

Legacy of Peace, Legacy of War:

The 100th Anniversary of the Armistice

Preached by Rev. Dr. Roger D. Jones
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento
Sunday, November 11, 2018

Hymns: #162 Gonna Lay Down My Sword & Shield;
#120 Turn Back; #159 This Is My Song.

Special Music: Hush'd be the Camps Today (text Walt Whitman, tune Tim Winebrenner; tenor/bass chorus, snare drum, French horn, piano)

Personal Reflection on Conscientious Objection by Worship Associate Jed Shapiro (printed at end)

Introduction of Hymn #120

Our Sunday service theme in this fall season is Heritage and Legacy. Today is the 100th Anniversary of the Armistice which ended a catastrophe that had lasted four years and three months, which we call the First World War.

As human beings, part of our heritage is the struggle for compassion and peace in the wake of war and in the midst of other violence. Even in the midst of the horrific absurdity of war, human beings can still direct our energies toward creativity instead of destructiveness.

One example of that is music, including songs and hymns. Claude Debussy died as Paris was being shelled in the last days of the war in 1918; we heard his “Arabesque” earlier. The offertory music is “At Dawn,” one of Three Improvisations for the Left Hand, written by Frank Bridge in 1918 for a pianist friend of the composer who had lost his right arm in the war a year earlier. Those of you familiar with the musical *Godspell* may know the song, “Turn Back, O Man, Forswear thy Foolish Ways.” Originally it was written as a hymn in response to the First World War while the war was raging. In 1916, when he was 30, Clifford Bax was asked to write a hymn text by the composer Gustav Holst. Bax wrote it as a Christian hymn. Before his death in 1962, Bax had become a Buddhist. So perhaps he'd be happy that we've got his work in our UU hymnal. With gender-neutral words, it appears in the gray hymnal at #120. It will be projected as well. Please listen with me as Ina plays it all the way through, and then remain seated as we sing “Turn Back, Turn Back.”

Sermon

Often people express the hope that sermons at UUSS will provide something to do in response to the topic or theme of the day—an action for you to take in the pursuit of healing in the world, or a spiritual practice for you to try out, or an idea for continued reflection on your own. “Give us something to do!” as one person says.

Well, when it comes to the First World War, the facts of it are so tragic, the pain of it so horrific, the waste of it so pointless that the first practice that occurs to me is to sit down and weep. We must weep—or at least observe silence. Given the massive scale of killing that took place then and continued through the whole 20th century, the next practice that occurs to me is to behold the improbable wonder that you and I are even alive at all. And then to give thanks for being alive. Having done those two things—cried and given thanks that I'm alive on this earth—it seems that the next thing to do is to bear witness. First to bear witness to what people went through, then bear witness to the ways that, in the face of that absurdity and cruelty, some people were able to assert our common humanity.

First, bearing witness to the war. The list of warring parties includes the Allies and the Central Powers. The Allies were France, Great Britain, Imperial Russia, Italy, and Japan. The colonized lands of some of those countries also provided soldiers. The United States stayed out of the war until a year and a half before its end, but it joined the Allied side in April of 1917. On the other side, the Central Powers included Imperial Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Turkish Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria.

The fuse that set off the war was the assassination of the Archduke and duchess of the Austro-Hungarian Empire by a young man with a gun. He'd been recruited by a conspiracy of militant Serbian government agents. The fuel for the chain reaction which became the war included a mix of alliances among various countries, military ambitions and imperialism, ethnic-based

nationalism, and popular uprisings against entrenched class structures headed by old royal families. The war would remake the maps of Europe and the Middle East—the map of the world, really.

The legacy of the war includes many firsts. For example, U.S. women served in Army and Navy Nursing Corps and as telephone operators near the battlefield.¹ Yet other firsts included the use of poison gas—and gas masks—and airplanes for spying and bombing. Not a “first” in this war but most memorable about it were the miles and miles of trenches dug by opposing armies. In trenches young men lived, fought and waited to fight, froze, often hungered and rarely slept, and shared space with millions of rats.² Also, this war was the first mechanized war, with heavy artillery taking down row upon row of advancing men.

Soldiers were treated as an abundant supply of material more than as human beings, whom their commanders deemed expendable and replaceable. Of course, back in their villages and their families, they were not replaceable. Moreover, so many service members came back with lost limbs or eyesight or tormented by shell shock, which we now call post-traumatic stress disorder.

