

By Jerry Bone

Good morning, everyone. And, a special welcome to our summer visitors.

My talk this morning will be about war and peace. It will be about betrayal and forgiveness. About truth and reconciliation. And, about my journey.

I was born near the end of the Great Depression, six weeks before Nazi Germany swept into Poland. I was the oldest child in a family of five. My early life was one of neglect and abuse, most of it verbal but some of it physical.

Looking back on those dark days during and just after World War II, I realize how important the church was to me. That would be St. Augustine Roman Catholic Church in Ossining, New York, where I served as altar boy for four or five years. The people of St. Augustine fed me—body, mind, and spirit. They educated me. They gave me a sense of purpose, and a message of hope. I valued myself in a way that I could not in my father's home nor on the gritty streets of Ossining.

Throughout the war years and into the late 1940s, my developing mind soaked up scary images of the world war from MovieTone Newsreels, The New

York Daily News and the radio. At the age of six I saw the ugly future in the shape of a mushroom cloud. About ten years later, while I was in high school, I read John Hersey's Hiroshima and the real horror was revealed. My Dad, for all his faults, and with his sixth grade education, had encouraged me to read. Then, too, I had a rather remarkable high school English teacher whose first name was Dante. No, really—it was Dante. He steered me toward the reading that would open my eyes and feed my aching heart and soul.

Ten years ago I had a revelation about those early days, and the survival and coping mechanisms I had developed early on. I was alone on the floor of my cell at the Anderson County Jail, serving out a short civil disobedience sentence for blocking the road to the Y-12 nuclear weapons plant. I was writing some notes onto a scrap of paper. The lights had been turned off in the cell, a punishment not necessarily reserved for non-violent enemies of the state, but irritating none the less. A sliver of light had spread across the floor for a few inches at the bottom of the cell door. So there I was, on my belly, cheek resting on my left hand, right hand gripping the stub of a pencil. Then, it hit me. A phrase from a Bruce Cockburn song I had been listening to in my car. "I can see in the dark; it's where I used to live."

And, so I did. As a child, I lived in the dark, in my room—waiting for the heavy, faltering, stumbling footsteps, the curses and sometimes the crying. I looked out at the scary world from other dark places, too—not trusting, not believing--holding the loving part of myself away from the hurt and anger and sadness.

I couldn't name it at the time, but life at home and on the streets of Ossining was hardening me, making me hyper-vigilant. Hypervigilance, one of the hallmarks of what we now call Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. Many years later I realized what other things I had in common with the veterans who come home from war, broken and bitter.

I joined the Marine Corps Thanksgiving week of 1957, five months out of High school. I don't really know why I chose the Marine Corps. It might have been I just wanted to get away from my father, as I've often said. Whatever my motivation, my choice proved fortunate. For one thing, out of all that discipline, I gained a measure of self-discipline; for another I met a man who would change the course of my life. His name was John McAfee—and he was a remarkable human being.

Now, I've talked about Master Sergeant McAfee before. Suffice to say, the sergeant persuaded me not to make a career of the Marines, and said that he would not recommend it as a career to any young man. He told me that the Marines are always first to serve and that they always ultimately serve the interests of the privileged few.

I seldom gave much thought to my undistinguished eight years of service in both the Marine Corps and Air Force. I got some education and experience keeping radio relay equipment on the air in the Marines. I learned how to repair computers in the Air Force. Three weeks out of the Air Force, I went to work for IBM and settled down to raise my children near the same town where I grew up-- in the country, where I could remain oblivious to most of the evil in the world. Then, along came the Vietnam War.

What a horror! For ten long years, we punished the people of Vietnam. We bombed. We strafed. We poisoned. We massacred. We burned. We crowded Vietnamese into 'strategic hamlets' and torched their villages. A recent article in The Nation, entitled "The Lethal Legacy of the Vietnam War", put the horror of Vietnam in perspective while describing the bombing of Quang Tri province:

*Quang Tri is only thirty miles wide in places. It's smaller than Delaware, covering a little more than 1,800 square miles. Yet, that tiny piece of earth is the most heavily bombed place in history; a greater tonnage was dropped here than on Germany in the whole of World War II.*

Most of that bombing occurred during the siege of Khe Sanh in early 1968, which coincided with the Tet offensive. During that fateful year of 1968, which closed with 16,592 American war dead and untold numbers of Vietnamese soldier and civilian deaths, the opposition to the war back home increased dramatically. As the Nation article bluntly puts it: "After Tet and Khe Sanh, the war was no longer America's to win, only to avoid losing."

