

Iraq: Who Pays the Price?

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Readings

The prophet Isaiah, in the language of his time and place, expressed the enduring dream of peace this way:

In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

A brief poem from novelist and poet Alice Walker

Winning

The smallest child
Understands:

Anyone who terrorizes us
Is a terrorist;

Anyone who steals from us
Is a thief;

Any one who loves
Has won.

Sermon

I searched Memorial Day on the internet the other day. The History Channel site included on its Memorial Day page a timeline of America's wars, as it called them. The list noted where the war was fought, the name of the treaty ending it, and how many Americans had died.

I found myself getting very quiet inside as I scrolled through the list:

The American Revolution: American dead, about 4,435.

The War of 1812: about 2,260.

The Mexican War: about 13, 283.

The Civil War: Union dead, 646,512; Confederate dead, 133,821.

The Spanish-American War: 2,446 American dead.

World War I: about 116, 708.

World War II: about 407,316.

Korean War: about 36,512.
Vietnam War: about 58,193.
Persian Gulf War: about 148
War in Afghanistan: thus far about 450.
War in Iraq: American dead thus far, over 4,000.

Tomorrow, Memorial Day, we remember and honor them all.
And of course these numbers do not include those injured, often in life-changing ways. We honor them too.

And these numbers suggest only indirectly the innumerable family members and friends who grieved and in our own time grieve still. We grieve too.

These numbers leave out all the others in allied or opposing forces who lost their lives, or who were terribly injured. They leave out civilians, mothers, fathers, children – ordinary people going about their business whether in Dresden, in London, in Hiroshima, in New York, in Kabul, in Baghdad...

They leave out those caught in the crossfire of so many other wars that have been fought across the ages and across the continents. They leave out the native peoples of our own continent, victims of colonial and then U.S. government genocidal policies.

So much to grieve.

These numbers leave out, though they surely evoke, the cries of our hearts:

Can't we stop this? Someday?

Must we live like this? Must we always have graves of young soldiers and all too many civilians to decorate because they were killed in a war?

Isn't there enough suffering without this self-inflicted disease of war?

For though today we focus quite naturally on ending the war at hand, we must not lose focus on the larger, even more daunting, yet essential challenge of ending all war.

The war at hand. Iraq: Who pays the price? In addition to the over 4,000 young American men and women who have given their lives in this war, in addition to their families, in addition to the over 20,000 injured service-men and women and their families?

Who else pays the price?

The UUSC tells us that the \$463 billion that has been spent to fund the war in Iraq could have funded four million affordable housing units or eight million new elementary school teachers or health care for millions of children.

One *day* of the Iraq war, according to the American Friends Service Committee costs the American taxpayer 720 million dollars. That could fund: homes for 6,482 families or 84 new elementary schools or 34,904 university scholarships or 12,478 elementary school teachers or 95,364 head start positions or renewable electricity for over 1,274,000 homes or free school lunches for 1,153,846 children.

Or if you don't care to choose among these alternatives, just wait for eight days and fund them all.

So... who pays the price? Those least able to pay the price, those on the street or living with inadequate health care, education, or housing.

Who pays the price? Well... we all do, through an increasingly fractured social fabric as the divide between rich and poor grows ever wider.

And thus far I've been talking only about Americans.

Who else has paid the price? We don't even keep an accurate count of Iraqi deaths. Estimates range from 30 or 40 thousand into the hundreds of thousands. Then

there are millions of refugees, millions living in fear in their own homes, millions without adequate clean water, housing, health care.

And implicit in everything I've catalogued thus far is the moral price.

The moral price for soldiers – for all the good that so many of them are doing, all too many coerced by circumstance or direction into behaving in morally reprehensible ways.

And the moral price for our nation, our nation's moral fiber weakened the longer we put up with this. For though there is plenty of blame to go around at the highest levels of government, we are all complicit in some degree – our material way of life dependent as it is on high levels of consumption, which means dependent on oil from unstable parts of the world, which means dependent on a military suitable for empire... all of which means, too... dependent on global warming.

So, on this Memorial Day I, for one, mourn all of the losses implied in this cataloguing of "who pays the price?": I have before my mind's eye the faces of the earnest young men and women we see on the evening news, their ultimate sacrifice honored. I have before my mind's eye images of torture inflicted by Americans on Iraqis and others. I have before my mind's eye ordinary mothers, fathers, children, fleeing from the bombs, from the crossfire in their neighborhoods. I have before my mind's eye the needs of our own citizens, unmet because of the appalling amount of resources drained into Iraq.

What am I – what are we – to do with all of this grief?

