

“Duty and Conscience”

UUCGV Sermon by
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The red rock canyon is cool; its walls rough to the touch. As I trace a layer with my finger, I imagine a sandy beach washed by a primordial inland sea millions of years ago. Deep time as Bill Conrod would say. Mountains made out of mountains surround me in bands of color; layer upon layer of time shaped and folded under great pressure, broken and eroding away to become the sand under my feet. Deep time. Further down the canyon there are petroglyphs, rock memories of long gone humans depicting stories and symbols of lives lived and gone, generation after generation, like the layers of rock around them. Deep time.

Stories perhaps of right and wrong and how to live an honorable life told by fathers to sons, mothers to daughters. Molding conscience.

Stories of community – the family, the clan—and the web of interdependence based on responsibility of one to another. The golden rule. Teaching duty.

Stories of a collective sense of right and wrong. Learning justice. All fundamental to survival in this harsh land.

But which of these stories depicts the collision of duty and conscience: the times when the clan demanded actions that violated conscience? In war, perhaps. The rocks are silent and I am left alone with my memories and my guilt.

What I share with you this morning will be hard to hear and even harder to tell. But I hope it will be a step toward greater understanding of war and its consequences for all of us.

Guilt is the legacy of the conscience betrayed, a wrong committed, the voice within ignored. It happens to all of us, despite the best efforts of our parents, and most of the time confession and forgiveness relieve it and we learn. There are other times, however, when the magnitude of the wrong –perceived or real—is so great that confession and forgiveness seem to be impossible. So we carry the guilt like a sack of rocks which gets heavier with every step. I suspect many of us, at one time or another, has been on this journey. But there is a special category of wrong, that thankfully, most will never experience. War guilt, the wrong of killing others, that weighs so heavily that it breaks a man and corrodes his soul. Silently. Few have the words to speak. So the awful burden is carried alone. Veteran by veteran. Deep silence.

The silence of my father who preferred not to tell of his war –World War II—arguably the last “just war” where community and country sacrificed together against a common enemy that was clearly defined. For him, as a 22 year old pilot, there was no doubt about who was dropping the bombs raining down on the barracks and B-17 bombers at his base at Hickam Field, across from Pearl Harbor, early on that December morning in 1941. The attack was real; the enemy was real; the homeland was imperiled.

His duty was clear as he and his squadron flew bombing missions against Japanese bases and convoys in the South Pacific, missions that cost the lives and planes of most of the squadron's members by the end of 1942.

His conscience must have been clear when he was shot down and crash landed near an island just before Christmas of that year, all 10 crew members banged up but safe. Above, his fellow B-17 pilot, Preston Hensley, circled fending off Japanese fighters and thereby saving his life only to crash and die himself 4 months later. A little over a year later, my father would name his infant son Richard Preston in memory of his friend.

A war story, not told, but gleaned from letters much later. Why? Why the silence? I will never know; one among the many things I will never know about this quiet man. Instead, an Eagle Scout himself, he dedicated his life to working with youth through the Boy Scouts of America and molding the conscience and teaching duty to his young son.

*On my honor I will do my best
To do my duty to God and my country
And to obey the Scout Law.
To help other people at all times;
To keep myself physically strong,
Mentally awake and morally straight*

Years later, in a different time, amid different circumstances, I saw the concern in my father's eyes even as I felt the sting of sharp disagreement over the growing U.S. involvement in Vietnam. I was opposed; he was not necessarily supportive, but believed in duty. My opposition deepened as our country fractured over civil rights and the Vietnam War. There was no Pearl Harbor; only an incident in the Gulf of Tonkin, proven later to be a fabrication, that triggered a war resolution, not a war declaration.

Now there were tears in my father's eyes as I questioned duty to country and sought to heed the voice of conscience that he had taught me to hear. As our disconnection deepened, so too did the vortex of war sucking more and more young men into military service. I was trapped. Newly married to Jan, we had few options:

- Seek alternative service- Peace Corps (uncertain; returnees being drafted)
- Claim conscientious objection (lie)
- Leave the country (exile)
- Refuse to serve (prison)
- Serve (betray my conscience)

Duty and conscience clashed within. We agonized as time collapsed around us, betrayed by our country as were so many thousands of others. Conscience dictated exile or prison. I took the cowardly way out. I went to war. And part of me never came back.