In the year 1968, while the war raged on in Vietnam, the prophetic voice of Martin Luther King, Jr. was silenced by an assassin's bullet. One year to the day before his death, Doctor King said these words at Riverside Church in New York City:

*When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered...A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth... A true revolution of values will lay hand on the world order and say of war, 'This*

*way of settling differences is not just.' This business of burning human beings with napalm, of filling our nation's homes with orphans and widows, of injecting poisonous drugs of hate into the veins of peoples normally humane, of sending men home from dark and bloody battlefields physically handicapped and psychologically deranged, cannot be reconciled with wisdom, justice, and love. A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.*

Doctor King's speech was powerful and prophetic—fully as powerful as Julia Ward Howe's "Mother's Day Proclamation" speech of 1870, spoken just five years after the end of the Civil War--the bloodiest war ever waged on the American continent.

As for the Vietnamese and others who were left behind after the last American helicopter went home, the war went on. According to Chuck Searcy, an American Army veteran who works with Vietnamese to remove unexploded ordnance from the killing fields, the province of Quang Tri "was like a moonscape." Farmers returned to their fields and walked into a death trap. Best estimates, according to The Nation article are that "about 40,000 [Vietnamese] have been killed by unexploded ordnance since the war's end, with another 65,000 maimed."

And, unexploded ordnance is not the only problem the Vietnamese faced after the end of what they call the “American War.” There was the widespread, intense use of Agent Orange as a defoliant, which has brought a scourge of birth defects and deformities to rural Vietnamese--even to this third generation since the war’s end.

Last year at this time I was in Asheville for the annual Veterans For Peace convention. On Saturday night, at the banquet, I was introduced to a Vietnam era Marine veteran. After a few minutes of conversation, the ex-Marine opened up and told me his story. In the course of his duties in Vietnam he had been regularly exposed to large amounts of Agent Orange. He returned to the states “a post war victim of Agent Orange.” A son had been born with birth anomalies, including a heart defect; after several surgeries, the boy died. My eyes welled with tears as I rested my hand on my new friend’s shoulder and he quietly relieved himself of some small measure of the great grief which gripped his soul.

Grief, and loss—the lingering legacy of the Vietnam (American) war. Not coincidentally I’ve been reading War and the Soul, by psychotherapist Edward Tick. It’s a tough read. It tells the stories of many veterans, mostly from Vietnam, but from other wars as well, who are suffering from Post-traumatic Stress

Disorder (PTSD). In War and the Soul the author tells the stories of several combat veterans who describe how their souls deserted them, left them during the war. Tick describes what he believes is a method to deal effectively with this post-traumatic stress, this “soul loss.” One step is to tell the story.

I know quite a little bit about telling the story. Ever since my first marriage ended and I stumbled across the beneficial effects of story-telling during a therapy session, I’ve been doing just that—telling my story. I told it again and again at meetings of Adult Children of Alcoholics or Al-Anon meetings or over a drink with trusted friends. I tell it still, picking up the threads at small group meetings, or Personal Beliefs and Commitments, or over coffee in the fellowship hall. I have found story-telling to be an excellent tool for opening up, for redeeming and refreshing the soul, for finding my way out of dark corners into the light.

I am also reading Gordon Gibson’s book, Southern Witness: Unitarians and Universalists in the Civil Rights Era. What a book! What a revelation! What a discovery for this scattered scholar. How I lapped up those stories of heroic people who were neck-deep in the defining movement of my generation during those years when I served my country in uniform.

Of particular interest to me in Gordon's book, aside from the reading which Gordon himself so ably delivered, were the personal stories. In one of those stories from the 1960s, a Unitarian minister's wife was handling a call from a woman who was not happy with what Unitarians were doing for "those people." After a tense exchange the caller abruptly offered the opinion that "they (African-Americans) do not have a soul."

The first prayer my mother taught me had to do with "soul." It goes like this: Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray thee, Lord, my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray thee, Lord, my soul to take.

