

Unitarian Universalist Chaplains

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I invited church members who'd served in the military to share their thoughts, this Sunday. The response was muted. Since just one person volunteered, I decided to pass the mic rather than put them on the spot by asking them to share from the pulpit.

That's OK – we don't have to do the same thing every year, for Veterans Day. It gives me more time to explore a question that matters, more and more: what is the relationship between our faith tradition and military service? This concerns not only our ideas about war, but the relationships between a liberal religious movement, a political institution, and the flesh-and-blood human beings that constitute both.

There are Unitarian Universalists now serving in the military. There are men and women among us who serve, or have served, and many more folks who know and care about them. There are opportunities to form positive connections between our faith and the military, at both a personal and institutional level.

First, at a personal level: Consider soldiers and their families. How shall we respond when a young person among us decides to join a branch of the military? Shall we commiserate with the family, or perhaps shun them? Shall we send their child off with our prayers, knowing that he or she is pursuing a calling, or fulfilling a sense of duty?

In today's voluntary system, people join for many reasons. They go for the experience, or the education. They go with the desire to give something back to the country that gave them birth. They go to protect the freedoms we all depend on as citizens.

How shall we respond when the parents, or the spouse, or the children, of a soldier, come to us? Do we expect them to hold certain political views? Do we expect them to hide their military connection, or do we welcome and affirm it?

And, finally, what about the soldiers who come home? In years past, many of our churches shunned the Vietnam veteran. Some of those who joined our congregations felt compelled to hide their past, in order to fit in. Nowadays, we tend to be more

accepting. But we may still be poorly informed, operating on stereotypes. Shall we steer clear of the returning soldier as damaged goods, as a potential loose cannon? Or shall we educate ourselves, and hear the stories of people who have lived through situations we cannot imagine, in order to protect us. Not all war wounds are physical. Church is meant to be a place to be a place of healing. Healing begins with listening, acceptance, and face-to-face relationships.

Next, consider our relationship to the military at the institutional level. Here we have a dual role to play: a prophetic role, and a pastoral role.

All along, Unitarian Universalists have emphasized the prophetic role. We have often spoken out against war and the flaws in our social systems that lead to war. But surprisingly, in our ethical positions on war, the UUA and its forerunners have gone from one extreme to another: in one generation, demanding participation; in another generation, vilifying it.

Our numbers today include true pacifists, who categorically reject the use of military force, and just-war theorists, who teach that military force is sometimes necessary. If any of us want war, it's only as a last resort. What we have in common is a desire for peace. The desire to keep the peace, to restore the peace, and especially to create the conditions for peace that make future wars unnecessary.

This is our prophetic role, as a liberal religious movement: not just to criticize, but to call people and institutions back to their best selves, back to the promises they have made, back to their highest purpose.

But our role is not only prophetic, it's pastoral as well. We are called, individually and collectively, to see the brokenness in our world, move towards this brokenness and heal it. As an institution, we've made progress in this. Over the past few years (after a long hiatus) we have begun to support and encourage the work of military chaplains in our faith. I'd like to use the rest of this sermon to describe the nature and importance of this work.

Since I went to seminary, I've been to General Assembly every year to reconnect with my faith and learn what's going on. Back in 2008, my first General Assembly, our then-President Bill Sinkford was leading worship in the plenary hall. At one point he

drew attention to a group of uniformed men and women, sitting in the front row, a privileged place, ahead of all the usual dignitaries, movers and shakers. Sinkford pointed them out and said, “These are our military chaplains”.

He invited them to stand up, and they received a standing ovation, from a crowd of 4,000 UUs. I was proud for these chaplains, and I was proud of us, too. Today there are seventeen chaplains currently serving in three branches of military service, and eight more who are preparing to serve as military chaplains.

Although I’ve never served in the military, I have served as a chaplain, so I can identify with these chaplains, even if they’re going places I will never see. Although chaplains serve in many different environments, their work is the similar in many ways, whether it’s done in a hospital, a prison, a fire department, a ship, or a war zone.

You don’t have a fixed congregation: you deal with people from many faiths, including some very traditional ones. Some have no faith; others are yearning to find faith; others on the verge of losing it. Some are facing situations that shake the foundations of all they’ve taken for granted, all they once accepted as true.

You deal with people in extreme circumstances. They feel alone. They hunger for human contact. They don’t need to be told what to feel, or what to believe; above all, they need you to listen. You’re job isn’t to convert or evangelize. You’re there to help people find the wellsprings of their own faith; to test and articulate what they truly believe; to help them to pray in the language of their own heart.

One thing all chaplains have in common is that they operate within the constraints of an institution – a hospital, a prison, a chain of command. They need to remember they’re in it but not of it. On rare occasions they may need to raise an ethical voice or stand with people who have been treated unjustly by the system in which they serve.