First – let it be. It seems to me we must allow ourselves to feel this grief, to feel the weight of this suffering, to feel it so that we might be more likely to do something about it.

And then – do what?

To begin with, we must acknowledge that though we (we at Old Ship, we Unitarian Universalists, we Americans, we human beings...) may be of close to one mind and heart when it comes to *desiring* a world at peace, with justice for all, with a sustainable economy on this one earth we share... we are, even so, of more than one mind when it comes to how to get there.

This said, just as we must allow the grief to soak into our bones, we must also allow our imaginations to waken in our hearts:

To allow ourselves to imagine that the zones of peace already present in the world – in our communities, in the millions of kindhearted daily deeds around the world, in all of the ways we cooperate toward common and peaceful ends – that these zones of peace might indeed expand to embrace someday the whole world. Why not, after all? Why must the world always be so, always be prone to war? Let our hearts imagine another way.

And then we must *choose* this way. For as pacifist and activist A.J. Muste said: there is no way to peace, peace is the way.

And so...

We can speak out against clearly unjust wars waged in our name.

We can speak out against all war, if it is our belief that all wars are by the very nature of war unjust.

We can vote in ways that we believe will more likely bring greater justice and peace.

And we can understand that if we expect a harvest of peace someday, we must plant seeds of justice this day, seeds of economic opportunity and equity, of health care as a human right, good education as a human right, adequate housing as a human right,

clean and affordable water as a human right, democratic freedoms and civil liberties as a human right.

So we can support human rights organizations such as our own Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, dedicated to all of these rights and goals.

We can help build a house for Habitat.

We can tutor at the UU Urban Ministry at First Church in Roxbury.

We can donate food to the Hingham Interfaith Food Pantry.

We can volunteer at Wellspring, in Hull.

Yes, if we expect a harvest of peace someday, we must plant seeds of justice this day.

For if the way to peace *is* peace, the way is also justice.

But a daunting way it is. What might inspire us on the way of peace and justice?

First, we inherit a tradition from the Hebrew prophets who knew and proclaimed that empire was built and sustained on the backs of the poor; and who called to account those in power, those who could do something to create more justice, yet did not; yet these same prophets also foresaw a time when our swords *would* be beat into plowshares, our spears into pruning hooks, when justice *would* roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.

Yet none of this by magic. Rather because human beings would help to make it so, with our thoughts and prayers, with our words, with our hands.

We also inherit traditions of the wider world which can inspire us along the way, traditions such as the Buddhist, whose ancient wisdom teaches that “never does hatred cease by hating in return...” so we must “overcome violence by gentleness... evil by good...” (from the *Dhammapada*).

And our own Unitarian Universalist principles can inspire us, principles which envision a world community of justice and peace, a world in which the inherent worth and dignity of every person is respected, a world in which we understand that our lives are woven into the interdependent web of life.

...Principles which also challenge us to seek the truth responsibly and to follow the dictates of our conscience. When might this be more important than when we find ourselves in the midst of war?

A concluding thought about Memorial Day:

As we know, Memorial Day as we celebrate it today derives from Decoration Day, what were at first impromptu local gatherings, both north and south, to decorate the graves of those fallen in the Civil War. Given the immense losses in that war and the deep rents in the national fabric, it is almost unbearably poignant to imagine those early Decoration Days, the grief so fresh.

Even so, most Americans, and perhaps most of us in this room, may think of the Civil War as a moral war, fought as it was (in part anyway, eventually anyway) to end the utterly inhumane and unforgivable system of slavery.

Yet to me, the Dalai Lama’s assertion seems as starkly true in relation to the Civil War as it does in relation to any war – when he said that the only certainty when it comes to war is that there will be suffering. So, can we be so certain that ending slavery through violence and war resulted in less suffering over the course of the next 150 years than ending slavery through non-violent, if slower, means would have?

As a nation and as a people, we have been and remain, it seems to me, all too ready to believe that social evils, or international evils can be solved through violence, through war. Yet is it true?

I could of course be wrong. It would hardly be the first or only time. But I for one choose to place myself among those who believe we must find another way, we must imagine our way to a world of peace, we must live our way to a world of peace, we must continue to plant the seeds of justice if we are to have any hope of harvesting a world of peace. We would not be alone in this other way – think of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, think of the Velvet Revolution, think of the non-violent revolution in the Philippines... this list of peaceful change, too, is a long one.

Iraq: Who pays the price? All of us.

War: Who pays the price? All of us.

Justice and peace: Who must pay the price? All of us.

May we link hands and hearts in this great work.

Remembering, as we heard Alice Walker affirm in her poem:

Anyone who loves
Has won.

So may it be.