Religions, Families and War
Memorial Day Service
May 26, 2013
Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

Gathering, Welcoming, Centering, Kindling, Opening:

We are here
on a lovely morning in May,
to remember and learn, and celebrate peace,
together, in this unique community
within a neighborhood, a city, a state, a nation,
a world, a universe which we call home.

> ***(so)*** **Grounded in gratitude for the cosmos that is our home, claiming deepening wisdom as our authority, and daring to engage joy, burden, loss and insight in a deliberate community of many ways and ages, the flame summons us to *awaken*: to listen with our whole lives, to open, to serve.**

Singing #83 Winds Be Still *in solidarity with those who survived the Oklahoma tornado.*

Story

Maybe some of you heard your parents or teachers talking about the powerful storm that did a lot of damage to a city in the state of Oklahoma. A whole school building was blown down by the wind, and many houses and trees were simply blown away.

It was sad time. Today I want to tell you a story about another storm (called a tornado, by the way) which hit a town in another state, Massachusetts, a town called Brimfield. It was June 1st, two years ago. Many houses were blown away by the wind. Many trees were lifted out of the ground, and thrown down by the wind.

A man in a fire truck was trying to find a way to get rid of one of the fallen trees that was blocking the road. He heard a little sound, very weak, and went to see what it was. It was a little kitten, only two weeks old. It was very, very small. It weighed only six ounces, or as they would say, in Canada or Mexico, 170 grams. How small is that? This jar, with this much water in it, weighs exactly 6 ounces, exactly 170 grams. The cat was very weak because the tree had fallen on it. So they took it to a place that cares for sick animals. They named the cat Toto, after the famous dog in the story of the Wizard of Oz, who also was affected by a tornado.

Soon Toto was OK, and then very OK. The wife of the firefighter who found Toto in the tree branches

brought him home, where Toto lives to this very day, a happy cat who purrs in the lap of the family who adopted him.

When things like storms happen, some are affected by it, and some are not. It doesn't seem fair to many of us. But sometimes we have to say, it may not seem fair that a storm touches one place and leaves other places alone, but it is still important to help even the littlest creatures that lived through the power of the strong wind. Little things are often just as important as big things in this life.

Announcements and Caring Cards

Affirmation #399 Vine and Fig Tree

Communing

The finger of the wind comes down, and trees and buildings and people fly away, never to be seen again; but some survive to weep and rebuild, and all we can do is witness from afar. Tanks roll into Budapest in 1956, and destroy a protest by killing 3000 people. Julius Caesar strides into Gaul 58 years before the beginning of our era, to find a way to pay off his large debt, and to do so, his legions kill almost a million people. A nation divided in 1860 over the issue of chattel slavery, and 600,000 perish on stony battlefields. All we can do is witness from afar, reading of life and death in the pages of book. Yet, I say it: "May we indeed witness. May we always say, 'This has been, and something like this is happening now too.' May we always say, 'I see, and with clarity.' May we always say, 'No matter the reasons for fighting, no matter whether thinkers deem that a war is just or unjust, war is hell still.' May we always remember that being a witness is the beginning of the path to peace that is more real than a mere truce or resentful ceasefire. May we always remember that fighting for justice is *always* something to do, that Gandhi and King and Dolci fought fiercely, but yes, in a different way, without guns. May we always remember that the silence that follows the end of a war, or the passing of a tornado is not exactly like the silence that will follow these words, but that it is not unrelated either." **(silence)**

In witness of our own lives, their joy and sorrow, their deep grief and hard struggle, may we name, either inside the sanctuary of hearts, or whispered aloud in our congregational home, the names of those who embody our loves and losses and worries. And may we do so in peace. **(Naming)**

In witness of our shared history of war and peace, this offering of reflective music. **(Nathan)**

The First Reading *this morning is from Neil Shister's article in the UU house organ, UU World, from the summer issue of 2003. It will be read by our retiring Director of Religious Education, Jolinda Stephens, and our incoming Director of Religious Education, Lane Campbell. The reading mentions Eric's and my beloved colleague Rob Hardies, who serves our All Souls Church in Washington D. C. There is an article about him and his partner and child in the latest Atlantic Magazine, which I recommend to you.*

The Naval Surface Warfare Center, at Indian Head, Maryland, is where smokeless gunpowder was invented a century ago, a landmark event that transformed "fog of war" from the literal description of a battlefield to a strategic metaphor. But on the morning after the war in Iraq began, it was worship that brought together some hundred members of the base community. And it was a Unitarian Universalist Navy chaplain, the Rev. Cynthia Kane, leading them.