The war lasted from August 1914 to November 1918. Its toll was 9 million deaths, with 21 million people wounded. As happens in most wars, some countries did surrender to others, but it seems that it was a war that *everybody* lost. Years of stalemate involved not merely the misery of trench life, but many battles that killed hundreds of thousands with no advance in territory. The last several months of the war included mass desertions by German troops and Austro-Hungarian troops. On November 3, Austria-Hungary surrendered to Italy.

The German commander resigned his post and fled the country and Germany surrendered to France. The terms of the surrender took effect on November 11. However, surrendering German leaders had requested peace negotiations five weeks earlier. Yet Marshall Ferdinand Foch, the French commander in charge of the Allied forces, ignored them. He made this order: “It is urgent to hasten and intensify our efforts.” In those five weeks, his

lust for vengeance cost a half million more young men.

It gets worse. Peace negotiations would begin on the 8th of November. Germany’s delegates “pleaded for the fighting to be suspended at once.” Marshall Foch refused. A cease-fire for those three or four days could have spared nearly 7,000 lives. It could have allowed 15,000 maimed and injured men, instead “to have gone home whole,” according to historian Joseph Persico. “All that sacrifice [he writes], was made over scraps of land that the Germans, under the armistice, [would be] compelled to surrender within” anyway.

It gets worse. On November 11, delegates from Germany and France met to finish negotiations for surrender in a teak-lined railway car at Compiègne, a town in the north of France. They signed the Armistice at 5:00 in the morning, but it would not take effect until 11:00 AM. Marshall Foch insisted that Allied forces continue attacking for six more hours.

Perhaps it shouldn’t be surprising after four years of accelerating agony and resentment that commanders would have wanted to shed every drop of blood they could. Hence, ten minutes before 11 o’clock, “British cavalry raced into a Belgian town [chasing down] German defenders as if they were on a fox hunt.” In another location, American soldier Harry S Truman, who “was the only future [U.S.] President to see action in this war, kept shooting” as well. He wrote later that up until the hour of 11 o’clock, he had fired 164 rounds at the enemy. “I’m for peace [he wrote], but that gang should be given a bayonet peace for what they’ve done to France.”

In the segregated U.S. military, a regiment of African American soldiers was commanded by a white man from Alabama, Lieutenant General Robert Bullard. He ordered his black regiment to “make three separate assaults on German positions” that morning, at a loss of 17 men, with injuries to another 300 of them. All these things happened 100 years ago today. In the words of Adam Hochschild, the First World War “ended as senselessly as it had begun.”³

As a boy I heard about Armistice Day from a great aunt, who had been 16 when the war ended.

She told me of the ceremonial nature of the formal end of the fighting, at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of the year. As she described it, the moment seemed peaceful, honorable. Yet, in the words of writer Kevin Baker, it was “a romantic gesture to cap a war that/ long before should have buried any possible remaining romance of war.”⁴

After November 11, returning German soldiers marched home through their towns and villages. Their people greeted them with parades and flowers. A new Chancellor greeted them as “unconquered from the fields of battle.”⁵ How could this be? The German government had waged a propaganda campaign [as had governments on the Allied side]. It had censored the press, thereby keeping the public in the dark about mass army desertions and the incompetence of the German command. Later the people were shocked to learn of the harsh terms of surrender to France. These terms included Germany taking all the blame for the war, and having to pay large financial penalties and reparations, and giving up the Rhineland, where German industry was based.

Two years later, the Allies quietly reduced the financial punishment, but most Germans weren't aware of that.⁶ Right wing politicians in Germany began exploiting the humiliation right away. This led to Adolph Hitler's rise to power. Hitler did not blame the old ruling class of Germany for getting into the war, or blame the culture of militarism and nationalism that had driven military leaders toward the war, or blame its military leaders for the loss or. Instead he stirred up hatred of German socialists, pacifists and Jewish people.

All of that is part of the dehumanizing legacy of the First World War. Yet we must bear witness also to the legacy of so many people whose actions kept faith with our common humanity. In that war, as in all wars, there were many acts of mercy and courage, protests for peace, and bold, creative responses to protect human rights. For example, after the war started in Europe in 1914, a diverse coalition organized in the United States to keep this country out of it. The coalition included Republican and Democratic politicians, upper-class people, radical socialists and social reformers, African American leaders and women's rights

activists, plus “newly arrived Irish and German immigrants.”⁷ President Woodrow Wilson promoted neutrality and non-intervention, even running his reelection campaign in 1916 with the slogan, “He kept us out of the war.” Yet by 1917, the peace movement was overwhelmed by forces larger than it was. The coalition splintered apart.

