

Veteran's Day: A Meditation  
November 8, 2009

Many years ago when I was serving as a ministerial intern, I remember going into my supervising minister's office, braced to receive his comments on everything I did wrong the previous week. I closed the door behind me as I entered, and noticed he was not looking well. I sat down opposite his desk, and after exchanging a few pleasantries, he began to cry. This was not what I expected. I didn't think I had done that poorly.

Feeling a little uncertain about how to handle this, I asked rather timidly: "What happened?" Attempting to regain his equilibrium, he told me his son had enlisted in the army and was being shipped to Vietnam. I didn't know what to say. I wasn't married, had no children, and could not imagine this father-son dynamic. After a short while the minister kind of smiled and said: "I think my son is trying to tell me something."

In the ministry, my closest colleague and dear friend called me one evening. We knew each other's families well, and were aware that his son had chosen the military as his career. I remembered the kid as a great ten-year-old tap dancer. Now he was career military and the reason for the phone call was because he was going to the Kuwait, ready for action in the First Gulf War. Having children myself at this point, I understood the pain triggered by every parent whenever the smell of danger and the prospect of harm to one's children become real.

That next Saturday I was scheduled to lead a protest march in Salt Lake against the war and speak at the rally together with the director of the ACLU in front of the Federal Building. I mentioned to my dear friend that I would hold Karl in my heart and wax eloquently to end the war to bring him back home.

"But you don't understand," I was told. "Karl wants to be there. He's looking for action." After a pause he said, "I cannot protest against the war. I need to support my son."

"But logically, aren't you supporting Karl by protesting against the war?"

"No, it doesn't work that way."

Some of you will surely remember an Asian woman from our congregation about nine years ago. She was a very young girl in Japan when the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. She dedicated her life to peace. If pacifists were organized, she would have been a card-carrying pacifist. Needless to say, she loved this church.

What she kept from me was that her oldest son was a student at West Point. When he received orders to go to Iraq, she and her husband made an appointment to see me. She told me that evening that because of the church's position on the Iraq war she was forced to leave us.

I already knew the answer when I asked if the church wasn't in fact accurately reflecting her own values. She said: "I must now support my son, and I can't do so as a member of this church." We hugged in a teary good-bye.

As the Iraq war raged on, and the mission was clearly far from accomplished, some of those east-coast liberal senators, most prominently Charles Schumer of New York, mentioned the draft – conscription into military service. This being the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the draft would include young men *and* women from ages 18-30. For Mary and me, this meant that four of our five children would be vulnerable to the draft. We were deeply concerned. We spoke with our kids about this and they were not the slightest bit concerned. We were told: Everything will be fine; don't worry so much. I concluded that all children were into magical thinking.

Rationally I fully agreed with the call for a draft. In fact, had we gone through and enacted a draft, we would be long gone from the Middle East by now. But Senator Schumer was talking about drafting *my* kids. I couldn't put their lives in jeopardy. I followed through on a proposition offered by the German government to restore good relations with the children and grandchildren of German Jews persecuted during the Holocaust. We were offered dual citizenship which I applied for and was accepted in 2005. In the event of a draft our children could live safely anywhere in the EU. The children greeted the news with: "You worry too much."

I just finished reading Jon Krakauer's new book on Pat Tillman, the professional football player for the Arizona Cardinals who turned down a \$3million contract from the team to enlist as a ranger in the army, together with his brother. When they told their mom what they had done she became quite emotional and warned they could get hurt or die. Pat said to her, "That's not going to happen; not even a possibility."

About a year later he was killed by friendly fire in Afghanistan: Operation Enduring Freedom. Tillman was the poster boy for the war, and everyone, from his commanding officer to George W. Bush, covered up his death due to fratricide. When the mom was told by a woman chaplain who seemed more concerned with keeping the buttons on her uniform properly aligned than delivering the message the mom went out of the house screaming hysterically and it took virtually the whole neighborhood to calm her down.

