

OPENING WORDS

We live within a great circle – a circle of time, a circle of seasons, and an ever-expanding circle of community that encompasses all that lives on this planet and then is further held by the farthest reaches of the cosmos. To honor the circle, I invite the powers of the East – the sunrise, Spring, the place of inspiration and new beginnings, and the home of eagle. Then I invite the powers of the South – midday, Summer, the place of innocence and trust, the place of childhood, and the home of little mouse. Then I invite the powers of the West – sunset, Fall, the place of the darkness and looking within, the place of adolescence, and the home of bear. Lastly I invite the powers of the North – night, Winter, the place of adulthood and bringing our gifts into community, the home of the ancestors and those yet to be born, and the home of snowy owl. May this circle hold us in sacred time and space as we gather together.

WORDS FOR REFLECTION

The real gap is between our subconscious belief that righteous violence can redeem us, even ennoble us, and the chastening truth that violence debases and corrupts. Roy Scranton

SERMON

HEALING THE WOUNDS OF WAR

I was asked to come today to speak again about Veteran's Day and its meaning for us as a nation. To do that I must first speak about us as a nation, then about our veterans, then about us who have not served in the military. So, to begin.

We say we are a peace-loving nation. Yet since World War II we have been involved in an incredible number of armed conflicts, military actions, and wars. We live with a national myth about being a peace-loving nation when, in fact, we are steeped in a milieu of violence. Look around. We live within a Judeo-Christian belief that it is wrong to kill another human being yet violence pervades our culture. Look at the number of violent movies and video games filled with heroes who rely on violence to beat down the enemy. These are viewed by our children, our teens and by us adults. Consider the degree of violence in our everyday society – violence by those here to protect us, violence by those who live among us, and the violent thoughts that occur within us even if we do not act on those thoughts. We emphasize the warrior virtues of loyalty, discipline, honor, courage, and sacrifice but we completely avoid the costs of killing on our heroes, our communities, and our relationships. How do we make sense of these two diametrically opposed beliefs – killing another human being is a sin and killing another human being whom we see as an enemy is not a sin? And how do our children and our late teenagers and young adults whose brains are still developing meet these conflicting beliefs?

There is more. Our myth is that our nation is incapable of fighting immoral wars. And we get to determine what is immoral. Vietnam exposed our treachery but still we frame our wars as crusades against evil tyranny and the nasty business of killing as necessary in protecting our country. We must keep tyranny far from our shores. Keeping our focus "over there" insulates from looking at the tyranny existing within our shores. As a nation we "dress up" war as a national necessity. We participate in this

national myth without acknowledging the impact of war on the soul of the nation, on the souls of those who serve, and on our own souls. Do not think for one moment that we are not impacted.

With all of that in mind, we can now turn our attention to those who serve. Our 18, 19, and 20 years-old arrive at boot camp. Their old-world identity is stripped away as soon as they step onto the ground. The goal is to create a new identity based in discipline, honor, courage, teamwork and on the ability to neutralize a target. Neutralize means to kill and the target is another human being known as the enemy. The enemy is not just a combatant. Later once in the combat zone, these young men and women will learn that there are more than combatants. There will be women, children, the aged termed non-combatants who will be in the kill zone. How do brains still in the process of developing deal with this conundrum?

Our recruits graduate and are deployed. They join others who have experienced the same training and have been hardened by the realities of war. Combat is total submersion. Every aspect of one's being is on high alert – the physical, the emotional, the psychological, and the spiritual. The focus is on completing the mission, staying alive, and keeping everyone around you alive. "Down time" is a euphemism – one is always on alert. One is immersed quickly in the cruelty of war, the inhumanity, the chaos, the confusion between what is right and what is wrong. Buddies and friends are injured or killed. One may be injured him or herself. There are the physical injuries including traumatic brain injury, the psychological injuries including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and there are the spiritual injuries. It is this latter that I want to explore for those who survive can lose something greater than their lives. They can lose their souls for there is a great moral discovery in combat zones and beyond – one meets his or her and others' limitless capacity for malice and the unsuspected depths of human depravity. This leaves one with a Moral Injury.

