

Veterans Day comes again this Wednesday. Originally, November 11 was proclaimed “Armistice Day” by President Woodrow Wilson in 1919. It was meant as a day to remember the sacrifices of those who served in war, particularly World War I, the “war to end all wars”. That war did *not* end all wars, of course. After World War II, Armistice Day was obsolete, really. And so, in 1954, Congress renamed it “Veterans Day”. President Eisenhower signed the bill that created Veterans Day, and though few seem to remember it, Eisenhower called upon Americans to rededicate themselves to the cause of peace. And yet, here we are, on the brink of another Veterans Day in a time of war. To date, 4359 U.S. military personnel have died in Iraq. To date, 916 U.S. military personnel have died in Afghanistan.¹ This says nothing of those who have died from other countries, including civilians. This says nothing about the many thousands who have been wounded.

For some reason, as Veterans Day approaches this year, I find myself remembering January 21, 1977. That was Jimmy Carter’s first day as President of the United States. I was just a kid. I remember lots of things about that day, but one of the things I remember, because it confused me at the time, was that was the day that Carter granted (in news-terms, quote) “unconditional pardons to hundreds of thousands of men who had evaded the draft during the Vietnam War by fleeing the country or by failing to register”² (unquote). As an eight year old, I heard this news, and understandably needed to have several of those terms unpacked by my mother, who was watching the news with me. I was in that moralistic phase of development where everything is black and white, right or wrong, and there are no shades of gray. I was trying very hard to figure out who the “bad guys” were in this story – was it the ones who evaded the draft? But my mother said, “They weren’t bad... they were trying to avoid doing something they didn’t believe in. They didn’t agree with the Vietnam War.” Trying desperately to find right and wrong, I then decided that it must be the ones who fought in the war who were bad. But my mother said, “No. They weren’t bad either. They thought they were doing what they had to do, or that they were serving their country.” I was terribly confused. I wanted so much for there to be a side to take. I remember that my mother had a sort of far-away look, and said she was glad Carter was pardoning them all. “All those men had to make choices that no one should have to make,” she said, “the ones who went to war, and the ones who found ways to avoid it. It was impossible to do the right thing – there was no right thing.”

Many things strike me about this conversation, more than thirty years later. First, of course, I’m amazed what a good answer my mother gave me, in retrospect. But second, it seems to me that when it comes to military service, we Americans often judge each other. Veterans often judge those who never served, particularly, to be specific, *men* who never served. If you didn’t serve in the military, you must be unpatriotic, or maybe even a coward. Maybe you’re a commie, or just a little suspect. And many who never served in the military judge those who did, maybe especially those who joined voluntarily. If you served, especially voluntarily, you’re a hawk, a violent type, a brute. Maybe you’re even judged to be a bit of a loser who didn’t have any better options. I know these are harsh words; they’re hard for me to say. But my experience has been

¹ Source: <http://www.icasualties.org>.

² <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0108/7974.html>.

that Americans are often uncharitable toward each other when it comes to judgments about military service.

As many of you know, I am a veteran. I was in the Navy. I was on active duty during the first Gulf War from 1990-1994. I was in Naval ROTC from 1986-1990 before that. Eight years, all told. I have never been in combat. I could fill up many sermons with stories about my time in the Navy, as could any veteran. But I'll restrain myself. Today, I'll stick with the abbreviated story of my initial training and indoctrination.

Just about every person who has ever served in any branch of the military, whether in time or war or peace, started with some sort of intensive military training. There's Basic Training for those who enlist in the Army... There's Boot Camp for enlisted sailors and Marines... In my case, I did Naval ROTC (Reserve Officers Training Corps), and our training was called, simply, "Orientation". That was the official name. The unofficial name for it was, more-tellingly, "Disorientation." It was meant to be a kind of abbreviated "Plebe Summer", which is what midshipmen at the U.S. Naval Academy go through.

In my case, I joined the military primarily for money to pay for my education, a very common reason to volunteer for service. I had a full tuition ROTC scholarship, which in many ways was a real blessing to me. I chose the navy as my branch because I figured I'd at least be stationed near the ocean and because I imagined I'd wear cute white cracker jack uniforms and never have to roll around in dirt or touch a gun. I imagined I'd be trained by old salts – interesting old characters who would tell sea stories ... Except, it turns out, officers don't wear cracker jacks; you rarely put on dress whites or blues in any case; you *do* roll around in dirt; and – worst of all – you are initially trained by Marines! No one told me that. But it's *Naval* ROTC, not Navy ROTC, as we were constantly reminded. There were Marines training alongside me, not just sailors. I wish I had been warned, because I might have had a more realistic vision of what my training would be like.

