

Warrior and Pilgrim  
Reflections on a Life in War and Peacemaking

*Bob Weekley's talk is entitled "Warrior and Pilgrim." In this talk he explores the fascination war holds for many cultures in contrast to the reality of the death, suffering, and destruction that war brings. He notes the high calling of self-sacrifice which is the hallmark of a democratic military establishment and contrasts it with the cynicism with which the military forces have sometimes been used by their civilian leaders.*

*After Bob Weekley graduated from West Point his duties immersed him in an array of situations that included command in combat, refugee operations, and life in a former German death camp while his diplomatic assignments included arms control negotiator and U.S. foreign policy development. As an assistant professor of international relations at West Point and in subsequent foreign policy development work on the staff of the Secretary of Defense, he acquired a perspective that combines the realities of theory and practice. These varied experiences developed his perspective as both warrior and diplomat, and have kindled his humanist pursuit for a balance between the practical imperatives of national security in an imperfect world and the moral imperatives of social justice.*

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Mankind's ambivalence toward war.

We are fascinated by war. War is the central, powerful theme of human history. In fact, to study history is to study the history of wars – from the Greeks down through the Romans, the Huns, the Mongols, the Crusaders, Papal wars, “civil” wars, colonial and imperialistic wars, the “World” wars, and on to the present. But, for the Unitarian Universalists here on a Sunday morning looking for enrichment of their spiritual lives – is there a spiritual connection? Why are we talking about this?

In response I would ask you: Is there any more central theme of life and the history of man than war? How many people are affected now by present and past wars? How many loved ones have we – the people of the world lost? Have you visited a veteran's hospital lately and seen, sitting around in their wheelchairs the human living refuse of our wars? Unitarian Universalists, affirming their principles of “the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” and of “justice, equity, and compassion in human relations,” have been challenged by war and all that it embodies. Our churches often have been sanctuaries for promoting peace and, in times of social stress, harboring those who seek help in avoiding participation in war. Our churches often have been in the forefront of movements to end war and promote peace.

Yes, we are conflicted about war. We accord war a place of both glory and horror in our hearts. War generates both excitement and anxiety in us. During the buildup and

conduct of the Iraq war numerous people told me they had been unable to sleep because they were having trouble dealing with the idea that their nation was launching a war they felt was unjustified. Other Americans felt a sense of pride and elation that their nation was willing to sacrifice its blood and dollars to combat the forces of “evil.” And, yes, war does have a spiritual dimension, just as other aspects of life and death are a basis for our reflection and spiritual concern.

We are not the only people to suffer conflict about war. Many expressions of this concern have come from military people themselves. One of the best expressions of this dilemma comes from the great military scholar and historian, Captain Sir Basil Liddell Hart. In his book *Thoughts on War* he wrote:

The more I study war, the more I come to feel that the cause of war is fundamentally psychological rather than political or economic. When I come in contact with a militarist, his stupidity depresses me and makes me realize the amount of human obtuseness that has to be overcome before we can make progress towards peace. But contact with pacifists too often has the effect of making me almost despair of the elimination of war, because in their very pacifism the element of pugnacity is so perceptible.

War is infused with the mythologies that drive our lives. Joseph Campbell, that profound observer of human cultural history, wrote in his masterful *Myths to Live By*:

... not only has conflict between groups been normal to human experience, but there is also the cruel fact to be recognized that killing is the precondition of all living whatsoever: life lives on life, eats life, and would otherwise not exist. To some this terrible necessity is fundamentally unacceptable, and such people have, at times, brought forth mythologies of a way to perpetual peace. However, those have not been the people generally who have survived in what Darwin termed the universal struggle for existence. Rather, it has been those who have been reconciled to the nature of life on this earth. Plainly and simply: it has been the nations, tribes, and peoples bred to mythologies of war that have survived to communicate their life-supporting mythic lore to descendants.

Joseph Campbell notes that of the contending forerunners of man, *Zinjanthropus* (the vegetarian) and *Homo Habilis* (the meat-eater, killer, and maker of weapons and tools) it was the vegetarian who became extinct.

