

The Good Soldiers
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I've shared with a few of you that if I had it to do over again, I would have tried my hand at a first career in journalism. There are many forms of journalism that appeal, but one that stood out was being a foreign correspondent. Perhaps my confidence was stymied by the fact that I'm terrible at learning foreign languages. At any rate, I highly admire journalists who write a good story, particularly if they've immersed themselves in it. These days, there is no shortage of war literature written by imbedded journalists. Some is better than others.

I was eager to read Sebastian Junger's book *War* because I loved his first book, *The Perfect Storm*. Shipwreck stories have always fascinated me, and as I've been reflecting lately, so do stories of war – specifically stories of soldiers and the bonds between them.

Junger's book *War* is good, and as you heard in the reading, he focuses a lot on the addictive elements of war for soldiers: the excitement, and brotherhood, and several times he shares with the reader how caught up in the adrenaline rush he is himself. This was something of a revelation to me, because like any well-educated, good liberal, intellectually I believe war proves how rudimentary the stage of evolution we human beings are in. Presumably that's my super-ego talking, while my id was saying, oh yes, I can see how exciting war could be for young soldiers. That if I were them, I too would crave heroic glory, and bask in the utter commitment to my fellow fighters, a fierce closeness that, if we're honest, anyone would admit doesn't exist in civilian life as it must on the front lines of combat. But wait, super-ego would chime in, Junger is romanticizing combat! While his observations about the love of combat were honest, and therefore controversial

and interesting, I never came to a critique of it, and I couldn't shake the feeling that some further analysis was missing.

It's good that, this past week, Jim Nelson, our Senior Minister, pointed me in the direction of a book that was published in 2002 by another journalist, Chris Hedges, called *War Is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*. Hedges spent years covering wars in the Balkans, the Middle East, and Central America. His book wastes no time with this idea that war is one of the most seductive drugs of human experience there is. The first paragraph on the jacket reads, "We have been brought up to believe that war is hell, but for so many of the people who experience it – civilians and soldiers alike – war is an emotionally intense and even exhilarating experience. As General George S. Patton famously said, 'Compared to war all other forms of human endeavor shrink to insignificance. God, I do love it so!' War is an enticing elixir. It gives us purpose, resolve, a cause. War is a force that gives us meaning."

But then Hedges goes on to critique it. He shows how people are conditioned to embrace what he calls "the myth of war," the idea that combat is noble, selfless, and glorious, and how culturally destructive these myths in fact are. Just in these past few days it has caused me to reflect on how I myself carry my own myth of war, my own personal version of it.

Since 2001, our country been in a constant state of war. I liken these wars to water that, we fish, we the American people, are swimming in. Even though most of us are not soldiers, we may mythologize war in ways we're not aware of. I'm going to share my interpretation of my own myth – a work in progress - and perhaps it will inspire you to consider your own.

While Vietnam was the war of my parents' generation, culturally I experienced it growing up. Memory is the worship theme of this

month, and while the sermon of the month could only belong to our 125th anniversary celebration next Sunday, the significance of cultural memory comes up now as it will on the Sunday after Thanksgiving too.

As a teenager, all the culture of the anti-war 60's seeped into my consciousness – I adored that 80's TV show about a Vietnam medical and R & R base called China Beach. I especially loved the music of that era – a new level of rock had been fashioned out of rebellion and resolve. Since then, rock and roll has never stopped being a critical voice of war. In 2006, I made a mix of songs simply titled as Junger's book was, *War*, because there was so much new music about the unpopularity of the Iraq war. "I Hear Them All" that Steve and Craig performed was on that mix. Recently I've fallen in love with a psychedelic rock band from Austin, TX called The Black Angels. Their first album, *Passover*, also published in 2006, is mostly about war. Some of the lyrics from the first song, *Young Men Dead*, reflect this anodyne of battle that soldiers take in:

"Fire for the hills pick up your feet and let's go.
Head for the hills pick up steel on your way. □
And when you find a piece of them in your site, □
Fire at will, don't you waste no time. □ □

Another thought of the unaware, □
Addiction in disguise.

Run for the hills, pick up your feet and let's go. □
We did our jobs, pick up speed now lets move. □
The trees can't grow without the sun in their eyes. □
And we can't live if we're too afraid to die."

It's an amazing song and I recommend y'all give it a listen.

While I'm staunchly anti-war, and believe the money we're wasting on counter-insurgency methods may eventually undo us, I love listening to music about war. Partly because it's soothing to the anger and sorrow I feel about these wars, the wars of my generation. But also because I was born the year of the Paris Peace Accords, a treaty that was signed to end the Vietnam War, though fighting continued. I've inherited the rage and national neuroticism of that war too. And, if I'm really honest, I'm drawn to the part of war that, ironically, is about love. As Junger describes it,

“Combat fog obscures your fate – obscures when and where you might die – and from that unknown is born a desperate bond between men. That bond is the core experience of combat and the only thing you can absolutely count on. The Army might screw you and your girlfriend might dump you and the enemy might kill you, but the shared commitment to safeguard one another's lives is unnegotiable and only deepens with time. The willingness to die for another person is a form of love that even religions fail to inspire, and the experience of it changes a person profoundly. What army sociologists . . . slowly came to understand was that courage *was* love. In war, neither could exist without the other [and that] the primary motivation in combat . . . was ‘solidarity with the group.’ That far outweighed self-preservation or idealism as a motivator.”*

It's this solidarity, this loyalty, this brotherhood, that to my mind, represents the only ‘bonus’ of war, and I'm recognizing that this is a form of subscribing to the ‘myth of war’ that Chris Hedges tries to warn us about. Appreciating the brotherhood of war is my myth of war - as if it could only exist in what feels like the absence of God for some soldiers. It's not good that such intense human bonding should only be found in war. As a religious liberal, in my

* War by Sebastian Junger, p. 240.

case a Unitarian Universalist, I believe that humanity's greatest potential can be realized if we're courageous enough to remove the barriers in everyday life. And I have faith that we could evolve to the point where such delicious devotion, and confirmation that the self is worthy whether you're a hero or not, could be experienced in civilian life, in the course of a regular life, and I know that many of us are already experiencing this in the best flashes of our lives.