The occasion was the National Prayer Breakfast, an annual armed forces event that traces its origins to the Continental Congress's call for a day of "public humiliation, fasting, and prayer" in the early days of the American Revolution. For Kane, presiding in the dress uniform of a Navy lieutenant, the setting was replete with special symbolism. The guest of honor was the Rev. William G. Sinkford, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, invited at her behest. The presence of the UUA's "top brass" impressed the rank-conscious audience, especially when Sinkford announced that, besides being a minister, he was also the father of an Army Ranger in the elite 82nd Airborne Division, recently returned from Afghanistan.

Rising to speak after pancakes and scrambled eggs, Sinkford embodied the dual and, for many, contradictory strains that characterize the relationship between Unitarian Universalists and, if not the military itself, then the exercise of military power. "I come here with a great sense of gratitude," he began. "Thanks for the work you do, the protection you afford us, the democracy that you help us preserve." But, he continued, he was also "one who stood the peace vigil," one whose fervent position was that "the United States should operate only with the blessing of the international community," which, at that moment, it clearly did not have.

Sinkford celebrated the United States as "a work in progress" built around the dream of a community of equality. For the sake of promoting such a dream, he concluded, many Unitarian Universalists, himself included, were willing to go to war. He qualified his stance with a somber proviso, given the events that were just beginning to unfold: "War is not our first choice and, in some sense, it always represents a failure."

Most Unitarian Universalists would likely resonate with Sinkford's words, as well as the emotionally charged paradox he finds himself living: troubled by his government's actions, and fearful for his son, yet supportive of the troops. In the first weeks after the Iraq campaign began, the dominant sentiments I heard in my conversations with other Unitarian Universalists were variations on a theme of resigned ambivalence.

There were, to be sure, voices of unqualified dissent, like that of the Rev. Robert Hardies. "I will not allow myself to be counted among the coalition of the willing," he told his congregation at Washington's All Souls Church, Unitarian, on the first Sunday of the war. "I will not allow myself to be counted among those in whose name innocent lives are taken. I will not allow myself to be counted among those who call the loss of innocent life 'collateral damage.' . . . I will not allow myself to be counted among those who fall in line just because hostilities have begun." But even Hardies, like so many others opposed to the politics of the war, said he respected the men and women charged to wage it, and prayed for their safe return.

The Second Reading *this morning comes from the writings of 19th century Unitarian and Abolitionist Julia Ward Howe, who wrote contradictory things about war: First, her great patriotic hymn, first published in Atlantic Monthly in 1862, lyrics set to the tune. John Brown's Body Lies A'Mouldering in the Grave." The second text, also by the same Unitarian, Julia Ward Howe, sounds a different tune." This is from her proclamation of the first Mother's Day for Peace, 1870*

*A. (sung) "*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword:
His truth is marching on.
Glory, glory, hallelujah

B. "Our sons shall *not* be taken from us to unlearn what we have taught them of charity, mercy and patience. We women of one country will be too tender of those of another to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs." From the bosom of the devastated earth, a voice goes up with our own. It says, "Disarm, Disarm!"

Sermon

It was December 1st, 1969. Here is the context of what I am about to tell you. I was a third-year student at Oakland University in Rochester Michigan. The war, which we who lived in the States called the Vietnam war, and which the Vietnamese called the American war, was in full swing. The television newscasts spilled sounds none of us had heard before, every single night, like DMZ and Ho Chi Minh.

December 1st, 1969. On that cold late fall evening, the USA held its first draft lottery. Who would be drafted and sent to Vietnam? Who would go to fight a war that many at my university, and at many universities around the country, railed against regularly? And who would get to stay?

Now, some of us had already lost brothers or cousins in the war, so the war meant more than the trusted voice of Walter Cronkite on CBS news. Some among us had already enlisted, seeing it as our duty. Others were talking openly about their future life in Toronto. And still others were suddenly joining the Society of Friends (Quakers) or the Mennonites. Members of both these religious traditions will not fight violently in any war by virtue of their radical Christian principles, modeled on the early Christian communities in the Roman Empire, communities which, for almost 200 years, also rejected both the military and the very idea of war.

Me, I avoided the whole topic. I lived in a state of denial about *all* the issues.

Until December 1st 1969, that is.

On that night, some man on television stuck his hand into a jar which had plastic capsules in it, 366 of them in fact, one for each day of the year, including a leap day. Those of us born between

1945 and 1950 – that is, most every male student at my university – were the subjects of the drawing. Hundreds of us watched the event on the common black and white television in the dorm lounge.

