

“No Caravan of Despair’: Faith for the Frontlines”

May 24, 2020

The Rev. Heather Janules

“To lift the fallen, to restore the broken and to heal the hurting.” In a few simple phrases, Chaplain Savage names the objectives of ministry. And ministry is not just offered by the clergy. All of us who profess a spiritual life are called to serve needs beyond our own.

Companionship “the other” along their life path and bearing witness to this life at its end is at the heart of spiritual practice. Perhaps Forrest Church said it best when he defined “religion” simply as “our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die.”¹

This companionship is most profound in times of trauma and violence, times when we near the edge of “having to die.” Chaos and violence are intrinsic in war time. So there is wisdom in partnering the ministry and the military through the role of the chaplain.

And it is wise to set aside one day when the nation is collectively asked to serve as chaplains. Memorial Day is a time for all of us to pause, in compassion and in mourning, to recognize those who have died in war. If only all of us could, like Chaplain Savage, offer a blessing to all active military personnel at the moment of safe return. Memorial Day is a time to instead offer a blessing to the memory of those who did not return. It is an annual time when, through reverent ritual, secular military life and organized spirituality meet.

As I prepared for Memorial Day this year, I became curious about a specific connection between faith and the armed forces. I wanted to discover how Unitarian Universalism has influenced the US military and how engagement in war has shaped Unitarian Universalism. My faith tradition has unique responses to “the dual reality of being alive and having to die.” How are these responses lived out through the ministry of UU chaplains?

My curiosity began with a ceremony I attended at a past General Assembly. With many workshops on religious education and pledge drives, General Assembly often focuses on congregational life. So it felt strange to leave the busy, church-focused energy of GA for a brief time to find an out-of-the-way conference room in a convention hotel. My friend and colleague, Seanan Holland, was being recognized for his retirement as a Navy chaplain. Going “off the beaten GA path” as I was, I gained greater understanding of the sense of “being the other” that Chaplain Savage spoke of in today’s reading.

In Seanan’s ceremony, Chaplain Cynthia Kane shared a brief history of Unitarian Universalist chaplains in the Navy. I later reached out to Rev. Kane to learn more about UU chaplain history. I am deeply grateful to her for sharing her research informing my reflection today.

¹ <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=96169477>

As some know, my previous ministry was in the Washington DC suburbs. One thing I never got used to was officiating graveside memorial services at Arlington National Cemetery. This hallowed ground of our nation's military fallen was, for those who lived in the area, also a local cemetery. If you or your spouse were eligible to be interred there, it would be hard to decline claiming a piece of this sacred space as your place of final rest.

Even if you haven't been to Arlington, you are likely familiar with its design. Small, white headstones are arranged in perfect alignment. In the columbaria where ashes are placed, panels of plain white marble form stark mosaics in large, orderly grids. The design seems like a metaphor for the military itself – uniform individuals together create a large and integrated whole.

Yet, if you look closer and read the different names, branches of service and rank, you notice symbols on the grave markers, representing a surprising variety of spiritual affiliations. There are not just Christian crosses but the symbols of different Christian denominations. Veterans may also choose, among many others, a Jewish Star of David or a pentacle - a sign of the Wiccan faith – the Unitarian Universalist flaming chalice or simply a symbol for atheism. From this perspective, the headstones and crypt covers do not suggest anonymous uniformity but great individuality and diversity.

Thus, to minister to armed service personnel requires an openness to different beliefs. This interfaith, universalist approach has existed since the very beginning of the US military.

Here I use the word “universalist” in its general sense, referring to respect for theological diversity. Yet, in terms of military chaplain history, it is also appropriate to use the word “Universalist” in the denominational sense. As Chaplain Kain affirms, John Murray, remembered as the father of American Universalism, was not just a religious pioneer by helping to found the first Universalist church in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Murray also joined the 2nd Rhode Island Regiment as its chaplain.