Wrong or right, for as long as I can remember, I have always had compassion for war veterans, and have sought to understand the challenges they face returning to civilian life. Which, as it turns out, is a fairly American thing to do.

I read *War* over the summer, and took it with me to visit my in-laws in Canada. My very Canadian mother-in-law whom I love dearly asked me a question I found bewildering and has haunted me since. She experienced the Vietnam anti-war movement directly when she lived in San Diego between 1965 and '67. Why are Americans so supportive of the soldiers? she asked. She seemed to be saying that supporting our men and women in uniform was a way of approving the wars, and that if we were really anti-war we would shun the returning soldiers, as a way of opposing war – like was done after Vietnam.

My theory is that we had so much shame about Vietnam, that with time we learned scapegoating the soldier only compounded that shame. We don't want to do that again – maybe it's a good sign we're more compassionate and supportive – imagine if the warriors of ancient societies were shunned from their villages after experiencing all kinds of trauma in order to protect them. While I can't say I feel protected by the war efforts, (in fact I feel less safe), why further rupture relationship between civilian and soldier? What's missing is community cohesiveness for us both.

While shame may not readily characterize the Iraq and Afghanistan wars yet, there is a great sense of powerlessness in the populace in the face of the military-congressional-industrial war machine. Speaking for myself, I don't feel like I can stop it. I mean, if Obama didn't stop it, whoever will? It's one reason I elected him. Supposedly I'm part of some kind of democratic experiment begun over 200 years ago, and if my power is my vote, frankly I'm feeling kind of screwed right now. Protest is a last resort, and as you know, protesting war is a ghastly inconvenience during this time of economic whatever. That was a rant-encrusted way of saying this: how I treat our returning soldiers is something I do have power over – I feel there is some good I can do here, there is some choice. I only have warm fuzzies for American Muslims at this time, and I only have warm fuzzies for our vets too – it's positive energy that's soothing to my aching soul.

Which is why it's important to me, as it is for Pastor Schleup, founder of the Warriors Journey Home Ministry, to work on bringing the communities of veterans and the community of civilians closer together. As he said, we are very disconnected and detached from each other. Perhaps one reason the war machine is so powerful is because of this disconnect. Our country is experiencing extreme polarization in so many ways, and one of them is this stark difference between how the soldiers experience war and how civilians do. The soldiers have this emotionally charged experience, so powerful they struggle to integrate it into their lives. Then there are most of us, who do not have children or relatives in war (though I know some of us here do), who experience the cold, cerebral, political, ideological side of war – the side for which the vast majority of soldiers simply does not factor in to their reality.

I applaud Pastor Schleup's efforts to bridge this chasm, and believe that it's something, not right away but eventually, we might be able to do here at Neighborhood Church, if there's ample interest.

What a courageous ministry that our country is so desperately in need of - a shared endeavor of healing – through helping to heal the wounds of our warriors. In the meantime we could read the book that I highly recommend to you all – reading this book is a way to begin to understand what recent wars are really like; it’s a way to listen to our veterans. It’s called *The Good Soldiers* by David Finkel, another embedded journalist, and was listed as one of the top ten books of 2009 by the New York Times. It’s so engrossing that there’s not a section I could pluck out to share with you today – if you’re familiar with it, it has the intensity of Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*, and must be read cover to cover. War is not romanticized in this account of one battalion in Iraq nicknamed the Rangers, who went as part of the surge.

I want to conclude by sharing some words by my mentor Davidson Loehr. He’s been writing for Truthout, and this essay called, *The Things That Come Apart in War*, may appear on Veterans’ Day. Davidson is a Vietnam War Vet. He writes,

“The Wikileaks brought to mind some well-known words from J. Robert Oppenheimer, innovator of the atomic bomb. What he said when the bomb successfully detonated on July 16, 1945, was “It worked!” Later, when asked for his gut reaction, he quoted the Bhagavad Gita’s words from Lord Vishnu: “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.”

Part of the reason soldiers have trouble integrating their war experiences – possibly the most powerful experiences in their lives – is because they know that in serving their country, they too became Death, the destroyer of worlds, sometimes including the inner world of their integrity. No two soldiers have ever had the same experiences in war, yet the most poignant stories from soldiers of all wars form a genre with deep family resemblances between the tales they tell . . .

After losing our wars – then in Vietnam, now in Iraq and Afghanistan – soldiers are sent home to a world where people aren't trying to kill them. But our society cannot contain the passions of war, or come anywhere near war's emotional, often seductive, power. What's left over stays inside the soldiers, where its destructive power often festers in their body, mind and soul. The DNA of war has been implanted in them. Sometimes the offspring can be tamed. But sometimes their center cannot hold, and the soldiers we treated like things come apart.”

And in honor of Davidson and of all of our vets today, I ask that if you have served in our armed forces, or are a family member of those serving now, if you are able and willing, will you please stand?

Thank you for your service.