And again from Campbell’s writing:

Heraclitus declared war to be the creator of all great things; and in the words ... of Spengler, ‘The one who lacks courage to be a hammer comes off in the role of the anvil.’ Many a sensitive mind, reacting to this unwelcome truth, has found nature intolerable, and has cried down all those best fit to live as ‘wicked,’ ‘evil,’ or ‘monstrous,’ setting up instead, as a counter-ideal, the model of him who turns the other cheek and whose kingdom is not of this world. And so it is that finally two radically opposed basic mythologies can be identified in the broad panorama of

history: one in which this monstrous precondition of all temporal life is affirmed with a will, and the other in which it is denied.

Rather than belabor this, scan history quickly and see if you can think of any culture in which the mythology of war was not a central theme. Whether you search the cultures of the Americas, Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe, or the islands surrounding them, warriors were, and are, central to their tribe or nation. When man started building cities at the dawn of the agricultural epoch, walls soon enclosed those cities – and for good reason. How many parks, squares, and plazas around the globe today are dominated by a heroic bronze warrior on horseback?

Our most ancient literature is infused with the glory of battle, and topping them all are the *Iliad* and the Old Testament. In the *Iliad* Homer states: “Men grow tired of sleep, love, singing, and dancing sooner than of war.” Hector, doomed to die in war, says to Ajax:

War – I know it well, and the butchery of men. Well I know, shift to the left, shift to the right, my tough tanned shield. That’s what the real drill, defensive fighting means to me. I know it all, how to charge in the rush of plunging horses – I know how to stand and fight to the finish, twist and lunge in the War-god’s deadly dance.

We recall how Deuteronomy records the Lord God giving his *chosen* people the lands of seven other nations, and commanding the Israelites to “utterly destroy them ... and show them no mercy.” We recall the later assault of Jericho when the Lord God assisted Joshua’s band that “utterly destroyed all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and asses, with the edge of the sword....”

And it is not just the religion of the Jews, Christians, and Muslims that loved war. The Baghavad Gita is, in part a great war epic.

A king seeking prosperity should not hesitate to kill his son, brother, father, or friend, if any one or more of these should stand in his way .... Without cutting the very vitals of others, without performing many cruel deeds, without killing living creatures, as fishermen kill fish, one cannot win prosperity.... Every work should be done completely .... By killing its inhabitants, by destroying its roads, and by burning and pulling down its houses, a king should devastate his enemy’s realm.... Might is above right; right proceeds from might....

This archetypal symbol of the warrior, this instinct for fighting only thinly veiled by the veneer of civilization, does indeed live in our collective psyche. Peace also – but less prominently in our world – has a deeply spiritual connection. Men and women have lived and died according to their deep devotion to the values both of war and of peace.

### War and religion.

Throughout history warriors and religious leaders have been intimate partners in the pursuit of national violence. Recall the tribal shaman invoking the spirits to infuse the

warriors with invincibility. Recall the pagan Roman priest blessing the warrior legions with the fresh blood of a bull. Recall the medieval clergy urging on their kings to crusade against the Jews and Muslim infidels. For their part Muslim nations, in the name of Allah, were conquering peoples from the Mediterranean littoral to South Asia. For generations the Christian sons of the landed gentry became either military officers or priests, while the ranks of their battle formations were filled by drafted peasants from their estates. Or more contemporarily recall the scene of the U.S. Army chaplain shown baptizing a long line of U.S. soldiers in a water-filled hole in the desert in the hours before the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

And then there is the Sunday football ritual. When there's no real war to fight, people the world over glory in team sports which are born of the spirit of war, with their opposing sides locked in combat, their platoons and squads, their strategy and tactics, even to include the temple maidens contorting ecstatically on the sidelines in their near nakedness.

Peace, also, is deeply ingrained in religious life – although apparently less so than is war. Eastern concepts of protecting all life spring from ethical and religious motives. Recall the pacifism as practiced most courageously and effectively by Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Continuing that preference for nonviolent solutions even today the U.S. National Council of Churches joined with the Pope and religious groups around the world in urging the U.S. not to launch its invasion of Iraq. Our own UU Association has been a steady voice for choosing the peaceful option in international relations.

### The life of a warrior and pilgrim.

So back to my title – Warrior and Pilgrim – you see it *is* apt. In my case, fortune exposed me to a series of separate realities that seem contradictory. But they blend into the psyche and conviction of what I believe I have come to be – a *warrior-humanist*. Let me explain.