Perhaps you can see that a Unitarian Universalist can offer special strengths as a military chaplain. He or she will have a deeper understanding than most, about the issues facing LGBT people, as the military culture continues to find its way from an attitude of hostility through the hypocrisy of “don’t ask, don’t tell” to an attitude more sustainable and inclusive.

The UU chaplain doesn't see diversity as a problem. We UUs live and breathe religious diversity. We can help the Christian and the Muslim, the atheist and the Jew to understand and respect one another. We can support those whose beliefs fall outside the mainstream. First Lieutenant Chris Antal described an encounter with a soldier who identified himself as a Pagan. The soldier told Antal, "You are the first chaplain who would ever pray with me". (*UU World*, "Once a rarity, UU military chaplains increasing", February 2013)

I'd like to turn our focus now to one chaplain in particular, Captain George Tyger, whose meditation I read earlier. Tyger entered the military chaplaincy after serving fourteen years as a parish minister. He came to Afghanistan in June of 2011 at the "height of the fighting season" as he described it. As a squadron chaplain, Tyger took responsibility for the spiritual care of 1,500 soldiers. Much of his time was spent visiting Police Substations (or PSS) where US soldiers teamed up with Afghan uniformed police to protect the people in and around Kandahar City.

Since Tyger could only meet with so many soldiers face to face, he developed the habit of writing theological reflections which he titled the "Chaplain's Weekly Briefs" and circulated by email. Often, arriving at some remote outpost, he'd see these reflections posted in the chow hall, or inside the door of a latrine – any place they could be conveniently read.

Soldiers would thank him for these thoughts, which he first composed on scraps of paper, riding in the back of an armored truck.

Some of these reflections became the nucleus of Tyger's book, titled *War Zone Faith* (Skinner House, 2013). In it, he describes the atmosphere of uncertainty surrounding the daily routine, and the need to find meaning:

There have been several IEDs [Improvised Explosive Devices] found across the city in the past seventy-two hours. With vigilance and luck, all were found before they detonated. Still we are prepared, every time we go out, to get blown up ... As an army chaplain, my job is to help young men and women make sense out of all of this. ... As a Unitarian Universalist, I understand there are no easy answers. Instead, I seek to engage the young men and women I meet in the struggle for human meaning. Many chaplains do not share this approach to ministry ... They

imagine a deity that has charted each of our courses in life from our first breath to our last. If this is true, has God placed some of us on a collision course with an IED? ... Easy answers lead to difficult questions. So why not just start with the questions? (49-51)

Tyger asks himself: how do we tap into the sources of our courage? Much of the work of a soldier is hot, dirty and uncomfortable, not heroic or glorious. It takes courage just to get up every day, and keep going, in the midst of unpredictable violence. It takes courage to care: to risk friendship and self-disclosure with another person who could be killed tomorrow. But when we lose our ability to connect with other human beings, we lose a significant part of our humanity.

Tyger would suggest that we tap into our courage by the spiritual practice of seeing the pockets of grace and beauty that exist even in the places of chaos and destruction. He would have us look for the good in the present moment, the good that lives within ourselves and in other people.

Each one of us needs to be accepted for who we are. This is the heart of pastoral care. Tyger describes it using a story from the gospel of John: Jesus goes to a well, where he meets a Samaritan woman, an outcast, the member of an outcast minority. Jesus shares a drink of water with this woman. Then he offers her what he calls 'living water', saying "those who drink from [it] will never thirst" (John 4:14).

This is not magical thinking. The living water is a gift we give, whenever we reach out to care for one other. Tyger asks,

How will we offer living water to each other? Who among us is in need of a cool drink of acceptance? When your buddy gets hot, tired, worn out, and beat down, will you be the one to offer her or him a drink: a word of encouragement, an hand up, a shoulder to lean on? There are too many things that make us feel like unacceptable outcasts in a combat zone ... In this place, we must be the bearers of living water for each other." (35)

This is the calling of a military chaplain: not only to offer the living water, but to teach his fellow soldiers to do it for each other. As a congregation, we are called to do the same. Meeting in this sanctuary, this safe haven, we share the living water of

acceptance amongst ourselves. Shall we offer it also to those who serve, the veterans among us, the soldiers and their families who come to us?

I leave you with this poem, again by George Tyger: (xiii – xv)

I am an Afghanistan War veteran
I don't want your pity
I served two tours with honor
I've been shot at
Blown up
I put friends into body bags
Seen men die
Sent them home for the last time ...

When you look at me
Don't see a caricature
When you hear my story don't sigh and look away
When you think of me don't wish I had never gone to war

War has not scarred me for life
It has made me more
I am a better man than I was before
I know the value of life more intimately
I know compassion given
And received
I know courage seen
And lived
I know love
For it is love that has kept me alive
Not bombs
Not bullets
Not body armor
These only kept me from dying
Love keeps me living.

So may it be.