Murray joined because of his ardent support of the revolutionary effort. Yet, his fellow chaplains were so suspicious of his views on the Trinity and his disbelief in Hell that some thought he was a British spy. George Washington intervened and affirmed Murray's right to serve through issuing General Orders on September 17th, 1775, proclaiming that “the Reverend Mr. John Murray is appointed Chaplain to the Rhode-Island Regiments and is to be respected as such.” These Orders became the first historic reference to American Chaplaincy. They also set a precedent for the inclusion of unorthodox chaplains and the practice of Universalist beliefs within its ranks.²

From the Revolutionary War forward, there was an on-going presence of Unitarian and Universalist chaplains in the military. This engagement peaked with the Civil War. Those with a

² Kane, Cynthia. “Toward a Social History of Unitarian Universalism's Role in the United States Military Chaplaincy.” July 20, 2019, 7.

passing knowledge of Unitarian Universalist history know how leaders in these two faith traditions actively fought for the abolition of slavery. Some fought through proclamations from pulpits and editorials in newspapers. We remember Clara Barton for organizing medical care for soldiers, an effort that became the beginnings of the Red Cross. Visitors to the Boston Common can view the Shaw Memorial, erected in honor of Unitarian Robert Gould Shaw, commander of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment, a unit of Black soldiers. This broad support for abolition among Universalists and Unitarians rendered the Civil War a violent but moral struggle, perhaps explaining why a full ten percent of UU ministers also served as Union chaplains at the time. None served in the Confederacy.³

As Cynthia Kane names in her research, this expression of faith through ministering to those in the armed forces brought Universalist and Unitarian chaplains into moments of spiritual paradox. Their efforts to defend – in our contemporary language – “the inherent worth and dignity of every person” – through striving for abolition led them to become active participants in the Civil War. And, yet, experiences on the battlefield tempered their militaristic zeal.

Kane cites a letter by Universalist chaplain Gamliel Collins, written in November of 1861. He recalls the ambush of his regiment of 400 men, affirming:

I shall never forget what I saw and heard that night on the banks of the Potomac. It was one of the most dreadful nights of my life...I never endured so much of agony and of horror as during that night, when I saw men butchered by the hundreds in cold blood, simply because they wore a different uniform from their murderers.⁴

The trauma and brutality of the Civil War could easily persuade anyone that war, for any reason, was a violation of divine intention for human life. Regardless of what side one served on, frontline ministry moved some to regard their military foe in a new light.

Kane also recounts the experience of Unitarian chaplain Arthur Buckminster Fuller as documented by his son, Richard. Fuller’s ministry included care for all the injured, including Southern soldiers, perhaps a historic example of how relationship is more important than theology.

While Fuller still regarded the Civil War as a necessary and noble conflict, he affirmed that ultimate authority rested in the divine. He believed that all had equal right to come before God for judgment. Fuller is alleged to have said to dying Confederate soldiers, “if you believe you are in the right, may God forgive you.”⁵ Through these words, Fuller simultaneously named an ethical stance, siding with the Union, while also affirming his humility before the God they shared.

³ Cain, Cynthia. “A Love and Liberty That Shall Not Perish: The Theology and Ministry of Unitarians and Universalists During the Civil War.” November 22, 2019, 7-8.

⁴ Ibid, 9.

⁵ Ibid, 10-11.

Kane concludes her reflection on Unitarian and Universalist chaplains in the Civil War by identifying this armed conflict as the beginning of the end of broad UU enthusiasm for national military service. Yet, one later informal chaplain may be of particular interest to our congregation, Winchester Unitarian Society minister, the Rev. Joel Metcalf. As I named in a previous sermon, when Metcalf was not making ground-breaking discoveries in astronomy and serving this parish, according to Winchester historian Ellen Knight, he was also one of three middle-aged men from Winchester willing to care for those in active duty in the first World War through the YMCA.

Knight affirms that the “volunteers often endured the same hardships as the troops, caught in skirmishes, surrounded by enemy fire, bombed from the air” even though their duties focused on organizing and maintaining support centers such as theatres, clubs, chapels and places to write letters home. These older men were often affectionately called “Pop” although Metcalf is reported to prefer the nickname “Doc.”⁶ Metcalf’s service included marching with the troops and leading them in song, with some marches as long as 25 miles. In more harrowing moments, Metcalf carried the wounded. The Army eventually offered Metcalf an officer role, a role he refused as he wanted to continue caring for the troops. He eventually returned to the United States and the quieter ministry in the parish.

