

“Duty and Conscience, Part 2: Reflections on War, Friends and Enemies in an Interdependent World”

UUCGV Sermon by
Richard Hyland

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Yesterday, we celebrated –if that is the right word—the 99th anniversary of the Armistice ending one of the worst wars in history and the veterans who have fought our wars. Today, I take up a story you allowed me to tell two years ago as a veteran of the Vietnam War. The title was Duty and Conscience. It was a first step in confronting the demons that still haunt me and that Ken Burns eloquently explores in his recent PBS series on the American War in Vietnam. As it turns out, the sermon I gave two years ago was Part 1 of a larger story. Today is Part 2.

I come to you this morning as a fellow traveler on a path that has gotten steeper and harder to follow since the towers fell 16 years ago. It is hard to reconcile the deep feelings of unity I felt on September 11 with the policies we have been pursuing, and the wars we have been waging, in the name of those who died on that day. Do you remember the simple eloquence and unadorned beauty of ordinary folk doing extraordinary things? Construction workers, firemen, policemen...Flashes of light in the darkness of that time. The media captured them unrehearsed, direct, real, compassionate. Their words rang true in contrast to the calculated commentary and lofty platitudes of the politicians.

These were our fellow citizens working through a tragedy with courage and dedication. They brought us together as one through our tears. I felt it; I think we all did, for the first time in a very long time. It was a connection with something larger than ourselves, that touched something noble in our country. It was compassion not vindictiveness; it was anguish not anger; it was an embrace not a fist.

I think that connection was what my father must have felt as Japanese bombs devastated planes and comrades at his airfield near Pearl Harbor on that Winter morning of 1941. That tragedy called upon something deep within him and millions of other Americans, all bound together in common cause.

For a moment, there was a flicker of that connection in President Bush’s speech to the nation on September 20, 2001. There was acknowledgment of the grief, awareness of the unity of all Americans in those first few words. There was an emotional space when we were open to connecting with something beyond ourselves. It could have gone either way: a call to a new

vision of justice broken free of the cycle of violence, or a call to an old vision of justice embedded in the cycle of violence. George Bush chose the latter. It was a call to a holy war:

“...Whether we bring our enemies to justice or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done...Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists... Fellow citizens, we’ll meet violence with patient justice, assured of the rightness of our cause and confident of the victories to come.”¹

For a brief time, even this felt right. I, like so many others, was angry. But wait. This was a closed response. The decision had been made; the solution was clear: war. There was no questioning. There was no “Why?” *They* hated us. And why did *they* hate us? Mr. Bush soon provided the answer: “They hate what we see right here in this Chamber, a democratically elected government...They hate our freedoms...”

But why would anyone hate freedom so passionately that they would travel half-way across the world to attack it? And who were “*they*” anyway? A nation? A state? Poised to invade us? Destroy us? Or a small, lucky band of Saudi *jihadists*, one among many our own CIA had funded and armed to evict the Soviet Union from Afghanistan in the 1980s? These questions were not even posed. Instead, the banners were unfurled, the sword unsheathed. At the beginning of his speech, George Bush held me and all Americans in his hand. By the end, I and perhaps many others had slipped through his fingers.

Sixteen years have gone by since that night. In that time:

- With Bush’s declaration of a just war against global terror, we squandered the global unity and compassion of 9/11 and in the process limited our response to the insecurities posed by globalization, climate change and uneven economic development to military solutions rather than diplomatic ones. To fighting and destroying rather than negotiating and building.
- We attacked a country –Afghanistan, one of the poorest in the world-- that had not attacked us. There, we vanquished but did not defeat a ragtag Taliban militia and its government, but not Al Qaeda and not the warlords whose interclan violence spawned the Taliban in the first place. Instead, we like the Soviets before us, have spent troops and treasure occupying the country and seeking a victory that never comes but is always “just around the corner” if we send more soldiers.

