

What Iraq Taught Us
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
at the North Parish of North Andover, Unitarian Universalist
May 27, 2007

This sermon was preceded by testimonials by Ann Chay, whose son is currently serving in Iraq, and Melida and Carlos Arredondo, whose son died while serving in Iraq.

I like this description of the church: “a community of memory and of hope.” A place to remember, in the words of the Methodist minister Ted Loder, who we are, and who God is, and who our sisters and brothers are. A place to imagine a better world, and then to do our own small part to make that hope real.

This weekend, our country and this community remember its sons and daughters who died while serving in the armed forces. After the service I invite you to walk up to our cemetery and place a flower on one of the graves there. No matter where you stand politically, no matter what you think about the war in Iraq, this remembering is something we should all do—to take time to stop and honor those who answered the call to serve, who put their lives at risk, and who died too soon.

I am grateful that I came of age at a time between wars; that I never had to decide whether to join the service or worry about being drafted. Sometimes I wonder if I would have had the courage, the fortitude to be a soldier. And there is a part of me that wonders what I missed. In his book *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, Chris Hedges describes how war can be alluring and intoxicating; the power that war has to give our lives a sense of purpose, to lift us from the mundane, to make us see things in heroic terms. His book, based on his years as a war correspondent, is a sobering account of human nature, of how we are so easily led into war. How leaders can get people to fear others, to see them as a threat and identify them as the enemy, see them as less than human, so they are no longer mothers and fathers, sons and daughters; they are combatants, rebels, terrorists. So it becomes easy to fight and kill them.

I’ve heard politicians saying lately that the Iraq war has been “mismanaged,” that “mistakes were made,” and this is certainly true. But what they’re implying is that this war could have gone differently, and could have been won, had we done things right. I’m not convinced. Most of our leaders aren’t questioning the premise that war is an acceptable instrument of foreign policy, or whether the most effective way to respond to terrorism is to declare war on it.

Though we aren’t allowed to see the flag-draped caskets coming home to Dover AFB, our people are increasingly troubled by this war in Iraq. We are in a bad situation that we don’t know how to get out of. The only good I see coming from this war is its potential to teach us some difficult lessons. So I offer you three things that Iraq has taught us:

First, as the stories you have heard here today painfully illustrate, war exacts a terrible cost. We should know this, but it is a lesson we have yet to learn. We tend to

glorify war, to use words like valor and courage and honor to cover up the fact that combat is brutal and ugly. Beyond the number of our soldiers killed, many more are wounded, their lives forever changed. To say nothing of the number of Iraqis who are killed and injured, or who die as a result of the destruction and disease war brings. Much of this damage is hard to see.

Let me share with you one more story. It's about a young man from western Massachusetts, Jeffrey Lucey, who served in Iraq and then came home.¹ But he was changed. He was haunted by what he had seen and what he had done in Iraq. On Christmas Eve he said to his sister, "Your brother is a murderer." He wore around his neck the dog tags of two unarmed Iraqi soldiers he had killed at close range, when he'd been ordered to do so. He wore those dog tags to remember and honor those men he had killed. He was haunted by this, and his family tried to help him, by having him committed to a VA hospital, but he was released after four days. His father Kevin says, "Nobody really saw him."

One night, Kevin sat up late with Jeffrey, and at one point Jeffrey asked if he could curl up in his father's lap. Kevin says that act, of cradling his grown son in his arms, was his last gift to Jeffrey. Because the next day, Jeffrey Lucey hanged himself in the basement of his parents' home.

War costs more than we will ever know. Jeffrey's parents had hoped to be with us here today, but they are in Chicago at the showing of the "Eyes Wide Open" exhibit, the purpose of which is to witness to the cost of war. They are there collecting Jeffrey's uniform and other belongings they had loaned to the exhibit for the past year. Jeffrey's mom told Pat Scanlon, "We're going to Chicago and bringing Jeffrey home."

The second thing Iraq has taught us is that we are not who we think we are.

