Divine Discontent

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Unitarian Universalist Meeting House
May 24, 2009 – Memorial Day

Once upon a time in a church far away, the pastor discovered little six-year old Johnny standing in the back of the church gazing at the memorial plaque to the church's war dead. The pastor came over and Johnny asked him what the plaque was. The pastor said, "Johnnie, these were the people from the church who have died in the service." Johnny stood very still for a long moment and then asked in a trembling voice, "the 9:00 service or the 11:00 service?".

How do we deal with Memorial Day? It has become the gateway to summer, and here on the Cape the opening of this area's second life, a time, apparently, when we need to start scheduling our lives around the traffic jams. But it is not just about barbecue and picnics; May 30, called Decoration Day, was set aside by military order in 1868 to honor the Union dead of the Civil War by decorating their graves. David Blight of Yale recently discovered that it started even earlier than that: a day honoring the Union dead had already been celebrated in my adopted hometown of Charleston South Carolina in 1865, just after the end of hostilities, by the newly-freed slaves[1].

There is something especially poignant to me about the freed slaves of Charleston, who must have seen themselves as the beneficiaries of the military action just concluded, honoring those who died in the conflict. For those survivors, it was clear that the dead had died for something, that in the words of Lincoln at Gettysburg, they had not died in vain.

Not died in vain. It is conventional for military funeral orators from Pericles to Lincoln and up to the present to say that it is necessary that the soldiers not have died in vain. When we say we don't want the soldier to have died in vain, we are saying that the aims of the war were worth the sacrifice of this young person's life. But what do we make of the soldier's sacrifice if we have a deeply held conviction that all war is wrong, or that the particular war in which the soldier perished is wrong?

Sitting amid the flowers in Flanders beside the grave of a young man who died in 1916, songwriter Eric Bogle wrote these words which I sang a few minutes ago,
"Did you really believe, when you answered the call, did you really believe that this war would end war?

[1]http://www.postandcourier.com/news/2009/may/24/the_first_memorial_day83450/

"Well, the sorrow, the suffering, the glory, the pain/ The killing and dying was all done in vain,/For Willie McBride, it all happened again,/
And again, and again, and again, and again."

Now it is unlikely that many of the men who fought in the First World War actually believed Woodrow Wilson's fatuous and idealistic premise that this was a war to end wars. We know in hindsight that the result of that promise was the League of Nations, which did not prevent a second World War from breaking out, and that was followed by a United Nations which has perhaps succeeded in averting a third world war, but certainly has not succeeded in ending war. It has happened again and again and again and again.

I try in my preaching to lift up our heritage of Universalism. A case can be made that Universalism's sunny confidence, its belief in a God too loving to damn any creatures to hell, was one of the casualties of the horrible wars and the genocides of the Twentieth Century, the claim that "God Died at Auschwitz." This religion built on confidence in God's goodness flourished in the Nineteenth Century, when it was a breath of fresh air against the gloomy Calvinism of the day, but foundered in the Twentieth. The Universalist church here in Chatham had sold its building by the early 1960s.

The Twentieth Century wars were horrible enough to test anyone's faith. The killing technology got much more efficient, civilians were often targeted as part of military strategy, the interdependent economies meant that destruction in one sector wrought suffering and shortages in all sectors, and certain governments set out on deliberate campaigns to wipe out whole peoples.

None of us sitting here today are untouched by the wars of the last century, and some of us lost people very close to us. Those of you who served lost your mates, others lost uncles and brothers and cousins. Some of you had spouses with post-traumatic stress syndrome. I came up in a small suburban Episcopal Church in Columbia South Carolina; some of the peers who had the most influence on my development were in my church youth group.

Bob Hollingsworth was a handsome tall drink of water with a brush cut hairstyle; he always had thoughtful answers in the serious moral discussions we engaged in on Sunday evenings, and then he would go out with us afterwards for a burger and unbend a little. When we all went off to college, Bob went off to war in Vietnam, and in my sophomore year I learned that he had been killed. A few months later, I learned that Johnny Raines, another member of the youth group, had been killed.

Ulysses Grant said "War is hell;" Universalists don't believe in hell in the sense of an afterlife to which one is condemned for all eternity, but we can accept that war is a fair substitute for hell. There certainly is enough suffering involved, and that suffering leads us to question

whether there is any kind of beneficent force in charge in the world.

But you can reach the same question, the question of whether the world is kind, without ever leaving your garden. Take the poem that I read earlier.