¹ Bush, George W. “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the United States Response to the Terrorist Attacks of September 11” Office of the Federal Register, *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents*, Monday, September 24, 2001, Volume 37-Number 38, pp. 1319-1355

- We attacked a country –Iraq, a former ally—that had not attacked us. There we vanquished the Iraqi Army and deposed the government of Saddam Hussein, but did not defeat an insurgency fueled by sectarian violence misunderstood and mishandled by US occupation authorities whose policies both spawned the rise of Al Qaeda in Iraq and its offspring, ISIS, and drove Iraq closer to Iran.
- We singled out Iran, Iraq and North Korea as the “axis of evil” and, in the process, undermined reformers in Iran and South Korea, increased the risks of miscalculation and nuclear war by bullying the unstable leader of North Korea, but did nothing to address the roots of global terrorism either in the extremist Wahabi Islam of Saudi Arabia or the Zionist Judaism of Israel and the continuing expansion of Israeli settlements on the West Bank.
- In our post-9/11 military buildup, we ignored the warning of one of our greatest military leaders who told us to beware the threat to our national security and democracy posed by the growth and power of our military-industrial-intelligence complex.
- We reversed more than 50 years of U.S. foreign policy by declaring that henceforth our country will act “preemptively” against enemies, real or imagined, rather than act only in self-defense. And that we will henceforth focus our energies on “America First”, not multilateral alliances and agreements such as NATO or the Iran Nuclear Accord.
- We have taken a series of steps, beginning with the USA Patriot Act of 2001, aimed at restricting civil liberties and instituting extra-judicial measures removed from due process of law.

We have done this in addition to a systematic withdrawal from many international treaties and agreements spanning environmental, criminal justice, missile defense and other areas of vital concern, specifically the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. We have done this in the name of national security and “justice” as we define it, irrespective of how the world perceives it or might define it. And we have done all of this under the sweeping congressional authorization of September 18, 2001 which we have failed to repeal now, 16 years later:

“That the President is authorized to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons, in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States by such nations, organizations or persons” (US Congress, S.J. Resolution 23 (107th), 2001)

Both George Bush's and Donald Trump's rhetoric and the actions of their administrations harken back to another war: the cold war. To be sure, our enemies now are not the powerful nation-states that they were then. But the slogans and fears of those times resonate: "terrorist" has replaced "communist"; "anti-terrorism" has replaced "anti-communism"; "weapons of mass destruction" has replaced "mutual assured destruction". Now, as then, we are increasingly suspicious of each other, especially those who look different from us. Dissent is viewed as unpatriotic.

To those of us who lived through those times, who struggled for civil rights, protested against or fought in the war in Vietnam and endured the disgrace of Watergate, Irangate, and now potentially Russiagate, there is a strong sense of *déjà vu*, of misguided patriotism, mishandled trust, and misdirected power. There is an increasing sense that we are traveling backward rather than forward, regressing rather than progressing and that our children will have to suffer what we suffered all over again.

I have been here before:

- Vietnam 1969: felt same misgivings, same resistance to patriotic duty. But I went along, betrayed my convictions, served in Vietnam, fought and killed the enemy—the patriotically right thing to do. I lived out the consequences of a "bright and shining lie" for the next 30 years.
- Vietnam 1999: returned on business. *Journal entry, April 30, 1999*: Tried to find my former 18th ARVN Division base. Nothing remains. Not a scrap. My past is gone here. I cannot reconstruct it, touch it, feel it... Could not find the me who served here day after day, week after week: the fears, the killing, the monotony, the dust; the flimsy certainties, the drumbeat of demands for body count...Everything was out of place, wrong. We were out of touch with the land, the people, the culture, the history. We had created an American presence in an Asian land, guided by American, not Vietnamese objectives. We played out our hopes and dreams, not those of the Vietnamese. We played out—superimposed—our history, not that of Southeast Asia. Our only connection was war and the incredible violence it brought to this land. Our entire presence was disconnected from Vietnamese reality except the destruction and blood. I was looking for a phantom reality that had evaporated as if it had never existed.