Americans can rightly be proud of the ways we have supported justice and freedom around the world. We see ourselves as the "land of the free and the home of the brave," and we like this image of ourselves.

That's why the attacks on September 11 were such a shock. This wasn't supposed to happen here. At that time ethicist Stanley Hauerwas wrote, "Americans do not die as victims. They have to be heroes. So the stock trader who happened to work on the seventy-second floor becomes as heroic as the policemen and the firemen who were doing their jobs. No one who died on September 11 gets to die a meaningless death. That is why their deaths must be revenged."²

In the spring of 2002, I was taking a class in seminary called "Compassion, Forgiveness, Nonviolence." Desmond Tutu came to speak to us about South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation process. We talked about the fact that Americans responded to the tragedy of September 11 by widely supporting military action. We seemed to think, "Somebody is going to pay for this." Archbishop Tutu asked us, "Why are Americans,

¹ Jeffrey Lucey's story is told in the book *Eyes Wide Open*, which tells the story of the American Friends Service Committee exhibit. An audio clip is available at <http://www.afsc.org/eyes/experience/hear-it.htm>

² Stanley Hauerwas, "September 11, 2001: A Pacifist Response," in *Dissent from the Homeland: Essays after September 11*, *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101.2, Spring 2002, p. 426-27.

who are such generous, hopeful people, also so vindictive?" Though there was no link between September 11 and Iraq, it's clear that Iraq was supposed to provide a way for us to avenge the losses of 9/11.

We needed to strike back, we needed to do something. What if we had mourned for a much longer time? What if we had mourned not only the loss of those who were killed, but of our belief that we were invincible, that terrorism couldn't happen here?

Iraq has taught us that we will not be seen as liberators just because we wish it to be so. That preemptive warfare is ethically and strategically wrong. That as the comic strip Pogo once said, "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

Finally, Iraq has taught us that there is a limit to our power and influence. This war in Iraq reminds me of another war. But it's not Vietnam I'm thinking about. Two hundred and thirty years ago our forebears fought to defend their new country against an empire across the sea. The British were fighting to maintain their influence and control. That's what empires do. We fought an insurgent war, a guerrilla war. We hid behind trees and stone walls; the British said we didn't play by the rules. But we were fighting to defend our country against an empire that wanted to use it to their own ends.

The problem is, we still think of ourselves as those revolutionaries. But we have become the empire. Like us, the Iraqi people will not be colonized. We are being forced to come to the terms with the fact that, even though we are the world's only superpower, we can't do whatever we want. Even though our military spending is higher than any other country, might does not make right.

So what are we to do? What is a faithful way to honor our dead, and support our troops, and call our country to account for its mistakes? We need ways to mourn our losses, to confess our sins, to seek forgiveness and reconciliation. We need to challenge those who say supporting the troops means never questioning our leaders. Thank God for families like those who shared their stories here today, who risk standing up for an America that is often more promise than reality.

We are a community of memory and of hope. This Memorial Day let us remember those good people who have died in service to our country. Let us remember the high ideals we say our country stands for, and hold ourselves and others accountable to them.

And let us live in hope. In the knowledge that one day this war will end, that we will bring our troops home, we will be able to bind up at least some of the wounds this war has caused.

My hope is that the tragedy and cost of this war will not be in vain. That we will learn from our mistakes. That our war with Iraq will convince us finally of the futility of war; that military force should only be used as a last resort, as a means of defense.

In the Hebrew Bible, in the book of Deuteronomy, God speaks to the nation of Israel as they are crossing into the Promised Land, saying, "I have set before you life and death,

blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live” (Deut 30: 19). The same choice lies before us. Will we choose a way of life, or of death?

I believe in redemption—that our nation’s heart can be transformed, that we can turn from this way of death and destruction. This is my hope and prayer--that we will bring our troops home; that this war will end. And that the next time our leaders beat the drum for war, we will remember Iraq. We the people will say, “No. We have had enough of violence and victims. We will not live in fear. War is not the answer. We choose life.”

Amen.