I was just 17-years-old when I went to my initial training, my Orientation. Like so many who join, I was a kid, not even old enough to vote, let alone drink. I was fresh out of high school, fresh out from under my parents' roof, like almost everyone else there, and my indoctrination occurred a few weeks before college would start. We were trained by upperclassmen in ROTC and the Gunnery Sergeant at our unit. Here's how the day would start out: at 4:30 a.m. (which in the military is known as "O Dark Thirty"), there would be a pounding on our door. "Wake up, Midshipmen!" they'd scream. We had 60 seconds – literally – to get downstairs into formation to commence PT (physical training). This meant that we had to sleep in our PT "gear" (shorts and t-shirt) – it was the same gear the whole time, and you never got to wash it. After a couple of days, I smelled so bad that I couldn't fall asleep. Sleep deprivation is highly effective in indoctrinating new military recruits. So by 4:31 a.m. we would be in formation and begin PT. Lots of pushups, situps, all sorts of stuff, and then a long run around a very hilly campus.

Then we had 3 minutes – again, literally – to get showered and dressed. There were about 50 midshipmen at my Orientation, and (to the best of my recollection) 8 of us were women. There were 3 shower stalls in the women's quarters. This meant the only way for all 8 of us to get showered in time was to put 3 of us into each stall at once. In case you were wondering, this was

not at all homoerotic; it was stressful. They were screaming at us through the door, for starters. And we had so little time that we had to brush our teeth as we showered and spit right there on each other's feet. There was really no time for relieving oneself, to put it delicately. In any case, 60 seconds after getting into the shower, we'd get out – our soap and shampoo not completely rinsed. We'd dry off and run to our rooms and put on our uniforms, which of course had to be just-so, inspection-ready. Then we'd run, run, run back downstairs and into formation again.

Then we'd march from our "barracks" up to the ROTC building. They'd make us sing "jodies" – those little "I don't know, but I've been told / navy wings are made of gold" type songs where the gunnery sergeant sings one line and we all repeat it back. This was the pre-"Tailhook" navy, and the jodies were not yet "politically correct" – they were terribly offensive and demoralizing to some of us women. I don't remember all of them, but I do remember this charming gem: "My girl's a vegetable / lives in a hospital / she's got no arms and legs / but she's got what it takes." As a very innocent 17-year-old female, I found this shocking, degrading, and even vaguely threatening.

One of the worst things about Orientation was that the Marines were yelling at us non-stop. Really, the screaming just never ended. Along with the sleep deprivation and the dearth of restroom breaks, the constant yelling was pretty crazy-making. You'd think lunch would be relatively pleasant – a reprieve, even – but it was not. They yelled at us the entire time and quizzed us on Navy and Marine Corps history, meting out punishment if we did not know the answers. I was always so hungry by lunch that I'd fill my tray up with food, but then I was so stressed out that I could only swallow a few bites. That would get me punished in and of itself, of course, for wasting food. More screaming; more degradation. And you never knew what was going to happen next. There was no agenda or itinerary, at least not one that *you* saw. You never had a moment to yourself from the moment they woke you up at 4:30 a.m. until the moment they ordered you to "mount your racks", or get into bed, to use civilian-speak. I'm still not sure what time it was when we went to sleep. Truly, I think "torture" is the only word for such an experience.

That's just a snapshot; it doesn't really do the experience justice. And yet, I know that many people had far worse experiences in Boot Camp or Basic Training than I did at Orientation. And that's just *training*. It was just harsh training justified by the theory that you needed to be toughened up for *possible* combat. I can only imagine the horrors of *actual* combat.

José Narosky wrote, "In war, there are no unwounded soldiers." I would take this a step further. I personally believe that everyone who is a veteran, everyone who has ever served in the military, even in a time of peace, carries some wounds from that experience. The harsh indoctrination alone leaves you forever changed. There are the difficult things you are sometimes asked, or rather ordered, to do. Usually you are very young as you try to parse out what is right and what is wrong, or what your options might be. Sometimes after the fact, there are secrets you must live with as not every military experience can be discussed due to classified material. There are sometimes hard memories to hold, all alone.

Why should Unitarian Universalists care about Veterans Day? Many justice issues fall under the umbrella of Veterans Day, including even the question of war and peace itself for starters. But

today I'd like to focus on the justice issue of the socio-economic make-up of our "all-volunteer" service, the situation we have today. The draft ended in 1973, and for the past 36 years, every one who ended up in the military joined of their own accord... sort of. It's not really that simple. Why do people volunteer for the military? Sometimes people really do join for patriotic reasons. But often people join for the educational benefits, as I did, or to learn a trade that they can use in the civilian world someday. Sometimes young people join the military to have a quick escape from a bad situation at home. This much is certain: wealthy, privileged people rarely volunteer for military service. Low-income people are much more apt to enlist, and low-income and even middle class people are more apt to join up to have their college education funded by the military. People of color are disproportionately represented in the military, particularly in the enlisted ranks. As authors Kathy Roth-Douquet and Frank Schaeffer put it, "When those who benefit most from living in a country contribute the least to its defense and those who benefit least are asked to pay the ultimate price, something happens to the soul of that country."³