Journal entry, May 1, 1999: Took the 17 managers in my seminar to dinner. They wanted to know if this was my first trip to Vietnam. No. Then, when were you here last? 1969-70. Oh, the American War. Yes. Where were you stationed? What part of the military were you in? Xuan Loc. Army. Oh, very important place; final battle before fall of Saigon. No animosity, just matter-of-fact curiosity. Then joking. They pointed to several older

members of the group and said he was NVA soldier in the North; he was NVA soldier in the South. He took part in final offensive in 1975, maybe at Xuan Loc. I was reeling from the smiles, the rush of memories...Something had happened to me in those brief moments. Almost an assurance from the very people I (we) had so horribly injured that it's okay, we're past that now. We bear you no ill will. It's over. Reflecting then, and now, on that event and others that followed, I have begun to realize that we cannot go back and change the past. What happened, happened. We can only look forward.

Enemies or friends?

- Vietnam today: A war memorial in Washington, DC; another near Cu Chi, Vietnam. One listing thousands of names; the other hundreds of thousands of names.
Enemies or friends?
- Russia 1993: heart of the "evil empire". Opera performance at Perm Opera House, "Madame Butterfly" composed in Italian, about Americans, sung by Russians. Packed house of families; children fascinated; laughter. Later, Christmas gift from Dmitri's daughter, Sasha's Christmas cup.
Enemies or friends?
- Saudi Arabia 2002: heart of Islam. Anguish and anger at deaths of Palestinians during Israeli incursions and expansion of Israeli settlements on the West Bank; US inaction, apparent tolerance. Complexity of Islam; life system; fear of disruption by chaos of the West.
Enemies or friends?
- Houston 2012: a 27-year old student in my class on the last day waits until we are alone. He looks old beyond his years. He asks quietly if I was a veteran. I reply, "Yes, Vietnam 1969-70". To which he states "I am too, Iraq, two tours in Mosul as squad leader with the 82nd Airborne Division." As he tells me his story, I hear my story once again: the same justifications, the same misguided patriotism, the same invisible enemy, the same mistakes, the same lives wasted, the same moral demons. He could be my son. In tears, I embrace him and we cry together over what we have lost.
Enemies or friends?

As an international consultant, my effectiveness depends on how well I understand my customers be they boardroom executives or shop floor technicians. Over and over I have found that culture is far more important than technology. Each company, each organization has a history, experience, knowledge. Each has a culture. These are easily overlooked when one insists on seeing only from one's own perspective. This leads to "solutions" that

- Impose what others declare is right rather than listening for what is needed.

- Diagnose problems based on theory rather than facts on the ground.
- Provide correct answers to the wrong questions.

In my work there are no certainties, no absolute truths, no magic solutions. There is only human reality in infinite variation.

If you're good, really good, you might be able to glimpse that reality as a whole for a short time, see the issues clearly. But it requires stepping out of your preconceptions, getting into the shoes of another. It requires humility not arrogance. Only then are you useful.

This same story plays out over and over again all over the world. More now than ever before, for we are part of a global community bound ever more tightly by a global economy whose growth depends on people and policies imbued with global sensitivity. This is a community of vast complexity being knit together by electronic technology at unprecedented speed. Here knowledge is power, not brute force. Here curiosity rules, not certainty. Here ignorance is costly and there is no place for dogmatic absolutes.

A century ago, Mark Twain wrote a powerful critique of global capitalism/ imperialism as part of the anti-imperialist movement against the acquisition of colonies by a victorious U.S following the Spanish-American War:

Shall we? That is, shall we go on conferring our Civilization upon the peoples that sit in darkness, or shall we give those poor things a rest? Shall we bang right ahead in our old-time, loud, pious way, and commit the new century to the game; or shall we sober up and sit down and think it over first? Would it not be prudent to get our Civilization-tools together, and see how much stock is left on hand in the way of Glass Beads and Theology, and Maxim Guns and Hymn Books, and Trade-Gin and Torches of Progress and Enlightenment (patent adjustable ones, good to fire villages with, upon occasion), and balance the books, and arrive at the profit and loss, so that we may intelligently decide whether to continue the business or sell out the property and start a new Civilization Scheme on the proceeds?