At 25, now in-country, my war was fundamentally different from that of my father. The homeland was not imperiled; only political policies and reputations. There was no community and country sacrificing together against a common enemy; instead it was business as usual –guns and butter—with war costs and lives mounting off-budget. Apart from the northern border of South Vietnam, there was no clear

enemy distinguishable among the farmers and families in the villages or the refugees in the cities. “Victor Charlie” (Viet Cong) could be anyone, anywhere, at any time. For U.S. soldiers, no-one could be trusted in this strange, ancient land of conical hats, flowing ao dai’s, rice paddies and plodding oxen. Ignorant of history and geography; unable to speak the language; uncertain of the mission, they could only trust each other. Everyone else was suspect, dangerous, dishonorable, a different species of sub-human beings: “slopes”, “gooks”, “chinks” of lesser value. The labeling was a necessary step toward dehumanization; the first requirement for killing. With no clear battle lines apart from vast “war zones” where everything within was assumed to be hostile and thus eligible for destruction, no clear enemy, and pervasive distrust, it was perhaps inevitable that accidental killing became routine killing, especially if the shots that had killed your buddy came from that village over there. There were many My Lai massacres.

As an advisor to an ARVN infantry division, my situation was especially complicated. My mission was to advise and assist ARVN soldiers who themselves were unsure of their cause and their mission and had been forcibly drafted into the South Vietnamese Army. Desertion rates were high: a battalion (600) per month; morale low; military proficiency poor. But I persevered, trying to get to know these frightened, newly-drafted soldiers, trying to help them sort through the maze of mostly useless “intelligence”, in order to analyze “enemy” strength and order of battle when the “enemy” in question was more a conjecture than a fact.

Under these conditions of uncertainty and distrust –where neither victory nor defeat was conclusive— the only measure of progress was “body count”, e.g., the number of dead, supposedly VC bodies remaining after a firefight. Forecasts of winning or losing depended on this daily number; promotions and reputations depended on this tally. And, with so much at stake, with so much blood and treasure invested, the numbers had to be large and consistent up and down the chain of command: from the platoon leader in the field to the commanding general in Saigon and from there to the Pentagon and the White House.

And so my other duties intensified: to plot the coordinates of suspected “enemy” units and bunker complexes and deliver these daily to artillery and Air Force liaisons who then rained down high explosive shells, bunker busting bombs from B-52’s out of Guam, and dioxin laced Agent Orange defoliant on the targets I had submitted. Targets that probably included hundreds of civilians as well as VC and decimated large swaths of forest and rice paddy –the livelihood of the people-- day after day; night after night until it seemed the land itself cried out in despair.

Death and destruction were all around me and never went away. Finally, at some point mid-way through my tour, something deep inside me broke, actually tore –I still remember the sensation— leaving parts of me, the creative, sensitive, compassionate parts of me, deadened; covered over with layers of mental and emotional callouses. I could not feel. All sense of future closed down except the day-to-day need to survive this nightmare. So hard to tell this; still do not have the words.

Chris Hedges best captures what I felt then and now in a talk to veterans at the Vietnam Memorial in 2012. It is the clearest expression I have found of war guilt and the moral injury that spawns it:

Many of us who are here carry within us death. The smell of decayed and bloated corpses. The cries of the wounded. The shrieks of children. The sound of gunfire. The deafening blasts. The fear. The stench of cordite. The humiliation that comes when you surrender to terror and beg

for life. The loss of comrades and friends. And then the aftermath. The long alienation. The numbness. The nightmares. The lack of sleep. The inability to connect to all living things, even to those we love the most. The regret. The repugnant lies mouthed around us about honor and heroism and glory. The absurdity. The waste. The futility.

It is only the maimed that finally know war. And we are the maimed. We are the broken and the lame. We ask for forgiveness. We seek redemption. We carry on our backs this awful cross of death, for the essence of war is death, and the weight of it digs into our shoulders and eats away at our souls. We drag it through life, up hills and down hills, along the roads, into the most intimate recesses of our lives. It never leaves us. Those who know us best know that there is something unspeakable and evil many of us harbor within us. This evil is intimate. It is personal. We do not speak its name. It is the evil of things done and things left undone. It is the evil of war. (Truthdig, October 7, 2012).

