Readings for Memorial Day
May 25, 2008

"The U.N. Headquarters in the High Commissioner's House in Jerusalem"

The mediators, the peacemakers, the compromise-shapers, the comforters
live in the white house
and get their nourishment from far away,
through winding pipes, through dark veins, like a fetus.

And their secretaries are lipsticked and laughing,
and their sturdy chauffeurs wait below, like horses in a stable,
and the trees that shade them have their roots in no-man's-land
and the illusions are children who went out to find cyclamen in the field
and did not come back.
And the thoughts pass overhead, restless, like reconnaissance planes,
and take photos and develop them
in dark sad rooms.

And I know they have heavy chandeliers
and the boy-I-was sits on them and swings
out and back, out and back, out till there's no coming back.

And later on night will arrive to draw
rusty and bent conclusions from our old lives,
and over all the houses a melody will gather the scattered word

like a hand gathering crumbs upon a table
after the meal, when the talk continues
and the children are already asleep.

And hopes come to me like bold seafarers,
like the discoverers of continents coming to an island,
and stay for a day or two
and rest…
And then they set sail.

- Yehuda Amichai

"Breath"
The people I come from were thrown away
as if they were nothing, whatever they might have
said become stone, beyond human patience,
except for the songs. But what is their daily
breath against all the ardent, cunning
justifications for murder?

The stunned drone of grief becomes the fierce,
tender undertone that bears up the world,
steady as a river grinding soil out of stone.
I'm thirsty for words to join that song-
Cupped hands at the spring, a cup of
Rain passed hand to hand, rain pooled
on stone, a living jewel, a clear
lens trembling with our breath.

- David Williams

"What Every Soldier Needs"

Rob Eller-Isaacs
Unity Church
May 25, 2008

In 1941 just as the Americans were entering the war, Ancel Keys, a physiologist at the University of Minnesota was asked by the War Department to design a non-perishable, ready-to-eat meal that could fit in a soldier's pocket. The idea was to provide nourishment enough to allow a soldier to make it through an emergency in which regular meals could not be made available. Keys, who would become famous as an advocate for the connection between cholesterol and heart disease, went to a local grocery store to choose inexpensive, high-energy foods. That day he bought hard biscuits, dry sausages, hard candy and chocolate. He then tested his 28 ounce, 3200 calories meals on six soldiers at a nearby army base. The ratings ranged from "palatable" all the way up to "better than nothing."

Though meant only for short-term emergency use there were times in World War Two when soldiers had to survive on so-called K-rations for months. Building on Keys' original menu (if you can call it that) the War Department saw fit to create separate rations for breakfast, lunch and dinner and to add a few amenities. Breakfast included a small can of chopped ham and egg, two biscuits, a fruit bar, instant coffee, sugar, four cigarettes, chewing gum and a nutrition bar (called field ration D) meant to be eaten slowly or dissolved in boiling water. Dinner (the midday meal) included pasteurized processed American cheese, the biscuits, malted milk, synthetic lemon juice powder, sugar, four cigarettes, the

gum, the again field ration D. Supper brought back chopped ham and egg, biscuits, field ration D, the gum, four more cigarettes and bouillon powder as a special treat.

I mean no disrespect. I'm sure K-rations kept thousands of soldiers alive when breaks in the supply lines made more substantial meals impossible. For Ancel Keys the question was, how can we provide for a soldier's essential dietary needs in an emergency situation? For us the question points beyond physical needs. What does every soldier need? Each year I ask for the privilege of preaching on Memorial Day. And each year I ask myself, how best might we honor those who served and especially those who lost their lives in service to their country. Sometimes I just want to talk about peace, to rail against war in any and all of its forms. But then I try to imagine how I would feel if someone I love had died in the fighting. I know I would want to believe their death had meaning. I would want to believe they had not died in vain. The problem is this: for their deaths to have meaning their wars must be just and few if any wars are.

I think our heartfelt desire to honor the fallen explains in part the all-too-human tendency to glorify war. The challenge is to find ways to honor the fallen in ways that do not perpetuate the violence. In the sermon, which opened this series on food, Janne talked about how most of us don't really know where our food comes from. We eat foods shipped in from all over the world. We're not dependent on the seasons. Most of us have lost touch with the land. There is a parallel reality to our relationship to violence.

