are making some pretty heavy sacrifices and contributions in our name, and we should know a little bit more about them.'"

This got me to thinking about the 'two worlds' Trudeau had mentioned. I thought about my 'two worlds.' One, where I am proud to have served my country with a very successful military career, and the other, my valuable faith as a Unitarian Universalist, which has been the bedrock of my moral compass throughout my entire life. You know, it's not easy being a 'UU' and in the military – particularly when a number of situations and actions such as being involved in an armed conflict sometimes challenges your thoughts on whether you are capable to adhere to your faith, and carry out a lawful order imposed upon you by the Commander-in-Chief and the members of Congress. I for one am blessed that throughout my career I did not serve in a war, although I was deployed to a peace-keeping mission in Haiti in 1994, as well as performed numerous search and seizure maritime law enforcement boardings at sea where at times the pressured situation could require me to employ the use of a weapon in an instance.

Within the two worlds of my faith and the military provided me with an emotional and compassionate understanding of cultural awareness, and a sense of proprietary ownership as a native born citizen of this country. I am often quick to remind many, that our 'UU' faith has been deeply rooted within military since 1775, when General Washington sought the assistance of local ministers to provide pastoral care for his soldiers before and after battle. A large number of those who volunteered were Unitarian ministers. In fact, when the U. S. Navy Chaplain's Corps was created in November, 1778, its first chief of chaplains was the Reverend Benjamin Balch, of the First Unitarian Church in Boston. Our faith's military connection is indeed historical and has been an important part of providing the spiritual comfort to those who have served since the founding of our country.

My point here, my pride runs deep in knowing that my faith has played an integral part in the defense of our nation. I look at our seven principles and see a correlation with our country's five armed services collective core values of duty, courage, honor, commitment, respect, integrity and selfless service. My faith has given me the wisdom of knowing that I am able to apply the principles of my spiritual knowledge, and knowing that I am walking the talk in doing what I believe in.

Which brings me back to my story about the 'Doonesbury' character, 'B.D.' Trudeau's account of 'B.D.'s' recovery is very accurate, according to the many servicemembers I had talked to who had read it and know first hand what the experiences are like. I recall a discussion Trudeau and I had with a young Army specialist left-leg amputee recovering at Walter Reed. He told us how the strip used real-life events wounded troops and their families face and identifying the issues they have to deal with. Trudeau said that there's not much hyperbole in this sort of thing. This pretty closely tracks what a soldier would actually go through. It's important that our citizens understand some of the sacrifices that returning warrior are going through.

Beyond the story of the severely injured troops lie the story of the family and how they are forced to cope with the life-altering experience of dealing with their loved one who has returned from war. Traumatic stress hurts military families as well. One of, if not the most painful part of my job is listening to the stories from the family members discussing how they are coping or the difficulty of coping with their returning servicemember. The impact of PTSD on a family is equally tremendous, and causes just as much mental concern as the servicemember.

I hear the real stories of these servicemembers through their wives, husbands, daughters, sons, mothers and fathers. The warrior's true cry for help comes through the family themselves. I consider these individuals are the forgotten victims of the war.

One of the severely injured troops spouse candidly told me when I asked about how things were going with her husband's vocational rehabilitation program, and she told me a frightening story that I'd like to share with you. She told me that her husband lost three of his friends during his deployment over in Iraq. Every day he goes out into the backyard and talks to them. She watched him from the window, and it's just so sad. He said he can't to her about it, because she wasn't there. She went on to tell me with teary eyes that she thinks she has lost him. He thinks he's fine, struggles very hard to focus on his training program, but in the end, comes home, drinks and talks to dead guys, because he can't talk to her.

Another discussion I had was with a mother of a young marine who was badly burned from an explosion of an improvised explosive device, known as IED when the vehicle he was in ran over it. His face is badly disfigured, and although he is continuing with series of facial reconstruction, he remains depressed and unmotivated. All he wanted to be was a Marine, but that option is no longer available to him. We are working with him to get some new vocational skills to focus on, but he remains disinterested. He told his mother numerous times that he should have just been left inside the burning vehicle to die.

These stories go on and on. I have found my way of trying to rally these servicemembers out of their depression is by showing them positive hope visually. Not just in words. We often hear and see the phrase, "Support our Troops," plastered on bumper stickers, magnetic sign ribbons on cars, and on a host of other things. The

phrase has to be more of a realistic actionable response, than just a patronizing statement. What can we do?

Of the nearly half million veterans who have left active duty since 2002, some 30% have sought VA health care. Of those, 34% were active duty, and 28% were Reserve or National Guard.

The three most common health problems reported by these vets are musculoskeletal ailments, namely, joint and back disorders, psychological disorders and a catch-all category called "Symptoms, signs and Ill-Defined Conditions."

As citizens and taxpayers, we can start by ensuring that much needed assistance for servicemembers become and remain a top-priority. The price of war has its variable costs mostly known in the form of what I call 'combat toys,' or weapons, but seldom does the importance on the transitioning assistance of servicemembers is given an equal if not greater priority. Our elected officials need to hear from its voters that reduced veteran care detrimentally impacts our community. It's not just the military veteran, but the family member and even friends are affected.

The young veterans today, particularly between the ages of 22 to 30, are facing more difficult challenges than ever before. While the recent Department of Labor statistics just released on Friday for the month of September shows a relative low figure at 4.7 percent. Within that unemployment figure, more than 25% of those unemployed are military veterans. This is an alarming statistic, which has little explanation as to why. While military recruiting ads show potential applicants about the wide range of training and education opportunities, not to mention the proven talents of leadership, responsibility and attention to detail, younger veterans capture the largest number of unemployed workers in America.

This month, Saturday, October 28th to be exact, the 'Movie Night' feature here at MVUC will be a documentary called, "The War Tapes." It's what I would call a riveting, putting you in a realistic view of what our troops in Iraq see and deal with on a daily basis. The documentary was filmed by several members of the New Hampshire Army National Guard who were called to a 12 month deployment to Iraq last year. They took along video cameras, filming just exactly what they have to go through in their day-to-day survival of living on the edge in a dangerous environment. Also and just as important, how they react with re-entering their lives when they return. The documentary itself provides a full understanding of what I am discussing here in today's sermon. You will see more information on this documentary on both our church website, as well upcoming Sunday order of service announcements, and 'the Windmill newsletter. I encourage you to see it. It doesn't matter what side of the war issue you are on, you will probably still come away with the same views – but – it will give you a greater sense of understanding our service men and women face when placed in harms way, in a dangerous yet unpredictable environment.

And finally, support for the troops does not have to imply a statement of agreement or even disagreement on the subject of war altogether. To quote a phrase from Army National Guardsman, Zack Bazzi who is proud of his heritage as a Muslim American, and his desire to be a soldier, "I love being a soldier. The only bad thing about the Army is you can't pick your war." Remember, our country as with any enterprising commerce nation requires a military. The fact that we have an all volunteer force, speaks volumes in terms of those who serve, do so for a number of reasons, but most importantly recognizes the high risks that they may face just by the nature of their vocation. They go because they're told to go, as they live up to a contractual commitment to "...support and defend the Constitution of the United States." Decisions are made beyond them. It's okay to be angry about the war – but recognize they are the ones carrying out the orders placed before them.

We are a faith whose goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all resonates humanist and spiritual teachings which call on us to respond to creator's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves. It is with words and deeds that make up the interest and compassion to support one another, and to reach out to others.

Members of our church, ladies and gentlemen, we hear our warriors cry. Let us reach out and help them, regardless of their belief to become whole again.

Blessed Be. Amen