

**2004 Dana McLean Greeley Award Address
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WAR IS A FORCE THAT GIVES US MEANING
PAX OR BELLUM AMERICANA?



A Sermon by
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There is an old Zen parable about “The Gates of Paradise” that speaks to our situation on this United Nations Sunday, 2003, with our nation at war. A soldier named Nobushige came to the monk Hakuin, and asked: "Is there really a paradise and a hell?"

"Who are you?" inquired Hakuin.

"I am a samurai," the warrior replied.

"You, a soldier!" exclaimed Hakuin. "What kind of ruler would have you as his guard? Your face looks like that of a beggar."

Nobushige became so angry that he began to draw his sword, but Hakuin continued: "So you have a sword! Your weapon is probably much too dull to cut off my head."

As Nobushige drew his sword Hakuin remarked: "Here open the gates of hell!"

At these words the samurai, perceiving the master's discipline, sheathed his sword and bowed.

"Here open the gates of paradise," said Hakuin.ⁱ

The gates of Hell have opened in Iraq and the Middle East, and, no matter what our political view, we are both saddened and troubled. Some of us have vigorously protested this war. Some of us no doubt support it. Some of us have friends or relatives in harm's way in the Gulf. The fact remains: we are at war.

Whether we believe it is a war on terrorism, a war on Iraq, a war with the “axis of evil,” or a war within ourselves, we are at war.

I am increasingly convinced that war and peace are spiritual and moral problems as well as political and economic ones. What precipitated this line of thought was the convergence of this strange and controversial war against Iraq and the emergence of a brilliant book by a *New York Times* foreign correspondent, Chris Hedges, also a graduate of Harvard Divinity School where he studied with our own Unitarian Universalist teacher and activist, James Luther Adams.

As one who has opposed Bush administration policy from the beginning, believing containment of a tyrant better than the unknown consequences of war, the title of this morning's sermon, also the title of Hedges' book, “War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning,” may seem a trifle strange, and I suppose it is.

Hedges has been on the front lines of many of the world's trouble spots and was himself captured by the Iraqi Republican Guard in the first Gulf War. His thesis is that war is an addiction which brings out the capacity for evil which resides not far below the surface within all of us. Yet with all the horror of war, which he describes all-too-vividly, it also becomes a source of human meaning.

“Even with its destruction and carnage it can give us what we long for in life. It can give us purpose, meaning, a reason for living. Only when we are in the midst of conflict does the shallowness and vapidness of much of our lives become apparent. Trivia dominates our conversations and increasingly our airwaves. And war is an enticing elixir. It gives us resolve, a cause. It allows us to be noble.”ⁱⁱ

I remember as a child growing up in World War II – picking milkweed for life-preservers, I think, saving metal cans and tinfoil, spotting airplanes – and playing war. I felt a part of a noble cause even though I was a child. And I heard the demeaning terms “jap” and “kraut.” That was then; this is now, and we will certainly see the hyped patriotism when the Jessica Lynch story comes out in book, TV and film.

War drugs us into dehumanizing the enemy while extolling the courage and sacrifice of our heroes. As Hedges puts it simply: “Our dead matter; theirs do not.”ⁱⁱⁱ[iii] Even the redoubtable *News Hour with Jim Lehrer* fell into that pattern. Periodically, they would picture in silence the confirmed American dead. It was admittedly moving, and I grieved for their friends and loved ones. But what about the Iraqi dead? Their dead are just as precious to them. But where was that simple human recognition – especially as Unitarian Universalists who cherish and promote “the inherent worth and dignity of each person.” In war this sensibility is destroyed.

But that is not all. President Bush characterized this war as a “crusade” of good versus evil, of “infinite justice,” though these terms were later withdrawn. Who is not for us is against us in the war on terrorism. “We go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in the world.” For Hedges this is another instance of holy war waged against the president’s “axis of evil.”

There is not much humor in war, but I could not help but respond to this satirical comment on the president’s theologizing about the “axis of evil.” “Bitter after being snubbed for membership in the ‘Axis of Evil’, Libya, China and Syria today announced that they had formed the ‘Axis of Just as Evil’, which they said would be more evil than that stupid Iran-Iraq-North Korea axis President Bush warned about in his State of the Union address. . . . Cuba, Sudan and Serbia announced that they had formed the ‘Axis of Somewhat Evil,’ while other nations formed the ‘Axis of Occasionally Evil’ and the ‘Axis of Not So Much Evil Really as Just Generally Disagreeable.’” All of which skewers the president’s dangerous plunge into political theology in which rhetoric becomes policy.

