

Veterans' Day

I know that *Veterans' Day*, when we pay tribute to all those who have *served* our nation in our armed forces, is not the same as *Memorial Day*, when we specifically remember and give thanks for the lives of those who have *died* in service to our country. But it is easy to confuse these two tributes (especially since there is much official visiting of military cemeteries on both days). I grew up in an area of the country (the Hampton/Newport News/Norfolk/Virginia Beach area) which had an outsized military presence. Many of my schoolmates had fathers who were in the military, especially in the Air Force – and my best friend living three houses away had a dad who was an engineer at NASA (not part of the armed forces, of course, but closely related in certain ways to Langley Air Force Base).

And yet, despite the ubiquity of lieutenants, captains and colonels amongst my schoolmates' fathers, it was also an era when young people eschewed the military. There was a draft. There was Vietnam, an unpopular war. There was the hippie movement (“make love, not war”). It was the dawning of the “age of Aquarius” (whatever that meant – something about peace and freedom, I presumed).

My own father came of age during the Korean Conflict, and he wanted to join the Air Force to work as a radio operator, but the family lore was that his father forbade him from doing so (Daddy was the oldest of six boys and was expected to take over the family business) – and so my father joined the Coast Guard instead, and served off the coast of California. But that was before my time – I never heard any stories about his service at all until after he died, when my mother told me about the beautiful letters he had written her while he was stationed in San Francisco. For whatever reason, surrounded as we were by Langley Air Force Base, Fort Monroe, Norfolk Naval Base and Fort Eustis, in my own family there was never any talk of joining the military. The subtle message that I received was that the armed forces, if you join, dictate too much of your life and identity, demanding loyalty over independent judgement and/or creativity.

Never having been on the inside, I don't know if that is true. What I do know is that the military places a high value on “honor” and “service,” and from what I can gather from the media (some of this, admittedly, being the stuff of Hollywood), the

bonds between those who serve, especially in combat, are very strong, very deep. I have heard interviews on NPR with soldiers who have returned from Iraq and Afghanistan, and it seems a frequent occurrence that some soldiers have a difficult time adjusting to civilian life after their service. Sometimes it is a matter of PTSD, but in many instances it is that these soldiers (all the ones I heard interviewed were men, but of course now there are women, too) miss the extraordinary comradeship that they had “over there” with their fellow soldiers. They say that none of their civilian friendships can hold a candle to those bonds. I suppose it is because they shared such intense experiences, risking their lives together, and often *for* one another in battle. This kind of bonding goes all the way back to antiquity (as can be seen in the pages of Homer’s *Iliad*). Some of these soldiers I heard interviewed did not stay civilians long, but reenlisted, requesting to be returned to active combat duty.

There is always the cloud of possible death hanging over military service, and so our Memorial Day and Veterans’ Day seem to blur into one another, even though they come at different times of the year. And now we are living through this coronavirus pandemic. Today the coronavirus fatalities in the U.S. have reached almost 240,000. Of all the wars we have waged, only the Civil War and World War II exceed this number in fatalities. And yet the return of the body of a soldier in his (or sometimes her) flag-draped coffin is a dramatic event, one that we accord with great grief, significance and honor. And yet now these who are passing away on our own soil, never having thought that their ordinary life would bring them into a “danger zone” – these deaths are so hard to take in. There are too many for our news broadcasts to pay tribute to. They do not have taps blown for them. Their families (unless they were service members) do not receive carefully-folded flags. We do not know how to mourn as a nation. We do not know how to pay tribute – and even if we did, we could not gather in large numbers to do it.

Here in our own community at Temple Beth El, we have lost our faithful custodian, Mr. George Haire, who had also served Fall River’s last remaining Orthodox congregation, Adas Israel, until they finally closed just last year. George was a man of the driest humor of anyone I ever met; he was always joking, but you often did not know it! But he served the temple and its community with great loyalty and humility. He was not one to look for honors; his life was quite different from that of a soldier; nonetheless, he was dedicated to serving others. Now George did not die of the coronavirus; he had cancer, only diagnosed in the past few months. His passing so quickly was not expected. In fact he was still at work

in the temple just a few days before he died. Like a soldier, George died “with his boots on.” He will be missed by us all, but perhaps most of all by our son Lev, who actually considered George one of his best friends.