As patriotic fervor and war fever dominated this country, some visionaries formed organizations to push back against militarism and advocate for constitutionally guaranteed liberties. Such organizations are still in operation today. For example, the Fellowship of Reconciliation in the United States created a program to help men who wished to declare themselves as Conscientious Objectors, those who would refuse to be part of military combat. The Fellowship served a crucial role, for in 1917 the Selective Service Act established the military draft for the first time in this country.

Congress also passed the Alien and Sedition Acts, outlawing public speech opposing U.S. involvement in the war, among other words or actions deemed unpatriotic. At first, the Supreme Court even upheld those restrictions. Anti-war socialists like Emma Goldman and Eugene V. Debs were put behind bars.

Incredible times for this country, yet courageous resistance to these laws led to the founding of the American Civil Liberties Union. Still strong today, the ACLU defends the freedoms listed in the Bill of Rights. Resistance to U.S. involvement in the war left a legacy of activism for basic human values, like freedom and peace.

In April 1917, having changed his position and now leading U.S. involvement in the war, President Wilson said victory would “make the world safe for democracy.” Yet a 1917 photograph I saw in a museum is a reminder that this country was not yet a full democracy: a woman in a long dress is marching for the right to vote. She holds a poster that mocks Wilson for his “sympathy with the poor Germans who are not self-governed.” She notes: “Twenty million American women are not self-governed!”⁸ Women achieved the right to vote in the U.S. finally in 1920. In addition to the service of thousands of women during the war, back

at home in the U.S., many women worked in munitions factories. Historian Leslie Hume says that women's war service made it seem

both ungrateful and illogical to deny them a place in the polling booth. But the vote was much more than simply a reward for war work; the point was that women's participation in the war helped to dispel the fears that surrounded women's entry into the public arena.⁹

While protestors at home did what they could to stop the war, many soldiers undermined the culture of war by affirming the common humanity of their enemies. The most famous example of this was the Christmas Day Truce of 1914, between German soldiers and English and French ones. In a few sectors of the vast battlefield, men sang a Christmas carol to the enemy. Some of them rose from their trenches to exchange greetings, share a cigarette, even try on one another's helmets. At one sector, they played football.

Military commanders, however, "detested [this practice] ... and took measures to stamp it out." They made orders against it, they spied on infantrymen, and they tallied up their own casualties to make sure there wasn't a decline over the holidays. The Christmas Truce of 1914 took place only five months after the War had begun. By Christmas of 1915, there were fewer occasions of it. By 1916, the commanders got their way, as numerous massacres and the agonizing use of poison gas had embittered everyone.

Yet that poignant show of courage and mercy is worth remembering. Furthermore, it was not reserved only for Christmas. It was a common practice in the trenches. It was an informal agreement between enemies, and they called their practice "Live and let live." This phrase was coined the trenches of World War I: "Live and let live." Then it was published by a journalist, a war correspondent. What this looked like is that troops in trenches facing off against enemy trenches would sometimes refrain from firing on their foes during mealtimes. Sometimes men could work out—exercise!—above trench in daylight... and be left alone. As one museum display describes it, "[A] sense of mutual agreement would allow both sides

to get through certain periods of the day without disturbance." Soldiers on night patrol near the dangerous middle ground of no-man's-land "would spot each other ... and quietly move away [from each other] to avoid an encounter."¹⁰ To the men in the trenches, "live and let live" meant freedom from constant fear and from the burden of constant hostility. It meant respect for common humanity, and the courage to trust in others to be able to recognize that humanity.

Today, the dictionary definition of "live and let live" means practicing tolerance of the beliefs, behaviors and cultures of other people even if you don't agree with them. It implies freedom or non-intrusion. It's an appealing philosophy, "live and let live." Yet it's not enough. We must also live and *help* live. In world where cruel forces are weighed against vulnerable and hurting people, we must live and help live. As migrants, refugees and asylum seekers flee violence and starvation, they need understanding, support, and a strong voice defending their safety and fair treatment. As adults and children experience abuse and assault in workplaces, families, schools and churches as well as in war zones, they need our support and our voice. As unhoused people sleep outside and walk the cold streets of this town and every town of this nation, there is need of our support and our voice.

There are many examples of how you and I might be called to live and help live, and organizations or campaigns to support in responding to that call. Fortunately, our congregation is a partner with several of those organizations.