I don't believe in that soul, the one that God keeps for us while we're sleeping and takes with him when we die. I believe in the soul of Edward Tick and the veterans and others he works with. I believe in the soul that can desert us, run from us when we do things that make us terribly ashamed, when we've done something for which we cannot forgive ourselves. I believe in the soul that can be restored by love and listening and in the soul that can grow again and flourish-- blossoming into renewed growth even after the most grievous transgression against wisdom, justice and love.

As I intimated earlier, after serving my country, I woke up in another country. As it turns out, after many years of wandering in the wilderness, I woke up with another religion, as well—Unitarian Universalism. In the Spring 2015 issue of *UU World*, in a piece called “Black Lives Matter”, The Reverend Nancy McDonald Ladd writes that Universalism is “the unyielding belief that each and every person is endowed with an original blessing that calls them and claims them regardless of circumstances or even of worthiness. Every single person. Inherently endowed with worth and dignity.” Black. White. American. Vietnamese. Cultured, educated urbanite. Illiterate peasant. Friend. Enemy.

Chuck Searcy has often wondered at the mystery of Vietnamese forgiveness, particularly because of the healing it has brought to the American veterans who come back to Vietnam to confront their inner demons. He told of a friend, a former Marine from the Bronx, who had summoned up the courage to go back to My Lai. “There was a woman there, one of the survivors, and she reached out to him and held his hand and said, “We have forgiven you, now you have to forgive yourself.”

How much more grace, how much more dignity, how much more wisdom and compassion can one person have than that she could forgive a man who had, decades before, come to her village to kill?

I am nearing the end of my sermon. There are two points I would like to make about forgiveness. The first is that someone from the United States government needs to take the initiative and apologize to the Vietnamese people for the American War. They are ready to forgive us. The apology needs to be delivered formally by a high-ranking representative of the government of the United States. I can think of no better person than our current Secretary of State, John Kerry—the same John Kerry who, in 1971, as a member of Vietnam Veterans Against the War, testified before the United States Senate and uttered these words: “How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?”

Finally, I confess a lingering rage about what was done to the generation of young men and women who were ordered to fight, die and suffer in Vietnam—and those at home who were assaulted by the “armies of the night” as they struggled to end the war. As for those who came back from the war broken and bitter-- having lost their faith, their limbs, their health, sometimes dear friends--I think we need to find better ways to help them heal. Edward Tick has an answer

that seems to work—honor them, yes, but give them an opportunity to tell their stories.

As Gordon has suggested in his opening words, PTSD can turn into PTSG (Post-traumatic stress growth) if sufferers are permitted and encouraged to tell their stories. I know this from my own experience. When I walked out of this church and went home on that awful day seven years ago, I suffered mightily until I got into therapy and discovered the PTSD which has been my lot since an early age. I have come a long way with your help, and with the love and support of my partner and my many friends, I'm now realizing the *growth*.

Seven years ago I stood on that spot, right over there. Near the door. The shotgun blast was the loudest sound I had heard in fifty years. In that year 1958, that spring, I was at Camp Lejeune, enduring what the Marines called Infantry Training Regiment (ITR). As part of the experience of “war lite” we were ordered to undergo a “live fire” exercise. That is, we crawled in the dust with live machine gun bullets streaking over our heads. We turned on our backs and used the barrels of our M-1 rifles to lift the barbed wire as we snaked forward.

As we crawled closer to the finish line I began to feel relief. Just keep your head down, I thought. Then, as I passed close to a circle of sandbags, it

happened. The explosion, the charge meant to simulate mortar rounds landing, seemed to lift me off the ground. That was the sound I remembered on July 27, 2008.

I will talk no more about that day, except to say that it nudged me into therapy. I am today a far more committed and active Veteran For Peace. I know lots more about PTSD. I am saving my soul by intensifying my work for peace—and by honoring and working with those who struggle day by day to end war and all its attendant evils. I am sick of war. I am sick of our militarized police forces, our occupied cities, our talk of endless war. I am sick of the racism that rears its ugly head from My Lai to Ferguson to Charleston to Fallujah. I am so over war—and all the chickens that have come home to roost. I “ain’t gonna study war no more.”

And now, my sermon is ended. In a few days I will be in San Diego, with my other beloved community—Veterans For Peace—working toward a world without war. I am OK. I hope you are, too. As a rule, My Life Flows On in Endless Song.

And, may it ever be so.