Every generation of parents worry endlessly about their children going to war.

A.A. Milne had more than Winnie the Pooh in mind when he wrote his seldom-mentioned book, "Peace With Honor." Maybe he was thinking of his own son when he wrote: "But of course one can't just say to a million mothers: 'I want your sons,' and then six months later: 'Sorry, they're all dead.' If war is to be made tolerable, the romantic tradition must be handed on. 'Madam, I took away your son, but I give you

back the memory of a hero. Each year we will celebrate together his immortal passing.”

Why did Tillman join the army? He was no Christian soldier marching off to war; in fact most people believed he was an atheist. He was interested in religion, however, and had read the Koran and the Book of Mormon. Tillman was an advocate of gay rights and listened to National Public Radio. He was married to the woman of his dreams and they planned on a family when he returned from active duty. Why?

Tillman told an interviewer once, “I think you have to get out of your comfort zone. If you’re kind of comfortable all the time – it’s like if you’re skiing and your not falling, you’re not trying. I kind of want to push myself. A lot.”

Not wanting any publicity because of his football fame, he did submit to a request of the Cardinal’s public relations department to be videotaped for distribution to the news media. When asked to speak about how the national tragedy of the Twin Towers being hit on 9/11 had affected him, he reflected: “You don’t realize how great a life we have over here...Times like this you stop and think about just how – not only how good we have it, but what kind of system we live under. What freedoms we’re allowed. And that wasn’t built overnight. And the flag’s a symbol of all that. A symbol of – My great-grandfather was at Pearl Harbor. And a lot of my family has...gone and fought in wars. And I really haven’t done a damn thing as far as laying myself on the line like that. So I have a great deal of respect for those who have. And what the flag stands for.”

Who is the happy warrior? Asked William Wordsworth in 1806.

Who is the happy warrior? Who is he/That every man in arms should wish to be?/it is the generous spirit, who, when brought/among the tasks of real life, hath wrought/Upon the plan that pleased his boyish thought.

Whose high endeavors are an inward light/That makes the path before him always bright:/ Who, with a natural instinct to discern/What new knowledge can perform, is diligent to learn;/ Abides by this resolve, and stops not there/But makes his moral being his prime care...

Plays in the many games of life, that one/ Where what he most doth value must be won:/ Whom neither shape of danger can dismay,/ Nor thought of tender happiness betray;/ who, not content that former worth stand fast,/ Looks forward, persevering to the last/...Finds comfort in himself and in his cause;/ and, while the mortal mist is gathering, draws/ His breath in confidence of Heaven’s applause:/ This is the happy warrior; this is he/ That every man in arms should wish to be.

The tension between the glories of heroic military action and its consequences of grief and destruction ... tension between courage and noble ideals with the very horror of war itself and its wastefulness...has offered fodder for poetry for a long time. I may not know the classics as well as I should, but Homer’s Iliad, certainly comes to mind, composed in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE: An epic poem of war between Troy and Greeks. It was the Roman poet, Horace, in order to please his patron

Caesar Augustus, constructed odes to celebrate the ideal that to die for one's country is a "sweet and noble thing."

But then there were poems, like Coleridge's "Fears in Solitude" where the sheen of virtue is wiped off real fast with his assertion that people are only interested in what he calls the "war-whoop," a passion for war that comes from being a spectator more than a combatant. This now is 1797, and Coleridge writes in part: we send our mandates for the certain death/Of thousands and ten thousands! Boys and girls,/ And women, that would groan to see a child pull off an insect's wing, all read of war./ The best amusement for our morning meal!/ The poor wretch, who has learnt his only prayers/ from curses, and who knows scarcely words enough/To ask a blessing from his Heavenly Father,/ Becomes a fluent phraseman, absolute/ And technical in victories and defeats,/ and all our dainty terms for fratricide.

Fratricide. Alfred Lord Tennyson referred to fratricide in his famous "Six Hundred: "Someone had blundered." The sacrifice made by the soldier was unintentional.