Moral Injury is a deep identity crisis brought on by what one experiences or witnesses during one's service for our country. It comes from perpetrating, witnessing, or failing to prevent an event that runs against the person's moral or ethical beliefs and commitments. This crisis within the soul wounds the heart and severs the bonds with others and the Divine. The person experiences a conscious loss of emotion, a loss of inner vitality, and a loss of bodily sensation. What evolves is a debilitating distrust of people in authority and of loved ones. There are occasional moments of uncontrollable rage and a persistent self-horror after the perceived absorption of evil on the battlefield. The person is filled with shame, guilt, demoralization, and may show self-handicapping and self-harming behaviors like drugs, alcohol, sleeplessness, isolation, and withdrawal. Returning home increases these symptoms. Feelings of isolation are heightened for who would ever be willing or able to hear his or her story, sit with the horror, the losses, the shame and guilt – all without disgust and judgment? One's belief is all of those experiences, all of those feelings, all of those memories need to be locked away and never visited again. This is exactly the wrong decision for trying to make believe it never happened adds to isolation, aloneness, and self-harming decisions and behaviors.

This then is our job as community members. Moral Injury is a signature wound not only of the military but of our militarized society as well. We participate in the national myth about war. Our men and women have served to protect us. They and their families have sacrificed their collective well-being for us. Now they return home and we do nothing to welcome them home nor assist in their transition from wartime servicemen and women to peaceful warriors. They have much to teach us if we would be

willing to listen. But first we must be willing to meet them and help them to move through their Moral Injury. This is what we can do:

- First, we must look down at our collective hands and see the blood not just on the hands of the warriors but on the hands of every person who lives in this country and has been protected by our servicemen and women.
- We can create social circles small enough to end isolation and where warriors can meaningfully belong.
- We must be strong enough to hear their stories without having to deny the reality of their experiences or to blame them. We need to be able to respect them without judgment.
- We need to start listening to their shame, their guilt, their losses, and their inner emptiness.
- In listening we help carry, share, and grieve rather than deny the burdens of war.
- And we need to thank them for the sacrifices they and their families have made on our behalf. Acknowledging their and their families sacrifices goes well beyond saying “thank you for your service” for it honors the sacrifices they have made for us.

And if we can do this, what might we all learn, both citizen and warrior?

- The world is real and the suffering of others is real and it does not help to deny that fact. At this very moment service men and women around the world are facing life and death decisions which will result in suffering.
- One’s actions can sometimes irrevocably determine the destiny of others. Every day we witness that in our lives and on the news in this country and around the world.
- The mistakes one makes are often transmuted directly into others’ pain. There is sometimes no way to undo that pain and there is no way to deny one’s responsibility.

This is no more or less what we all should know. It is the ethical lesson life teaches to those who attend to the consequences of their actions. Most of us flee from such knowledge, such reflection. And as a nation we also flee from such knowledge. Are we willing to meet this challenge? Are we willing to acknowledge the consequences of our actions in our individual lives, or in the lives of our service men and women, or in our nation’s history right to the present day?

CLOSING

No society is healthy without a healthy, functioning elder warrior class leading the way into a future of hope, responsibility, true security, and peacemaking based on the transformational wisdom and healing gained from ordeal, the ordeal of war.

Our challenge is to turn war’s inevitable wounding and suffering into wisdom and growth that truly brings warriors home and benefits us all.

Edward Tick

On this day and moving forward into an uncertain future, may we find the courage and heart within to listen to the stories of our veterans without denying the reality of their experiences and may we carry, share and grieve the burdens of war. Together may we turn the suffering of war into the kind of wisdom which may lead us together into peace. I release the circle. Go in Peace.