A Veterans Homily 11.3.19

November 11 is veterans day, and normally I’d be preaching about veterans on the Sunday immediately before, but I’ll be away that Sunday, so I’m preaching on them now.

This is a sermon about stories. I’ll start with one about me.

A week or so after I came home from my year in Afghanistan, I was in New York City. I’ll tell ya, New York City is a great place to visit after a year in a war zone. For me it was mostly the food. There’s this deli, Russ and Daughters on the lower east side, where you can get liver spread and sliced dill pickles on a fresh egg bagel. They weren’t serving that in the chow hall. New York City is great to come home to, until it isn’t. My moment happened when we went into some store in midtown. It was more like a nightclub. Lights flashing, music, mirrors. And my PTSD was triggered and I panicked. I rushed out of the store and fortunately was close to Central Park. I half-ran into the park and found a bench in a quiet spot. It took a while to settle down. Coming home is a mixed bag.
When we are deployed overseas, everything is about coming home. It’s when we can take off our uniform, return to our civilian status and hopefully the home we left behind. Coming home is when we become a veteran.

And it can be joyous! Coming home means beds and beer and eating off of plates that don’t have section dividers. It means love and family and the pride of survival and accomplishment.

Unfortunately, we know all too well that coming home is hard for some veterans. Some don’t do it by choice – injuries or force reductions cut their careers short. Others return to broken families. Still others wrestle with the physical and mental wounds that last long after their part the conflict is over.

And the families and friends who want to welcome their beloved veterans home may be confused. They may not know what to say, or how to say it.
With your permission, I’d like to do a roll call. If you wish, please raise your hand if you fall into one of these categories:
First: Raise your hand if you are currently on active duty in the military.
Raise your hand if you are currently in the military reserves or national guard.
Raise your hand if you served in the military at one time.
Raise your hand if you have a parent, sibling, or child who is currently on active duty in the military.
Raise your hand if you have a parent, sibling, or child who has ever served in the military.

I could go on and if experience serves me, most people sitting in this Unitarian Universalist sanctuary are connected, somehow, to the military. And to be thorough, all of us tax payers pay for the bullets and the uniforms and the jet fuel and the hospital rooms.
As for me, I was a cavalry scout in the Army National Guard in a unit in Albany NY, and then an active duty Artillery Officer in the US Marine Corps. For the record, all that service took place during peacetime. More recently however, I spent a year from 2012-2013 in Afghanistan as a DOD contractor. I was repairing the x-ray scanners that they use at the gates of the bases to check people and vehicles for IEDs. Since I came home I’ve worked as a chaplain at a VA hospital and done work with the veterans group Soldiers Heart. This is personal for all of us.

Because of my experiences I’ve come to believe that one of the things that keeps veterans from truly coming home, and that keeps families and friends from genuinely welcoming those veterans home, is the stories that we all tell ourselves about veterans (and by we, I mean both civilians and veterans). These stories keep us in isolation, and they keep us from having the real conversations that can lead to genuine homecoming.
The first story that some veterans tell themselves is that “No one else can understand what I went through”.

What soldiers (I’m gonna use soldier as a shorthand term for all military, and I apologize in advance to the Navy, Air Force, Coast Guard, and Marine Corps), what soldiers experience can be extreme and the circumstances can be unique, but the kinds of feelings they end up with are more common than what soldiers sometimes tell themselves. Let’s look at two major conditions that veterans can experience: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and moral injury. The Veterans Affairs Administration call these two conditions, along with traumatic brain injury, the signature wounds of the Iraq and Afghanistan era.
PTSD is a condition that develops after a person has an intense experience of bodily harm or fear of bodily harm. As I just talked about, I brought home some PTSD from my time in Afghanistan. I can’t point to a specific incident that caused it. I think it was just the steady but random rocket attacks that were made on my base in Kandahar. The base was equipped with a kind of radar that could sense when there was incoming fire. When that happened, a massive siren would sound and we’d have ten or fifteen seconds to get to a bunker, which were fortunately scattered all over the base. Most times, because it was a huge airfield, I never heard the rocket hit the ground. But the constant possibility of attack took its toll. When I first got back to the states, sirens in particular, and loud noises in general, made me both fearful and rageful. It was a little taste of what people with severe PTSD experience.

But PTSD is common for civilians too. People who are trapped in domestic violence situations, or victims of crime or industrial accidents, they all have to something to share with people who get PTSD from their time in the military. Many people actually CAN understand what veterans went through, or at least how it feels.
I think this is true with moral injury too. Moral injury is a condition that occurs as the result of perpetrating, or failing to prevent, an act that a person knows, in their core, is wrong. The experience of moral injury results in a profound shame that shakes its victims to their souls. Inadvertently killing civilians is a good example of an act that causes moral injury. But a policeman who shoots an unarmed suspect or subway train operator who runs over a person who jumps on the tracks is just as prone to moral injury. I’ve heard from teachers who tell me that they feel trapped in education systems that they believe aren’t acting in the best interests of their students. The feeling they describe to me is moral injury.