The first three members of the American military to die in the Afghanistan war were victims of fratricide. An inexperienced Air Force tactical air controller had just calculated the coordinates of an enemy fighting position and was about to call in an air strike when the batteries died in his precision GPS device, causing its display screen to go dark. Frantically, the air controller put new batteries into the GPS, the numbers flashed back on the screen a moment later, and he directed the B-52 flying overhead to drop its lethal payload on these coordinates. The air controller was unaware, however, that after a battery replacement his GPS automatically defaulted to display the coordinates of its own position. He mistakenly called in these coordinates instead of the Taliban position, and the upshot was the death of three Americans, many wounded, including Hamid Karzai.

It is quite remarkable, and we can only speculate as to why, but an astounding number of future authors were volunteer ambulance drivers during WWI. I'll throw a few at you: Ernest Hemmingway, John Dos Passos, ee cummings, William Somerset Maugham, John Masefield, Malcolm Cowley, Dashiell Hammett, (I could go on). They were part of the U.S. Army Ambulance Corp, and refused to join the army as soldiers. Most, if not all, infused their experiences into their writing. Somerset Maugham wrote a novel, *The Razor's Edge*, that takes place right after WWI. One of the veterans, Larry Darrell goes to the mountains of India in a spiritual quest. What drove him there was seeing his best friend die in front of his eyes following a dogfight with the Germans.

Veterans. It is hard to imagine what they carry with them when they return from battle. The front-page story of last Sunday's New York Times was about a woman soldier returned from Afghanistan who was so withdrawn she couldn't relate to her husband and children. We still do not understand the veterans of war, other than observe some unusual characteristics.

Sergeant Mel Ward was one of the first to reach Pat Tillman after he was killed. Interviewed four years later he couldn't keep from crying. He managed to say: "He wasn't just lying there like someone who's been shot in a John Wayne movie, where it looks like maybe he's only sleeping.

Shamus Heaney, captured the singular tunnel vision of war in his poem, Requiem for the Croppies. On the one hand it's about the Irish rebellions that never cease: 1641,1782,1789,1848,1916. But on the other hand it serves as metaphor for the thinking that each war is a new thing, unique in its own way. And the poet carries the image of the relentless onslaught of war with the barley that the rebels pick up on the fields as they run to do their bit of insurgent damage. They have no time to stop in kitchens to cook things. Then they retreat upon the hillside and are creamed by the British. But the barley continues to grow for the soldiers to grab in the next fight.

The pockets of our greatcoats full of barley  
No Kitchens on the run, no striking camp...  
We moved quick and sudden in our own country.  
The priest lay behind ditches with the tramp.  
A people hardly marching...on the hike...  
We found new tactics happening each day:  
We'd cut through reins and rider with the pike  
And stampede cattle into infantry,  
Then retreat through hedges where cavalry must be thrown.  
Until...on Vinegar Hill...the final conclave.  
Terraced -thousands died, soaked in our broken wave  
They buried us without a shroud or coffin  
And in August...the barley grew up out of our grave.

Until I had children, I could not cry with my ministerial supervisor. Now I know what he suffered. Because - it's really all about the children...called into battle. But why? We support them the best we can, provide them with safe entry onto safe lands, support them with prayers that will never cease, and hope for victory in a war that makes no sense.

While in the army, Pat Tillman kept a journal. I will close with this entry, written two weeks after Colin Powell made the president's case at the United Nations for invading Iraq. Pat refers to his brother as Nub.

It may be very soon that Nub and I will be called upon to take part in something I see no clear purpose for...were our case for war even somewhat justifiable, no doubt many of our traditional allies...would be praising our initiative...However, every leader in the world, with few exceptions, is crying foul, as is the voice of much of the people. This...leads me to believe that we have little or no justification other than our imperial whim. Of course Nub and I have...willingly allowed ourselves to be pawns in this game and will do our job whether we agree or not. All we ask is that it is duly noted that we harbor no illusions of virtue.