This also means that there is also a huge cultural divide between those in the military and civilians, particularly the so-called "elite" class. Since UUs are disproportionately represented among this country's elite class and "intelligentsia", I think we need to pay close attention to this divide. One book that I believe UUs should consider reading is *Making the Corps*, by Thomas E. Ricks. It's the story of one platoon's journey through Marine Corps Boot Camp. One thing Ricks points out is that part of indoctrination in the era of the all-volunteer military includes a feeling of being apart from, and frankly superior to, civilians. As Ricks puts it, since the draft has ended, and "as American culture has grown more fragmented, individualistic, and consumerist, [those in the military] ... have become more withdrawn; they feel they simply can't afford to reflect the broader society. [They]... give off a strong sense of disdain for the very society they protect" which they see as "decadent".⁴ I can tell you that in ROTC, we were taught to call those non-veteran civilians (like most of you) as "granola heads".

It was so strange to go to a liberal university doing ROTC. There I was, surrounded by many wealthy students – the future "elites". One day a week we ROTCs had to wear our uniforms around campus. I despised this day. In part, I despised it because it was uncomfortable to spend the day in a uniform that would have to be inspection-ready at 1600 (that's 4:00 p.m. for you granola heads), but even more I despised it because of the ridicule I took on those days. A few of my civilian classmates would mock me and other midshipmen all day. If I sat next to someone in a lecture on the day I wore my uniform, he or she might actually get up and move to another seat. On two different occasions, someone actually spit on me. And all I could think was, "Easy for you to judge... My family can't pay for this out of pocket like yours can!" So there's a real "us versus them" mentality that you can get sucked into when you're in the military.

Please keep in mind that everything the military does is "your tax dollar at work". Our wars are financed with your taxes, and as Eisenhower himself said, "Every gun that is made, every warship that is launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and not clothed." Beyond that, military

³ Kathy Roth-Douquet and Frank Schaeffer. *AWOL: The Unexcused Absence of America's Upper Classes from Military Service – and How It Hurts Our Country*. Harper Paperbacks, 2007, p. 11.

⁴ Thomas E. Ricks. *Making the Corps*. Scribner Press, 1997, p. 22.

indoctrination – with all of its cruelty – is also your tax dollar at work. Just as UUs are rightly outraged to learn of the torture of prisoners of war at the hands of U.S. troops, they should also be outraged by what our own troops are subjected to every day, financed with your tax dollars. Meanwhile, our government balks at financing affordable healthcare for all, or better education for the children we say we love. As author and UU minister Robert Fulghum put it, “It will be a great day when our schools have all the money they need, and our air force has to have a bake-sale to buy a bomber.” Wouldn’t it be great if the Peace Corps had more funding than the Marine Corps? Unless you are an anti-war tax resister, then you, like me, are in a very real sense implicated in anything our military does. It’s our money. As some have revised the old anti-war slogan, “What if they gave a war and nobody *paid*”? Let us never forget what our taxes finance.

In closing, some of you might have noticed that I have a U.S. Navy decal on my car. Perhaps you wonder why it’s there. First of all, it’s there because I am trying to fight assumptions about who is, and is not, in the military... about who is, and is not, a veteran. Not all veterans are hawkish. Not all veterans are men. Not all veterans are straight. Lesbian doves like me are veterans too. My decal says, “Don’t assume”. But also, truth be told, I have always felt ambivalent about my time in the military. In my middle age, I find that I’m making peace with it, so to speak. It’s a part of who I am. And truth be told, I’m proud I survived the experience. This Veterans Day, we remember that we might hate the wars, but we must continue to love the troops and the veterans. This Veterans Day, we remember that it’s virtually impossible to make a sane, spiritually-grounded decision about military service when our entire system is somewhat insane and spiritually-ungrounded.

World War II veteran and historian Howard Zinn wrote, “The best thing we can do for Veterans Day is to pledge: ‘No more war veterans’.” I would add to that another pledge: “No more mistreated servicemen and -women” and “no more ignoring the physical and mental health needs of veterans”. Maybe I’d even add the pledge, “No more exploiting economically disadvantaged persons to create a military that does not include the children of the elite class”.

Finally, to those of you who faced difficult decisions about whether or not to serve in the military, or go to war, I am so sorry that our country put you in the position of making an impossible decision. I am sorry for the hardships you faced, whether because you served in the military, perhaps even in combat; or whether because you were penalized or ostracized for choosing not to be in the military. May you have continual healing for any wounds you suffered, physical or emotional; may you have the understanding of others for what you went through; and may you have a peaceful and hallowed Veterans Day. Blessed be, and amen.