I remember marching through downtown Chicago chanting, "bring the war home." Some took the phrase literally, planting bombs in department store bathrooms, hurting innocent people to make the point that people no less

innocent were dying in droves everyday. But for most of us it was a metaphor. Bring the war home meant, feel the war in your bones, hold those burning children in your arms until your own chest is on fire. If you can't feel the terror and the grief your too far from the fighting. One way to honor the fallen is to refuse to maintain the emotional distance that making war demands.

Robert Fulgum tells a story about visiting a German cemetery on Crete. Walking among the graves of fallen German soldiers he came upon an old woman dressed all in black. Having weeded the small garden surrounding one of the graves she was sweeping the path and the headstone. Amazed to see her tending to a German grave he stopped and asked her, "How can you do this? After all the terror and destruction the Nazi invaders brought to the island, how you tend a German grave?" "I weed and sweep and tend this grave in the hope that far away in Germany a widow much like me weeds and sweeps and tends my husband's grave."

Like so many of you I have stood in the shallow grave of the Vietnam memorial and wept as my finger followed the carved letters of a dear friend's name. I remember so vividly seeing my face reflected in the polished stone and thinking, fifty eight thousand American dead, eighty thousand more have died by suicide since the war ended and then…two million Vietnamese dead. Where are their names carved in stone? Oh yes, today we honor our fallen by lighting a candle and saying their names. And yes we loved them. But in the eyes of God every name is carved in stone and everyone cut down by war is our own son or daughter. Would that you and I could tend to each and every grave.

It's the distance we have to transcend. Olympia Brown, the great Universalist minister who was the first woman ever

ordained in the Christian tradition wrote a hundred and fifty years ago: "We can never make the world safe by fighting. Every nation must learn that the people of all nations are children of God, and must share the wealth of the world. You may say this is impracticable, far away, can never be accomplished, but it is the work we are appointed to do." Feel it friends. Let the anguish inhabit your heart. But be careful. Don't let the pain overwhelm you. The challenge is not just to feel it, not only to suffer in solidarity with all who now stand in harms way but also to transform that suffering into compassion in service to freedom and peace.

This is no simple speech. There is no easy comfort here. Yet I would praise all those who've served the larger cause of love. The foolish and the brave, the gung ho and the reticent, the ones who came back different if they came back at all. This morning we attempt to offer some generous measure of our gratitude. This morning we attempt to rise beyond bewilderment and shame, though both remain to be reconciled, to name those we have loved and lost and to embrace the millions we will never know to whom we also owe allegiance.

I want you to listen again to "Breath" by David Williams:

> The people I come from were thrown away
> as if they were nothing, whatever they might have
> said become stone, beyond human patience,
> except for the songs. But what is their daily
> breath against all the ardent, cunning
> justifications for murder?

The stunned drone of grief becomes the fierce,
tender undertone that bears up the world,
steady as a river grinding soil out of stone.
I'm thirsty for words to join that song-
Cupped hands at the spring, a cup of
Rain passed hand to hand, rain pooled
on stone, a living jewel, a clear
lens trembling with our breath.

I look back through that trembling lens, back to a moment when we brought the war home. This is no simple speech. There is no easy comfort here. There is only memory and remorse and a deep down dignity, which rises when we ourselves rise up to honor those who did their duty as they saw it. In nineteen sixty-eight I helped to levitate the Pentagon. Two hundred fifty thousand of us gathered on the Pentagon's south lawn. On our flank to the west the hundred and first airborne waited in full battle gear for orders to clear the field. In a quiet moment a solitary man who had climbed into a tree began to shout at the soldiers. "You fascists, you Nazis, you pigs." We were stunned. Those men were our brothers. We'd come to Washington as patriots in hope we could redeem the nation. Now a voice of disrespect and hatred threatened to overshadow our resolve. And then it happened. No one knows where it begin. But within seconds the shouts of hated were overwhelmed as a chorus a quarter of a million strong raised their voices in a prayer of hope and memory and gratitude. To honor not only our own but all the fallen soldiers we will never know let us now sing the song we sang that day. (America the Beautiful)

Amen