And then there is U. S. General Boykin who believes we are struggling, not with Osama bin Laden, but with the Devil. He told one evangelical Christian congregation he knew his Christian God was the true God and the Muslim God, Allah, was merely an idol. He has later apologized, but one wonders how sincere he was. We are in danger of linking a fundamentalism in religion with a fundamentalism in politics that is fraught with dire consequences.

As California representative Barbara Lee, one of the few dissenting votes in the House against granting the president war powers, pleaded, “As we act, let us not become the evil we deplore.”^{iv}[iv]

Hedges writes that “Once we sign up for war’s crusade, once we see ourselves on the side of the angels, once we embrace a theological or ideological belief system that defines itself as he embodiment of goodness and light, it is only a matter of how we will carry out

murder.”v[v] He notes we are the world’s largest purveyor of weapons. We equip and train our troops in the most efficient means of killing the world has ever known.

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld said after just a few days of bombing Afghanistan that it was increasingly hard to find targets. Then in a moment of presumed levity he said Afghanistan is hard put to find them either – to which the press corps and those assembled laughed – and I was sick – sick to think there could be laughter when talking about the deaths of human beings on the receiving end of American bombs. Perhaps that wasn’t their intent, but I worry about what this “war on terrorism” is doing to the moral sensitivity of the American people. I fear we have lost our capacity for moral outrage and simple humanity.

As Senator Hiram Johnson said in 1917, “The first casualty when war comes is truth.” I am afraid I have lost all confidence in the integrity of this administration. Government propaganda, religious rhetoric and the blindly patriotic public placed this war beyond critical scrutiny. The media, especially Fox TV and the *New York Daily News*, early gave up objective reporting and became cheerleaders for war. Only this can explain how 70% of the American people believed Saddam Hussein was responsible for the tragedy of September 11, 2001, even after the president, who had all along implied a connection, finally admitted there was no evidence of this.

War as a force that gives us meaning has implications for our young. “Each generation,” Hedges wrote, “is raised to exact revenge for the injustices visited on the last, real or imagined. ‘Tell the man what you want to be,’ said Hyam Temraz to her two-year-old son, Abed, as she peeped out of the slit of a black veil one afternoon in Gaza. ‘A martyr,’ the child told me.”vi[vi]

As I read I recalled being in Gaza City in 1991 where a group of pre-adolescent Palestinian boys ran toward us as we walked the streets with stones in their hands – throwing them over our heads at an Israeli patrol. In my office I have a rubber bullet souvenir of that trip – symbolically sitting in the lap of a clay Buddha I had fashioned.

Rebecca Parker, President of Starr King School for the Ministry, illustrates what war does to human beings in a most moving narrative about her visit to a dying parishioner who fought in Korea. Bill’s commanding officer ordered him to lay an ambush which Bill knew to be foolhardy. He refused until his superior questioned his patriotism, his loyalty and his manhood. At last he obeyed orders and lost virtually all of his men – one of whom died in his arms – and he fell apart. He had been carrying the burden of this event all through his life and now, facing death, had to clear his soul of the anguish.

“I saw the truth. Back there in Korea, I was right to have questioned my commanding officer. I was right to feel the order should be disobeyed. And when I broke down because my buddies died, I was right to cry.’ As Bill spoke he placed both his hands on his own chest. ‘This is my manhood,’ he said, tapping a rhythm with his hands upon his body. ‘That I can feel. That I can care. That I can grieve. That I can love. That I hate war. That I had the courage to question. That I was willing not to obey.’ I’m not afraid to die

now, because I know what love is. I know where God is.' Hands again, pressing against his own flesh. 'This is what I wanted you to hear from me before I die.' He took my young hands in his old ones and looked at me. 'It is important for you to know this. You are a preacher. Tell my story. People need to know what I'm telling you. You need to know what I'm telling you.'"vii[vii]

There is in warfare an arrogance of power that is destructive of people and nations. Candidate Bush spoke of humility in foreign policy; but it is collective arrogance that moves us now – our Manifest Destiny in the world – our new policy of pre-emptive warfare – our withdrawal from international treaties – our Lone Ranger policing of the world. His dramatic landing in full battle regalia on an aircraft carrier deck to the cheers of the sailors while proclaiming the war to be essentially over struck me as unrestrained hubris. His “bring ‘em on” bravado in response to the assaults on our troops indicates to me he has imbibed the elixir of war.

He once spoke of Jesus as his favorite political philosopher; how then explain Jesus urging us to love our enemies? Or Jesus' words, “He who exalts himself will be humbled; he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

I contrasted this hubris with the case of Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War as he was besieged by clergy delegations from both North and South, both claiming to know God's will in the matter at hand. Said Lincoln, “I am the only one who doesn't know it.” That statement reveals a proper humility now lacking.