First the biological facts, which most of you gardeners probably know better than I: A hornworm is a caterpillar which has a horn at one end. There are several varieties, one of which is the tomato hornworm. Like other caterpillars, the hornworm is the larva stage of an organism, which will then go on to become a pupa and then emerge as a moth. The tomato hornworm has V-shaped stripes, and becomes the five-spotted hawk moth, with a wingspan of four to five inches. However, some hornworms never make it to the moth stage, because there are several parasitic insects which lay their eggs on the back of the caterpillar. The parasites then eat the flesh of the caterpillar and go on to reproduce and look for other caterpillars on which to lay their eggs. Gardeners are advised that if they see these tiny egg sacs on the back of the hornworm, don't worry about insecticides to control the caterpillars – the wasps or flies will take care of that.

So here is the hornworm in Stanley Kunitz' beloved garden in Provincteown, and through the magic of poetic imagination, the hornworm speaks with a human voice and has human emotions.

Since that first morning when I crawled
into the world, a naked grubby thing,
and found the world unkind,
my dearest faith has been that this
is but a trial: I shall be changed.

Here is the basic premise: the world is unkind. And yet in face of it, here is a very human aspiration: this life is not very good, but soon it will be better. This life is but a trial.

One way we humans have of escaping a bad present circumstances is by imagining an alternative and better future, and in Kunitz' conceit, the hornworm does the same thing:

In my imaginings I have already spent
my brooding winter underground,
unfolded silky powdered wings, and climbed
into the air, free as a puff of cloud
to sail over the steaming fields,
alighting anywhere I pleased,
thrusting into deep tubular flowers.

The hornworm, in other words, is already imagining, yearning for his life as a moth.

This is so human. But the hornworm's imagining comes up against the grim reality that he has been chosen by a parasite as the parasite's breeding-ground and nursery.

It is not so: there may be nectar
in those cups, but not for me.
All day, all night, I carry on my back
embedded in my flesh, two rows
of little white cocoons,
so neatly stacked
they look like eggs in a crate.
And I am eaten half away.

The hornworm knows that this means he will never make it to the moth stage. The best he can hope for is some temporary respite:

If I can gather strength enough
I'll try to burrow under a stone
and spin myself a purse
in which to sleep away the cold;
though when the sun kisses the earth
again, I know I won't be there.
Instead, out of my chrysalis
will break, like robbers from a tomb,
a swarm of parasitic flies,
leaving my wasted husk behind.

So mother nature, even in our backyard gardens, offers us horrors to compare to warfare; With all the suffering engendered by wars, at least most of us don't end up getting eaten up by parasites riding on our backs. The poet's imaginations has brought vividly home to us how wholly other, how alien, are the life forms in the most domestic of environments, our vegetable gardens.

What are we to make of a world in which such horrors as flesh-eating insects are a routine part of life. Where is the God we have been taught to believe in, a God of mercy and justice? Well, in a fabulous piece of irony, the poet has the hornworm conclude by addressing the human gardener as kind of a stand-in for God. The hornworm realizes that the gardener has the power of life and death over him, though the meaning of that choice has been reversed: death by the gardener's shears would be a mercy compared to the slow death that the parasites have in store for him.

Sir, you with the red snippers
in your hand, hovering over me,
casting your shadow, I greet you,
whether you come as an angel of death
or of mercy. But tell me,
before you choose to slice me in two:
Who can understand the ways
of the Great Worm in the Sky?

The great worm in the sky! That's how a caterpillar would conceive of God, as humans conceive of a great human in the sky, and each conception is a projection of a pathetic desire to make meaning out of facts of life which have no inherent meaning.

Who can understand the ways of the great worm in the sky? Who can understand a being who is supposedly all love who can allow a world in which human beings kill each other and inflict suffering with ever greater efficiency and in which flesh-eating wasps are deposited into the bodies of caterpillars?

For some, these horrors from the human and the natural world point towards atheism. If God is in charge, as Jesus said, down to the number of sparrows and the hairs on your head, why is there this cruelty and suffering on the micro or macro level? You can make a perfectly respectable argument that the horrible aspects of the world, natural and human, prove that there is no God.

But only if you have a certain conception of God. If God is omnipotent, all powerful, and beneficent, all-good, we have a human expectation that God would use this power to create good and eliminate suffering and cruelty. But who can understand the ways of the great worm in the sky? The poet's image reminds us that all images, names, attributes of God are the ways that we can perceive or attempt to understand God. Even those who give great weight to God's self-revelations in the Bible have to admit that the biblical images and stories are God as humans can perceive and conceive God, not God as God is in God's self.

In particular, the human idea of God as intelligent designer, analogous to the design engineer who oversees every aspect of the manufacture of your automobile, is shown to be shallow by these examples. Atheism is easy if what you are rejecting is a Disneyfied, feel-good God. But that is neither the God of the Christian or Jewish traditions or the God of Universalism.

It seems to me that the Hindu tradition may have a more sophisticated conception of God than Judaism, Christianity and Islam, for in Hindu thought God is creator, sustainer and

destroyer. And as I understand it, in Hindu thought, coming into being and passing out of being are two sides of the same coin. One of Emerson's best-known poems captures this – it is called Brahma

If the red slayer think he slays,
Or if the slain think he is slain,
They know not well the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again.