The voice of conscience within had become a whisper; my morality was broken; my moral self was in exile. In its place was a manager part whose mission was to lock away the traumatized parts lest they break loose, and control my daily activities through sheer force of will. In the background was guilt looming larger each day until, finally, mercifully, my tour was over and I, most of me, came home.

As it turned out, the war did not end there. It went on in my head and in my soul for many years thereafter—30 to be precise—the sack of rocks I described before. Was this Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)? Perhaps. But I prefer another term that seems to better fit what was happening to me: **moral injury**, the chief casualty in the war between duty and conscience. Something deep inside that was hard to understand, could not be shared or revealed to others. Something that destroyed any sense of honor and burned so fiercely within that the salve of valor and patriotism melted away no matter how often applied.

Crippled, at war with myself, I was far from the father I wanted to be for my daughter and sons who suffered accordingly. Like my father before me, I greeted their questions about who I was and what I had done in the war with silence. Knowing me was hard for I hardly knew myself. I was also far from the husband and partner Jan had married and she suffered as well. But she hung on, thank God, perhaps hoping that someday the creative, joyful man she once knew would return; would be resurrected perhaps. And to her surprise and mine, that resurrection happened in 1999.

As fate would have it, in April of that year—about now I believe—I was invited to Vietnam to train young managers of the National Petroleum Company (Vietsovpetro) in industrial maintenance and logistics. A different kind of advisor this time, civilian not military. Flying there over the South Pacific not far from where my father had crash landed, my heart and mind were in turmoil. Old memories recurred. Old wounds throbbed. But amid these there was anticipation, excitement and hope. For what, I was not sure, but it surged within me nevertheless.

The workshop was successful and the 20-odd participants invited me to a local restaurant to celebrate. Then it began, what I had hoped for and feared at the same time. It was an innocent question:

“Is this the first time you have been to Vietnam, Dr. Hyland?”

A long, thoughtful silence, fear mingling with uncertainty in my head, as I struggled to find the right words.

“No, I was here 30 years ago.....as a soldier”

Silence. Seemed like hours of silence. Then, a series of spirited, curiously collegial questions and comments:

“Did you leave woman behind?” Obvious reference to a prostitute/ GI girlfriend, all too common during the war.

“No”

“Hung, over there, was driver on Ho Chi Minh trail”

“Nguyen, next to you, was officer in VC unit not far from here.” Probably my enemy, I thought, as I looked at the diminutive, smiling, gray-haired man next to me. And now my friend? How can this be?

Stunned, with tears in my eyes, I asked where is your outrage, the anger for the immense amount of destruction we caused? “I caused” I said silently to myself.

“Happen long ago, American War over like French, Japanese, Chinese Wars before. All over. We not look back. What happened happened. We only look forward.”

Later, in a gesture of friendship and perhaps compassion, Dr. Nam, the Manager took me to the sites I had once known as a soldier including the ARVN division base where I was stationed. We could not find it. A marketplace stood where the compound used to be. Not a trace of the Vietnam War remained, except for the thousands killed and maimed each year by unexploded ordnance and the additional thousands crippled and deformed by Agent Orange. The Vietnam I had known as a soldier had disappeared or perhaps I had never really known Vietnam, but only the US in Vietnam. There is much more I could tell about this trip of truth and reconciliation, but time is short.

Afterwards, flying home, something deep within me stirred; something that I thought had died. And for the first time in years the warring factions in my head -- the traumatized parts, the controller parts, the guilt part—began to diminish. Not disappear, for they will always be parts of me, but begin to coexist peacefully. And the long-exiled creative and moral self—the poet in me—began to re-emerge.

Far below was the island of Espiritu Santo (Holy Spirit) where my father and his crew found refuge. I think my father would have loved this story.

Some closing thoughts:

- This is one story about duty and conscience out of thousands that could be told, but probably never will for they are too difficult and deep, consequences of the changing nature of war where it is more difficult than ever to distinguish between enemies and friends
- One cry out of many across time for an end to war and the political and economic rationales that make it seem feasible.
- One call out of too few for a new and different future for this country, one where
 - Our society is demilitarized
 - Our military-industrial-intelligence complex that enables war is dismantled

- Courage replaces fear and peace building begins in our hearts, families and communities; one veteran/family at a time until,
- There are no more veterans and the guns are silent.