Clearly, war is a force that gives many meaning. It does bring out our need for a transcendent goal; our capacity to sacrifice; to invest ourselves in a cause beyond ourselves. It does all these things, and it is therefore the most dangerous of all human behaviors.

Psychologist William James, early in the 20th century, called for a “moral equivalent for war.” Recognizing the self-sacrifice that often marks warfare, he wondered why we cannot commit ourselves as human beings with equal zeal to the cause of peace and justice. I wonder too. While we continue to pursue war and rebuild Iraq, our schools starve for funds, our poverty increases while the rich get richer, our health care system deteriorates and becomes unaffordable for tens of millions, our environment suffers, and we find ourselves in a national malaise.

Where is the zeal, the passion, the determination to build the Beloved Community – to wage war on poverty? Where is that same zeal, passion and determination to pursue peace as that with which our nation's leaders and many of our fellow citizens pursue war?

One cynic said that “All the world's a stage and all the men and women merely drama critics.” Apropos that thought, in Joseph Heller's 1970 anti-war play, *We Bombed in New Haven*, he raised the question about our response to public policy through actor-audience intimacies. Actor Jason Robards, who played an Air Force Captain turning

against the war, was stunned when the audience took his rhetorical question seriously. When he asked, as part of the play, "What can we do?" these audience members took it as more than a rhetorical question and began responding and gathered at the stage. They were not going to let the killing continue. Exasperated, Robards exploded. "What do you want me to do?" he cried. "I'm only an actor!"

Precisely the point. We are actors, historical actors, agents of change. If history is to veer off its suicidal courses it will only be because of actors who take time seriously, who link learning and action because they are inseparable. Joseph Heller's point was that while actors always wind up safe in their dressing rooms, persons can be killed. In actual warfare there are no actors, only people.

Drama critic Walter Kerr concluded, "Our silence was to indict us, our refusal to act in the theater was to become our refusal to act in life."viii[viii]

That narrative has become for me a powerful parable of spiritual and ethical life. No matter what happens; no matter what horrors befall us; no matter how depressed and discouraged and confused we get, we cannot refuse to act in life. Each of us will respond in our own way. The point is that we must not allow this war and its painful aftermath to stifle our spirit, to prompt a "refusal to act in life."

Here is my prayer for peace – my response after prayerful consideration: I support my Rochester Congresswoman's bill to require the administration to spend \$87 billion extra dollars on nation-building at home if we are to be asked to spend it in Iraq. I will continue to protest the freedom-chilling results of the American Patriot Act – 1 and 2. I will keep protesting what I believe to be an unjust war. I will continue to seek a "moral equivalent for war."

In our wiser moments we know life and history
Are no respecters of persons –
Good and bad intermingle
In a crazy-quilt pattern that defies comprehension.
We know there is nothing to do but go on.
In this house of worship and learning,
As we gather in these troubled times,
We take encouragement from those who have gone before
And lived courageously in just such times as these.
We take courage from those who take on the problems of our age,
And live with ultimate hope, despite the discouragement every day seems to heap upon us.
It is good to be together in troubled times, as in good times.
We know there is nothing to do but go on.

When the injured have been treated;
When the dead have been buried;
When the rubble is cleared away;

When the anger has been vented;
When the horror has been processed;
The work of the world continues:
To heal the sick; To comfort the afflicted; To rebuild the cities;
To restore our zest for living and loving;
To seek justice and peace in an imperfect world.

I leave you with this vignette of hope for peace. At the end of one of our church discussions about the first Gulf War, a member of the First Unitarian Church of Rochester gave me for safe keeping a most unusual vase, standing over a foot tall, with graceful, curving lines, and a very heavy base. It was an attractive vase, but I didn't at first understand its significance. She had purchased it at a rummage sale some years before as a flower container. One day she picked it up and read the surprising inscription on its base: "105 millimeters, M 14, lot 12c B Company, 1944." It was an artillery shell casing beaten into the shape of a flower urn.

We read in the Hebrew scriptures that the prophet Micah said, "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks." I don't usually take the Bible *literally*, but in this case I make an exception.

i[i] from *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones: A Collection of Zen and Pre-Zen Writings*
compiled by Paul Reps
pp. 51-52 # 57

ii[ii] Chris Hedges, *War Is a Force that Gives Us Meaning* (New York: Public Affairs, 2002), 3.

iii[iii] *Ibid.*, 14.

iv[iv] *Ibid.*, 5.

v[v] *Ibid.*, 9.

vi[vi] *Ibid.*, 68.

vii[vii] Rebecca Parker, *Proverbs of Ashes*, pp. 112-3.

viii[viii] Walter Kerr, "Participatory Theater," *Harpers Magazine*, January 4, 1970, 24.