Thus far I have written nothing here about the election results. One would think that after all of last week’s agonizing *waiting*, the announcement last Saturday of Joe Biden’s win might have been the first thing I would mention in this week’s chronicle. (We heard the news in the middle of our Zoom Shabbat service, because one of our congregants received a phone call from his son during our Torah discussion, and so the news was passed on to us). And of course this development is important– but still the matter is fraught. President Trump, who garnered the support of just short of half of our nation’s voters, is still claiming that the election was “stolen” from him, that there was rampant voter fraud, and is demanding recounts in states with close tallies, like Georgia and Pennsylvania. As I try my best to keep this chronicle nonpartisan, I hesitate to say too much about this situation. But I will say that, despite a celebratory “victory” rally with Joe Biden and Kamala Harris on Saturday night, the nation still feels on edge, with emotions running raw, as in the aftermath of a contentious divorce.

We are a nation ailing in so many ways: from this virus; from our bitter political and ideological divisions; from racism and xenophobia; from our vulnerability to crazy conspiracy theories which capture the minds of so many these days; from the toll of climate change on our land – devastating floods and fires, and unexpected weather out of season (such as last month’s snows and freezing temperatures in many states); from the myriad problems that unemployment brings (a consequence of the pandemic); and from the continuing crisis of opioid, fentanyl, and heroin addictions and deaths. We need healing so badly! I wish I could say with confidence that such healing is on its way...but that would be a lie. I cannot know that. However, we can all do our best to be *part of* this much-needed healing.

So let us meditate on this: How can we all, in however humble a way, help to be part of the healing? It might seem simple: don’t talk politics with those whom we know are on the “other side”. Be pleasant and smile at all people as much as possible. But it is not enough to cover up a festering wound with a band-aid – something more is needed. I hesitate to draw out the “wound” analogy to include antiseptics, and a cleaning out of the wound – because that would seem to imply that some parties, or their beliefs at any rate, need to be eliminated like the

infection in a wound. And such a charge leaves us right back where we started. Martin Luther King famously said, “Hate cannot drive out hate – only *love* can do that.”

Can we bring our nation together, can we heal it through *love* alone? And what would this *love* look like? In his day, King’s love took the form of protests, speeches, and written essays stating what the aims of the civil rights movement were. Yes, the protests were *non-violent*, but nonetheless, those who opposed King and the civil rights movement in general, did not feel bowled over by love. They felt their way of life, and their presumptions about “the way things should be” *threatened*. Some white people who had been somewhere in the middle, perhaps accepting the racial inequity of our society, but realizing that it was unjust, *were* moved by this approach. Enough were moved that in 1964 the Civil Rights Act, after a lengthy and difficult fight, was passed by Congress, and signed into law by President Johnson.

But hate was *not* driven out, and even if it has looked at times (as after the election of Barack Obama as our first African-American president) that *healing* had finally come to our nation, we now see that it has not. Those who were disgruntled back in King’s and Johnson’s day have left behind spiritual descendants who are still disgruntled today – and they have a greater ability to organize and disseminate their grievances (because of the internet) than they did in those times. I wonder: is there, to quote the prophet Jeremiah, “hope in our end”?

This is a time to try our hardest to love, to listen, to understand – to *grieve* for all those we have lost, to *fight* for a livable world for our children and grandchildren, to be *clear-eyed* about what we are facing, but to hold steadfastly to the *hope* that how we act at this moment in history matters, that we *do* make a difference. And may the memories of all those who have fought for us, loved us, served us in *whatever* capacity – whether on the battlefields overseas, in our schools teaching our children, or by clearing our temple sidewalks of snow – may they bless us, be with us, inspire us to be the best citizens of this nation, and the best human beings, we can be.

I am thinking of Marge Piercy’s well-known poem, “To Be of Use.” Its words aptly describe our dear George, and might serve well as a recipe for us all in making ourselves into the kind of citizens and human beings that can help our society move toward healing in this difficult era:

To Be of Use (excerpts)

The people I love the best
jump into work head first
without dallying in the shallows
and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight.

...

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.

...

The work of the world is common as mud.
Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
But the thing worth doing well done
has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums
but you know they were made to be used.
The pitcher cries for water to carry
and a person for work that is real.



George Haire clears our Temple Beth El walkways during the snowstorms of 2015.