

I was too young for Vietnam and too old for Kuwait.

I never really had to face the question of whether or not I would go to war.

And yet, the violence inherent in war exists in me as surely as it exists in every member of the human race.

Each of us must find our own pathway to, and through, that violence.

Today we honor those for whom that violence was institutionalized in the form of the armed services.

Today we honor those who faced that violence in themselves and in the world around them.

Today let us also honor our own struggles with our inherent violence.

Come, let us worship together.

--Steve Harper

On Sacrifice and Hope

Unity Church

May 30th, 2010

What is this fearsome thing inside me? If I knew its true name I would cast it out. The Gospel of Mark, the oldest and probably the most authentic telling of the ministry of Jesus, begins with Jesus being baptized by his cousin John. Then Mark tells us how Jesus recruited the first of his disciples, those fishers of women and men who would carry forth his ministry. Then, halfway through the very first chapter, beginning with the 21st verse, Mark gives us a glimpse of what this holy man can do. *"They came to Capernaum, and on the Sabbath he went to the synagogue and began to teach. The people were astounded at his teaching, for unlike the doctors of the law, he taught with a note of authority. Now there was a man of the synagogue possessed by a demon. He shrieked: 'What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God.' Jesus rebuked him; 'Be silent,' he said, 'and come out of him.' And the unclean spirit threw the man into convulsions and with a loud cry left him. They were all dumbfounded and began to ask one another. 'What is this? A new kind of teaching! He speaks with authority. When he gives orders, even the demons do what he tells them.' The news spread rapidly, and he was soon spoken of all over the district of Galilee."*

That "note of authority" those gathered there that day discerned in Jesus, is evidence that one is in the presence of a teacher who is able to see human nature as whole and holy in its full complexity. He knew that demon's name so well he didn't even have to say it. The demon knew the teacher's name so well that, recognizing the overwhelming power of his compassion, he shrieked and then departed.

I used to think we each were born with a tendency towards violence that had to be contained or tamed. Now I'm not so sure. It may be that what we might call that violent energy inside us is not inherently violent. That lashing out in violence is only one of a number of ways that the primal energy or life force is made manifest. The energy itself is undifferentiated. There is not good energy and bad energy. There is only energy which can be focused and channeled in positive or negative ways.

If this seems like highly speculative metaphysics which has little or no place in a sermon intended to honor the fallen and turn our minds and hearts toward peace then I suggest you contemplate with me how very much names matter. Take cowardice and courage for example. I spent much of my post world war two childhood, steeped in images of battlefield heroism. Boys of my generation were taught to hope we would get the chance to risk our lives for America. But now we see through a glass darkly. I will always honor those who chose and choose to serve as soldiers in our nations' wars. But I do not approve and I do not believe that battlefield heroism is the best and highest courage we have in us.

The truth is that I'm torn. I'm exhausted by the rhetoric of conflict. The call to arms is all thrilling as it is tragic. The young are particularly drawn to solidarity. So few of them have any sense of how very fragile life can be, 'not me' they tell themselves as they march off to war. Their parents know better but we're constrained by duty and by self-deception, struck silent by the thought that this time the fight may well be just and necessary, that this time we really are fighting for "peace and a new hope." I won't debase this day by opening old wounds. Suffice to say that solidarity takes many forms. It may well take just as much courage or more to engage in non-violent resistance, to be undying advocates for peace as it does to put on a uniform and dare to do our duty even unto death. There are no easy answers here. "Our hearts are not yet (fully) capable of seeing and of loving." But if we are to remember the young dead soldiers, is we are to answer their silent plea, if we are to give their lives meaning we will have to learn the disciplines of peace.

The old anthem goes, "let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me." It may seem trite but it certainly is true. The 15th century Indian master Kabir writes:

*I don't know what kind of a God we have been talking about.
The caller calls in a loud voice to the Holy One at dusk. Why?
Surely the Holy One is not deaf.
The Holy One hears the delicate anklets that ring on the feet of an insect as it walks.
Go over and over your beads, paint weird designs on your forehead,
Wear your hair matter, long and ostentatious,
But when deep inside you there is a loaded gun,
How can you know God?*

I don't mean to be simplistic or naïve. Peace does not end with you or me. It begins here. We will never win the peace by overcoming our enemies. Conflict will not carry us across the barriers only creative engagement has the power to inspire and sustain the lasting peace that just might give their lost lives meaning. Peace begins with you and me. It is not an attitude. It is a discipline that requires us to look exhaustively into our own capacity, yes yours and mine, to fall into complicity with evil. Neither our good hearts nor our long practiced liberalism

exempts us from the all too human tendency toward violence. Yes, we must meet strength with strength but let it be our prayer that the strength we learn to summon, practice and deploy is born of love and that our strength will always lead toward peace and freedom.

May it be so and amen.

Courage

It is in the small things we see it.
The child's first step,
as awesome as an earthquake.
The first time you rode a bike,
wallowing up the sidewalk.
The first spanking when your heart
went on a journey all alone.
When they called you crybaby
or poor or fatty or crazy
and made you into an alien,
you drank their acid
and concealed it.

Later,
if you faced the death of bombs and bullets
you did not do it with a banner,
you did it with only a hat to
cover your heart.
You did not fondle the weakness inside you
though it was there.
Your courage was a small coal
that you kept swallowing.
If your buddy saved you
and died himself in so doing,
then his courage was not courage,
it was love; love as simple as shaving soap.

Later,
if you have endured a great despair,
then you did it alone,
getting a transfusion from the fire,
picking the scabs off your heart,
then wringing it out like a sock.
Next, my kinsman, you powdered your sorrow,

you gave it a back rub
and then you covered it with a blanket
and after it had slept a while
it woke to the wings of the roses
and was transformed.

Later,
when you face old age and its natural conclusion
your courage will still be shown in the little ways,
each spring will be a sword you'll sharpen,
those you love will live in a fever of love,
and you'll bargain with the calendar
and at the last moment
when death opens the back door
you'll put on your carpet slippers
and stride out.

~ Anne Sexton ~

Call Me by My True Names

Do not say that I'll depart tomorrow
because even today I still arrive.

Look deeply: I arrive in every second
to be a bud on a spring branch,
to be a tiny bird, with wings still fragile,
learning to sing in my new nest,
to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.

I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,
in order to fear and to hope.
The rhythm of my heart is the birth and
death of all that are alive.

I am the mayfly metamorphosing on the surface of the river,
and I am the bird which, when spring comes, arrives in time
to eat the mayfly.

I am the frog swimming happily in the clear pond,
and I am also the grass-snake who, approaching in silence,
feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks,
and I am the arms merchant, selling deadly weapons to
Uganda.

I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat,
who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea
pirate,
and I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and
loving.

I am a member of the politburo, with plenty of power in my
hands,
and I am the man who has to pay his "debt of blood" to, my
people,
dying slowly in a forced labor camp.

My joy is like spring, so warm it makes flowers bloom in all
walks of life.
My pain is like a river of tears, so full it fills the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can hear all my cries and laughs at once,
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.

Please call me by my true names,
so I can wake up,
and so the door of my heart can be left open,
the door of compassion.

Thich Nhat Hanh