First number drawn. September 14th. A man in the back screamed in disbelief. It was his birthday. The numbers kept coming out...muffled weeping now and then. An intense and very tense silence in between the outcries. Lots of numbers to draw; it took some time.

The tension in my own heart broke when my number was called out. June 16th was #274. This most likely meant that I would not be drafted to fight in the war.

But I will assure you...that night, more alcohol was consumed in the USA than on New Year's Eve, and St. Patrick's Day and Cinco de Mayo combined. Those whose birthdates fell under the 100 mark drank because they knew their future would be different than they had imagined a few minutes earlier. Those who were somewhere in the middle drank because they could not be sure one way or the other, and their future was going to marked with a peculiar anxiety. And most of those who had numbers higher than 260 drank in relief. It was a most difficult night. The sheer randomness of the lottery gave it an even creepier air.

Sort of like the randomness of a tornado, in Oklahoma, Massachusetts, Xenia Ohio... or anywhere. Hits some houses, leaves others alone. Kills some family members, spares others. Kills some pets, whereas others, like Toto in the story earlier, are found and restored to health and families.

Such randomness raises religious and philosophical questions for almost everyone I talk to. And right there we find where spiritual questions and military concepts begin to overlap. And by religious thought, I am talking about conservative, liberal, Catholic, Evangelical, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and Unitarian Universalist. How do you respond to the reality that some die in a war, and some come home?

Unitarians, and Universalists have been serving in the military from their beginnings. And have been thinking about war and its meanings from the beginning.

And there has been ambivalence in many of us, both now and throughout our history.

Bill Sinkford, the former president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, makes clear in the reading you heard earlier that, as a father, he worries about his son, who was then stationed in Afghanistan. As a religious leader, he had many ethical doubts about the reasons we were in Afghanistan (or Iraq) in the first place, questioning the very justness of the war. And yet, as a citizen, he had to, as the saying goes, "support the troops," that is, not lecture them on the meaning of war, or raise himself up as morally superior to them, and to honestly hope and pray that they all come home. This did not stop him from telling the very troops he was supporting: *"War is not our first choice and, in some sense, it always represents a failure."*

There have been many Unitarians and Universalists in history who have differed drastically on this subject. The 19th century Universalist minister Adin Ballou, for example, thought the

Mennonites and Quakers were right, and he practiced a strict pacifism all of his life. He's always been one of my favorite figures from our history. Even Gandhi knew about him.

The Unitarian Abolitionist Robert Gould Shaw, on the other hand, joined the military during the Civil War because he felt it was his ethical duty, and served as the Colonel leading an all-African American troop, as celebrated in the well-made film *Glory*, which at least some of you surely saw a couple of decades ago. Colonel Shaw didn't carry the New Testament around with him during the battles, but his copy of the *Essays* by fellow Unitarian, Waldo Emerson.

Emerson figures in a story about another Unitarian military chaplain, namely Jack Hayward, who was the minister of this congregation between 1949 and 1953. In the coming June Discoverer, our now monthly newsletter, I offer my eulogy for this amazing man, which includes this story. Hayward was stationed on Iwo Jima...yes, the famous Iwo Jima of the great statue in Washington D.C. He was helping to dig a trench at the beach there, when his spade hit, of all things, a book. And even more "of all things," it was a copy of Emerson's essays! He had no idea how it got there, but he did write that those essays comforted him in the difficult days on that island.

I am wondering now if he may have been the military chaplain who comforted my friend and colleague Farley Wheelright. Farley and his best friend from childhood were in the Marines too, like Jack was. In the same platoon. And, on Iwo Jima.

As Farley and his friend were climbing the famous hill, his friend was hit by a grenade directly and was killed right next to Farley. What would Jack have said, as a Unitarian chaplain, to Farley, about the awful randomness of that awful death? What theology or philosophy would have comforted Farley? UU Military Chaplains seem the ideal people with which to face such deep and moving questions.

And, of course, both of these two types of events can indeed happen during wartime. And they have. Wonderstories, like finding a book of Emerson in the sand, or singing *Silent Night* together with the German troops during a Christmas midnight. And the death of best friends, their blood on your cuffs...but also in your heart, forever.