We must remember how important our efforts, our voice, our generosity and our prayers can be. Our participation sustains the cause of human dignity, taking it as our inheritance and handing it forward as our legacy. By doing so, we regard freedom and peace as the precious gifts they are.

Let us weep at the memory and the reality of war, or at least observe silence. Let us give thanks for being alive. Let us then help one another to be as brave, generous and kind as we can be on every day that we are given to live. May we strive to live and help live. So may it be. Amen.

Personal Reflection on Conscientious Objection
by Worship Associate Jed Shapiro

When my Dad was in high school, about to graduate, he and his life-long friend Dick made a plan – they would enlist in the Navy and become naval aviators.

It didn't take the Navy long to figure out that Dick needed thick corrective lenses, and that my Dad was too short to reach the controls, so neither became a pilot. Instead, the Navy determined that the best way for my Dad to serve our country was to become an Electrical Engineer – so they sent him to college.

When I was in high school, my Dad worked for Motorola Government Electronics Division in the fuse lab. That's all I knew – since the work was classified – until one night around the dinner table.

He said his team was developing high tech fuses for bombs. This was during the Vietnam era and the war was winding down. He said the military was fast tracking development so new technologies could be tested in combat conditions before the war ended.

Dad said North Vietnamese soldiers used the jungle to cover troop movements but could be seen from the air while crossing the rice paddies that littered the country. If they heard an airplane they would crouch, rolling into the smallest possible ball, and wait to see if they lived. Some were injured or killed by American bombs but the rest got up and ran for tree cover.

The military had developed a bomb with a nosecone that would open before it reached the ground releasing dozens of "bomblets," that would spread out to devastate all life on many acres at a time. The fuse team was perfecting the electronics to calculate bomb speed and time-to-target to make the bomblet system work.

Where previously many North Vietnamese survived, when these new bombs were dropped, nobody got up and ran for cover – they had all been killed. I saw the raw emotion on Dad's face as he softly closed saying, "I don't want to be part of this."

We sat in silence. No wonder he never talked about his job. I finally blurted out, "why don't you just quit." He half stood with momentary anger,

then in frustration and guilt said, "I have responsibly to my family – to you and your sister, to your mother, to put food on the table, this roof over your head, pay for your education." Then he carefully tucked this inner conflict back where he kept it hidden.

Later I was disturbed by my mental picture of dead Vietnamese in rice paddies. But in that moment at the dinner table I was just stunned. Stunned that Dad – typical engineer all facts and figures – had feelings, deep feelings, so profound he almost never let them out.

That Summer I discovered something written by R. Buckminster Fuller – American architect, author, designer, inventor and futurist... and anti-war activist. Here's what Fuller said:

"I can prove to young people that the war which they deplore is the same as other wars which are based on the assumption that there's not enough to go around so that somebody is going to have to die.

But that's no longer true. If you can go to the moon and under the arctic ice you can make the world work."

In the Fall of 1971 I completed compulsory registration for the military service draft. I had no deep religious convictions or study of philosophy to back me up. But, when I saw the box on the form I checked it, and registered as a "conscientious objector."

At age 17, while I was unsure of many things – I knew with certainty that I could not take a life. I respect and appreciate all who have served in combat. But if called, I would have to serve another way.

My Dad asked only one question, "Are you sure this is what you want to do?" I said, "yes I'm sure." His values had become mine.

¹ Greg Myre, "100 Years on, the Hello Girls are Recognized for World War I Heroics," *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, broadcast November 9, 2018. Accessed November 9, 2018. <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/09/659349910/100-years-on-the-hello-girls-are-recognized-for-world-war-i-heroics>

² Museum materials from the National WWI Museum and Memorial, Kansas City, Missouri, personal visit June 21, 2018. theworldwar.org

³ Adam Hochschild, "A Hundred Years after the Armistice," *The New Yorker*, November 5, 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/11/05/a-hundred-years-after-the-armistice>

⁴ Kevin Baker, "The Ghosts of Versailles," *Harper's Magazine*, November 2018, 5.

⁵ Hochschild, *op. cit.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Lauren Jannette, "The Peace Coalition: On Michael Kazin's *War against War: The American Fight for Peace*," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, August 4, 2017. Accessed November 9, 2018. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-peace-coalition-on-michael-kazins-war-against-war-the-american-fight-for-peace-1914-1918/>

⁸ Museum materials, *op. cit.*

⁹ Leslie Hume, quoted in "Women's Suffrage," article on Wikipedia, accessed November 10, 2018. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women's_suffrage

¹⁰ Museum materials, *op. cit.*