Far or forgot to me is near;
Shadow and sunlight are the same;
The vanished gods to me appear;
And one to me are shame and fame.

They reckon ill who leave me out;
When me they fly, I am the wings;
I am the doubter and the doubt,
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.

One Emerson scholar I heard said that this poem referred to Emerson's son, who had died of scarlet fever several years before it was written.

As our first hymn put it, "a fierce unrest seethes at the core of all existing things.[2]" God creates and God destroys and creation and destruction are inextricably linked. To me this is a conception of God which is more compatible with the cruelties and suffering that we find in the real world.

Let us return to the hornworm. From the imaginative point of view that the poet projects, there is tragedy and suffering in the caterpillar's death before he can become the moth. But from the point of view of the gardener trying to grow tomatoes, the parasitic flies in the caterpillar's body are a neat organic insecticide, eliminating the necessity to resort to chemicals which might mess up the tomatoes. The gardener is going to do what she has to to get rid of the hornworms, and if it weren't the flies, it might be chemicals, so what grounds does the little beast have to complain?

Now let's return to our Memorial Day remembrances. Young soldiers die; that is a tragic thing. But they may die in order that the nation may repel an attack or so that liberty may live.

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[2]Hymn 304, *Singing the Living Tradition*, words by Don Marquis

Out of the death and ashes might spring something new that is more vibrant or better adapted than the old.

Because I opposed the Vietnam War, I have a hard time thinking that the death of my friend Bob Hollingsworth was for a higher purpose, but I am nevertheless grateful for his service and sacrifice.

The young dead soldiers say: we leave you our deaths: Give them their meaning.

For the freed slaves of Charleston in 1865, the meaning of the Union soldier's sacrifice was evident: the union was preserved, and slavery was eliminated. 142 years later, we can find that same gratitude toward the fallen veterans, whether or not we agree with the particular wars that were fought.

Divine discontent. When we sit in the graveyard talking to Willie McBride on Memorial Day, the God we perceive is one who is not satisfied with the world the way it is, but who challenges us to make it better. Who calls on us to eliminate war, turn our swords into plowshares. When William Sloane Coffin's son committed suicide by driving his car into a river, some people told him that it was the will of God. Coffin said if that was the case, he didn't want anything to do with that God; in his conception, God was the first one to weep as the waters closed over that car.

God is as discontented at our war games as the most stricken family among us. He/she/it is calling on us to lay down our sword and shield down by the riverside, to study war no more. So let us mourn our dead, let the pipes play the Flowers of the Forest as they are lowered into the grave, and let us honor their memories by working to bring a world to birth in which war will be as archaic as alchemy. Amen.

Readings for Memorial Day

Opening words:
"Memorial Day" by Steve Kowit from *The First Noble Truth*.
Because our sons adore their plastic missile launchers,
electronic space bazookas, neutron death-ray guns,
a decade down the pike it won't prove difficult
to trick them out in combat boots
&camouflage fatigues,
rouse them with a frenzy of parades, the heady
rhetoric of country, camaraderie & God,

the drum & bugle & the sudden
thunder of the cannon as they march
into Hell singing.
Which is the order of things.
Obedient to a fault, the people will do as they are told.
However dispirited by grief at the graves
of their fallen, the mother returns at last to her loom,
the father to his lathe,
& the inconsolable widow home to raise sons
ardent for the next imperial bloodbath;
Ilium. Thermopylae. Verdun. Pork Chop Hill.

“Hornworm: Autumn Lamentation” by Stanley Kunitz

Since that first morning when I crawledinto the world, a naked grubby thing,
and found the world unkind,
my dearest faith has been that this
is but a trial: I shall be changed.
In my imaginings I have already spent
my brooding winter underground,
unfolded silky powdered wings, and climbed
into the air, free as a puff of cloud
to sail over the steaming fields,
alighting anywhere I pleased,
thrusting into deep tubular flowers.

It is not so: there may be nectar
in those cups, but not for me.
All day, all night, I carry on my back
embedded in my flesh, two rows
of little white cocoons,
so neatly stacked
they look like eggs in a crate.
And I am eaten half away.

If I can gather strength enough
I'll try to burrow under a stone
and spin myself a purse
in which to sleep away the cold;
though when the sun kisses the earth
again, I know I won't be there.
Instead, out of my chrysalis
will break, like robbers from a tomb,
a swarm of parasitic flies,
leaving my wasted husk behind.

Sir, you with the red snippers
in your hand, hovering over me,
casting your shadow, I greet you,
whether you come as an angel of death
or of mercy. But tell me,
before you choose to slice me in two:
Who can understand the ways
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