Many Unitarian Universalists have lived in between things, as President Sinkford expressed of himself. Julia Ward Howe, a Unitarian, could write the *Battle Hymn of the Republic* during the Civil War, and only a few years later write this. *"Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn what we have taught them of charity, mercy and patience. We, the women of one country, will be too tender of those of another to allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs. From the bosom of the devastated earth, a voice goes up with our own. It says, "Disarm, Disarm!"*

Her words echo Rob Hardies' words on the first Sunday after the war in Iraq began. *"I will not allow myself to be counted among the coalition of the willing, I will not allow myself to be counted among those in whose name innocent lives are taken. I will not allow myself to be counted among those who call the loss of innocent life 'collateral damage.' . . . I will not allow myself to be counted among those who fall in line just because hostilities have begun."*

He sounds like our Socinian, that is, Unitarian, ancestors in Poland, who would have said the same thing about ANY war...except for the Socinians who lived further east, closer to the frontiers of wars being fought nearby during that century. They offered some exceptions in their pacifist teaching.

This alone tells me that circumstances can shift passionate ideals for some folks, i.e. "I am against war until someone sets their foot on my threshold. Then, I will take up arms."

I can understand that. Even Gandhi, the most influential pacifist of the last century, told his sons that, if they was physically attacked by a violent person on the streets, they should use every forceful means available to get the attack off of him.

Unitarians and Universalists, like the Jews, have always avoided strict theological agreement, but turn to conversations about our differences instead. Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai disagreed about almost everything, but still they were Jews in good standing, honored in the Talmud.

In a similar way, John Haynes Holmes, a Unitarian minister, who was one of the founders of the NAACP and the ACLU, took a firm stand against all war, as a pacifist, even though many Unitarians were for the war. But the Unitarians at the time, tragically, were not as enlightened as the Jews.

William Howard Taft of Ohio, a Unitarian who, besides being President of the United State and a Supreme Court Justice, also served as the vice president of the American Unitarian Association, believed in the necessity of war with all of his heart, despite the undeniable mustard gas horrors of the First World War. He was so passionate about this, and spoke about it so frequently and fiercely, that Unitarian ministers who WERE pacifists were dismissed by their congregations, the ones at least who had sided with Taft. Holmes was so disgusted that he left the Unitarian Association with his whole congregation.

Since those days, the congregation has returned to the Association, but it was a rough time in our history.

During the following decades, while many Unitarians and Universalists, like my mentor Harry Scholefield, and Columbus minister Jack Hayward were Unitarian military chaplains during the European war, and had gladly enlisted to fight against the Nazis, others Unitarians, like John Abbot of Canoga Park California, refused to fight even in that war. Nancy McDonald sent me a wonderful testimony from John Abbot describing the difficulties of being a Unitarian, not Mennonite, during the Second World War, as he sought conscientious objection status. In my former congregation, I also knew a few other men who had refused to fight in that war.

Still, that war, for many, was different from an Iraq or a Vietnam War. Many who would have preferred peace went to fight willingly because of the Nazi threat to both Europe and the globe itself. Later, in the Vietnam era, many others saw nothing about the war that even seemed ethical. The My Lai massacre confirmed that for many people.

Just wars, unjust wars, no wars at all. The conversation is a good one. Let's have it. Warriors of pacifism and warriors in the troops? The conversation is a good one. Let's begin it. The randomness with which wars destroy, taking one life, sparing another? Certainly worthy of our time to contemplate conversationally.

I need to make clear that my own experience as a minister for 35 years has taught me that the real cost of war is not just in the loss of human lives, the destruction of cities and culture, but in the severe stress syndromes and depression found in many, even most, survivors of a war. Soldiers and civilians both.

That reality at least, is not as much worthy of just our conversation, but as an invitation of our solemn witness, our fiercest honesty and our deepest wellsprings of compassion. For although peace is not necessarily heaven, (peace being a most difficult state to achieve and keep, since its a lot more than the cessation of war), I nevertheless hope we can agree, as Civil War General William Tecumseh Sherman affirmed right here in Franklin Park in Columbus back in 1880, most certainly "war is hell."

Offering

The offering goes to support the health of the congregation, our support of justice and fairness outside these walls, and the pleasure of giving itself. The offering will now be given and received.

Closing Prayer for Peace

O Love, let there be peace; not merely a truce. Peace, not merely disarming and going home. But peace, O Love, sitting high on the broad shoulders of understanding, compassion and ruthless self-honesty. Peace that restores and heals jagged hearts and frayed nerves, and electric stress in the bones, peace that is the kind of letting go that some call self-forgiveness, but which I call deeper self-awareness. That peace, no less, within our congregation, our families, our circles, our neighborhoods, our cities, our nation and the world of all nations, which is the whole spinning earth, the home of us all. That peace. No less. That peace. No more. That peace which is the best praise, the best devotion, the best for our common lot. Amen