Understanding that these are human reactions, rather than something that only happens to the military, can help veterans feel less isolated and help them find support in their communities.
The second story is that all veterans are heroes.

Let me preface this by saying that I’m not trying to diminish military service. But everyone’s experience is different and some folks have experiences that they deeply regret. While I was a chaplain at the VA I was amazed and humbled by the number of Viet Nam era vets who are still tormented by what they had seen and done forty years ago. Also, there are veterans who are part of the three thousand active duty military who are sexually assaulted every year. For these folks, to be told that they are a hero does not help.

You know, this statement, “thank you for your service”, it’s really loaded. I personally never really know how to react. It depends on who’s saying it and in what context. Sometimes I hear from folks who want to justify their bigoted opinions by saying that they are patriots too. And other times I know that it’s heartfelt. It’s confusing to me and I’d prefer that people didn’t say it.
There’s a wonderful book written by Kevin Powers called “The Yellow Birds”. Mr. Powers is an Army veteran who served in Iraq. In The Yellow Birds, there’s a scene where the main character, who’s also a veteran of Iraq, sees a group of his old friends from high school playing in the river, while he is sitting on the opposite bank. Although he is very much alone and lonely, he doesn’t approach them. He notes to himself (and now I quote):

“I had become a kind of cripple. They were my friends, right? Why didn’t I just wade out to them? What would I say? ‘Hey, how are you?’ they’d say. And I’d answer, ‘I feel like I’m being eaten from the inside out and I can’t tell anyone what’s going on because everyone is so grateful to me all the time and I feel like I’m ungrateful or something. Or like I’ll give away that I don’t deserve anyone’s gratitude and really they should all hate me for what I’ve done but everyone loves me for it and it’s driving me crazy.’ Right.”

End of quote. This little segment shows so well the complexity of feelings that a veteran can bring home. Heroism may or may not be one of those feelings.
And the veterans are heroes story is funny, because another story that we sometimes tell ourselves is that all veterans are victims.

This is the idea that anyone who serves in the military does so because they are trapped in a web of economic and social brainwashing. That veterans couldn’t help it and they didn’t know what they’re doing. This is a favorite of some liberals. But it’s wrong and moreover, it’s totally unhelpful. It demeans veterans by implying that they have no agency, that they made no choices of their own. Believe me, most folks who join the military are excited about the opportunity. When I went in I got prestige, money, training. I got to travel, and I got to play with cool gear. The idea that there is a poverty draft that forces poor people into the most dangerous jobs is simply not supported by the data.

And this relates back to moral injury. It doesn’t help someone help to be told that they were “just doing their job”. The veteran knows better. They always had choices, even if they were sometimes very hard choices. I think that any time that we try to extract personal responsibility completely out of any story, we take away some of the complexity and ultimately the humanity of the situation.
Those are just some of the stories about veterans. But it doesn’t have to end there.

Our Unitarian Universalist movement does not have a great record with welcoming veterans home. But that’s changing! Many folks who were protesting the Viet Nam war regret conflating the war with the warriors and are seeking to make amends during this current period of forever war. Our congregations and communities now have a good resource to help us with this. The UUA has created a Military Ministry Tool Kit that lays out a set of structured conversations for veterans and civilians to talk together about their experiences and attitudes towards the war and the military. You can find this curriculum (for free) on the UUA web site. It’s well done because the conversations build on each other, starting with relatively safe topics, like “what messages did I receive from my family about the military?” to more complicated (and frankly, fraught) topics like the ethics of war. Through this slow build, people who might reflexively fall into conflict find areas of common ground and mutual compassion. I’ve done the program twice and I’m sure that I could do it again and still learn new things about myself. If that’s something that’s interesting to folks, let me know and maybe we can get a group together.
In our reading “Please Call Me By My True Names” the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh explodes our habit of creating either/or dualities. We are both the mayfly on the river and the swallow swooping to eat it. We are both the Ugandan child and the arms trader. We Unitarian Universalists talk about how we are connected by the web of existence. Thich Nhat Hanh, a civilian survivor of the war in Viet Nam, is asking that we see past the simple versions of each other to the richness inside. And that is our work with, and as, veterans.

In this time of endless war, we need to practice the art of homecoming for veterans. A real homecoming is one where the traveler and the welcomer meet and see each other as their true selves. Whether they are broken or relieved or overjoyed or confused, real return means seeing each other clearly and honestly.

These stories that we tell ourselves stand in the way of that seeing and we need move past them. Let’s create the space for people, civilians and veterans alike, to tell their own stories in their own way. Because it’s through our own, real stories that we can genuinely come home.

Amen and blessed be.