Cynthia Kane affirms that participation in military chaplaincy by Unitarian Universalists likely declined as the tradition trended towards pacifism. She remembers, “At my graduation from divinity school in 1996 when I ‘went public’ with my calling to Navy chaplaincy, I was met with criticism and hostility from my own faith community.” Kane identifies the impacts of the Vietnam and Cold Wars on sentiment towards the military within Unitarian Universalism but also wonders if the strong ethos of individualism within the faith contradicts military service, centered on self-sacrifice, hierarchical authority and unit cohesion. Earlier in her paper, she also cites the class privilege of many Unitarian Universalists that may serve as a cultural barrier to enlistment by the laity and chaplaincy by the clergy.⁷

Kane makes a strong case for the role of Unitarian Universalist chaplains. Drawing on the history of Civil War chaplains teaching illiterate soldiers, chaplains can be catalysts for social reforms envisioned within our congregations. Considering the theological diversity of the United States military, Kane also celebrates that Unitarian Universalist clergy are especially gifted in “providing spiritual care for all within our ranks regardless of belief” especially with the rise of the “spiritual but not religious” and “advising commands on matters moral and ethical.”

Sometimes this “moral and ethical advice” can be prophetic acts of ministry. Earlier in this service, we met Chaplain Chris Antal, the author of today’s chalice lighting words. Before today,

⁶ <https://www.winchester.us/DocumentCenter/View/3535/Y-Men?bidId=>

⁷ Kane, Cynthia. “Toward a Social History of Unitarian Universalism’s Role in the United States Military Chaplaincy.” July 20, 2019, 16-17.

I contacted him. In our email exchange, he invited us to consider with whom we are in relationship this Memorial Day. He affirms that:

The best way to observe Memorial Day in a UU congregation...is to pay attention to the human cost of U.S. wars on all people, everywhere, and not selectively remember U.S. service members while forgetting the deaths of others. The best way to do this is to listen to Veterans and those who have experienced the human cost of war first-hand [such as]...refugees...⁸

I know Rev. Antal is, to use his words, “pay[ing] attention to the human cost of U.S. wars on all people.” In an article from PRI-The World, Antal recalls serving as a chaplain in Afghanistan:

"I was doing my duty as a chaplain to honor the dead at a Dignified Transfer ceremony...As the casket was transferred onto a C-17 cargo plane, there is 'Taps,' there's prayer, and we salute as the casket is carried up the ramp. It was while I was standing on the flight line in those ceremonies that I saw the drones ...And my heart was opened to the pain of the loss of these American lives...but to hold that with the drones... to stand there wondering who we were killing, who their families were, and how they were grieving... it just created a break in my soul."⁹

This spiritual wound inspired Antal to preach a prophetic sermon in condemnation of the Obama administration's use of drone warfare for which he received retribution. Antal later resigned his chaplaincy, writing in his letter "I refuse to support this policy of unaccountable killing." In so doing, Antal sacrificed a number of military benefits and became a target of hostility and abuse from others in the military. In the words of The World journalist Stephen Snyder, Antal remained “a man on a mission – to promote peace.”

His final advice to us: “The worst way to observe Memorial Day is to fall into the trap of projected demonization, blaming Veterans for the human cost, or the trap of projected valorization, with...‘ultimate sacrifice’ language, that equates dying in war with Jesus' sacrifice on the cross.”¹⁰

I thank Chaplain Antal for recalling us – like so many chaplains before – to our collective humanity and complexity. As all chaplains can attest, there is horror and ugliness to war that no one deserves to suffer.

“To lift the fallen, to restore the broken and to heal the hurting.” The need for ministry in the military and beyond remains strong. In this time of collective mourning, for all those who died in war, and for those who are dying from a war on the cellular level with the new Coronavirus, I

⁸ Email send 5/16/20

⁹ <https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-05-19/empire-chaplain-army-clergyman-quit-over-us-drone-program>

¹⁰ Email send 5/16/20

am grateful for those who carry on the sacred mission of restoration, healing and loving, no matter one's faith or what uniform we wear.