Extending the Blessings of Civilization to our Brother who Sits in Darkness has been a good trade and has paid well, on the whole; and there is money in it yet, if carefully worked -- but not enough, in my judgement, to make any considerable risk advisable. The People that Sit in Darkness are getting to be too scarce -- too scarce and too shy. And such darkness as is now left is really of but an indifferent quality, and not dark enough for the game. The most of those People that Sit in Darkness have been furnished with more light than was good for them or profitable for us. We have been injudicious.²

² Twain, Mark. "To the Person Sitting in Darkness" *North American Review* (Feb. 1901).

So maybe that's why it is so difficult to find true patriotism in our policies or in the convictions of so many of our fellow citizens. Maybe Mark Twain hit on something profound in us as a country:

- Arrogance that we know what is right without even stopping to ask why.
- Arrogance that we have a monopoly on truth and that the world must follow.
- Arrogance that we are God's instrument, God's hope for humankind.

This is not the spirit of 1776, not the unity of September 11th. It is a distortion, a caricature of these. Well might we ask today what John Adams asked after retiring from public life in 1805.

Is virtue the principle of our government? Is honor? Or is ambition and avarice, adulation, baseness, covetousness, the thirst for riches...the contempt of principle, the spirit of party and of faction the motive and principle that governs?³

So what should we do?

- We must challenge and continue to confront this president and this congress and question the direction they are taking us.
- We must resist the illusion that we can somehow recapture the glories of greatness by retreating to the past or by reducing our world involvement to simple profit and loss calculations. Instead, we must find the courage to build on the spirit of community and compassion we saw on 9/11 and lead by making the deep investments in global education, relationship building, sustainability, public health and safety over the long-term, not the short-term. I would like to think that perhaps we are not so frenzied and scared by the present that we have forgotten how to imagine something better in the future.
- To get there, we must seek out wise leadership that understands that greatness lies in sharing knowledge, building cooperation, and increasing compassion not dominance. Perhaps this could be part of the task of revitalizing the vision of 1776 and adapting it to our times. This would involve redefining patriotism to include justice and peace for the world community as well as our national community.
- We must strengthen international educational exchange and understanding wherever and whenever we can for our own children, those of our communities and those of other lands. Like the ambulance drivers of the American Field Service after World

³ Adams, John. As quoted in David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), p.588.

War I, we must build peace by expanding the connections between us, through exchanges of children, family by family, thereby reducing ignorance, reducing enemies and increasing friends.

- We must encourage those elements in all world religions that speak to love, life, liberation and take a stand against violence and injustice. We must work to transform all world religions into reservoirs of reconciliation. Perhaps, in this way, some day, we will celebrate and value as heroes, firefighters and social workers as much as we do soldiers and sailors. Then again, perhaps this capacity has always been there; we just need wise leadership to bring it out.

Now is a critical time. We must learn from the past and seize the future. We must listen deeply, learn broadly, act wisely. We must get beyond the stereotypes, beneath the labels. We must seek the stories, learn the history, understand the realities that shape mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers. At this level, and only at this level, can we banish hate.

None of this will be easy. It will require dedication and effort. It will require courage. We are seeking to change the course of a proud, victorious superpower whose dominance is unchallenged, but whose citizens are trapped by fear: fear of the world, fear of the future, fear of each other. Whatever we do or don't do as a nation will have profound consequences on the rest of the world.

I have left you with some reflections that I hope will be unsettling. I have spoken to you as a veteran on this Veteran's Day weekend of 2017. I have done this trusting in your non-conforming, free-thinking spirit as Unitarian Universalists. You are, after all, by history and heritage a question in a world full of answers.

Following our closing hymn, I would like to offer a benediction in the form of a poem written at some point in my tour in Vietnam. It will be followed by a series of drawings from 1967 by a college student seeking answers that have still not come fifty years later.

Thank you for allowing me to tell this story.