In my senior year in high school, trying to choose among university options, I happened to take Margaret to the movies. We saw Tyrone Power in *The Long Grey Line*. That was it! That saga of duty, honor, and country, of dedication and sacrifice, appealed to that hometown Colorado boy. A life of service appealed more than making money or building things. Just to be a part of those men standing together – and dying together – in defense of their country, with the majestic strains of *The Corps* playing in the background – now that was spiritual! Without my parents knowledge I called my Congressman and got myself appointed to the U.S. Military Academy.

At West Point, in addition to the intensive education in engineering and liberal arts, we also studied what was called Military Art – the histories, strategic lessons, and tactics of those great campaigns and battles from Alexander's day to Napoleon and to the present. When the civilian public packed the field to see us parading in our dress uniforms we were always conscious that we were adorned with more than the starched whites and feathered plumes but also with gleaming steel bayonets and real M1 rifles. After graduation from West Point I went through the Army's daunting Ranger training and later

through parachute training to be, as the recruiting slogan said, “all I could be” – ready for duty and to defend my country.

Providence went further and gave me a sequence of unconventional experiences in the succeeding years that enabled me to develop a perspective that few have been privileged to receive.

My first assignment in Germany was to join a combat unit near the Czechoslovakian border on the Iron Curtain at the height of the cold war. I want to tell you two things about this period. First, I was based in the former German SS compound at Dachau. In my headquarters, the room where I stored the classified documents had been used – I was told by our old janitor – for storing the tons of gold teeth and gold eyeglasses that had been removed from the prisoners before they were put to death. My living quarters had decorative swastikas on the drainpipes and the chandeliers. Our stair railings had the SS symbol built in, as did the seats in the chapel. The boy from sunny Colorado immersed himself in the dark reality of the horror of Dachau.

Now, it is one thing to read about death and destruction, or now even to see it on television. It is quite another thing to be in it: to handle the cremation ovens and their equipment, to trace the blood ditches used to drain blood from the killing platforms like we drain water from a swamp, to find the doctors’ charts illustrating experiments on killing people by freezing them to death, to find and gently touch the pithy final words that prisoners scratched into the frames of the wooden sleeping platforms, to see the photos of skinny naked human bodies stacked twenty high. The evil power of this place led me to pursue the whole thing – how the place operated, how they transported people in from the trains in great wagons pulled by teams of prisoners, the overwhelmed cremation ovens, the problems with the gas chambers, the stories of survivors, ... It became my additional and voluntary military duty to conduct tours of Dachau for the few people who were ever permitted to visit it at that time. This is an experience for those who have the stomach to face an alternate reality and to try to grasp it. This is a reality that spawned a war. There was no question in my mind in Dachau as to whether military intervention by the allied forces was right or wrong. And with Soviet forces in a threatening posture just across the border I believed deeply that I was doing the right thing.

The other reality I want to share about this three-year experience in Germany – I commanded what was then the first and only battlefield nuclear weapon delivery system, the 280 millimeter gun – capable of firing a 600 pound nuclear shell over a distance of 31 kilometers that delivered an explosive potential greater than the bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I had my own cache of real live “nukes.” I, and the soldiers I commanded, assembled and disassembled those nuclear shells, we watched over them, and we carried them around southern Germany to our various border firing positions keeping them ready to fire on short notice. This small-town boy had the power in his hands to start World War III. I often found myself reflecting on the unimaginable power in those enriched uranium rings that I carefully held in my hands while assembling the shells. I pondered how man had created such innocent looking lethality, and I reflected on the hundreds of thousands of people we incinerated at Hiroshima and Nagasaki by this

ordinary looking hardware. I thought of the thousands of German and Czech human beings that my own weapons were targeted to snuff out. I did not discover any answers. This, too, is reality.

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A few years later the U.S. president decided on a major commitment to assist South Vietnam in defending against a takeover by communist North Vietnam. Being a trained and capable young captain I volunteered and soon found myself in command of a U.S. artillery unit in the heat of battle. What does one learn from two years in the field, constantly facing and seeing death, making life and death decisions over and over again? I experienced it as a different reality that made the other world I knew seem superficial and shallow. The seemingly great concerns of ordinary life became trivial and silly. In combat we got down to bedrock concerns where whining or thinking about internal feelings had no place. The emphasis was on action, top performance, constant vigilance, and survival. Living this utterly different reality may be what causes some to be attracted and addicted to war.

Something else I learned there in Vietnam – no matter how much the national leaders and policy makers want to conceal it, the non-combatant deaths are heart-rending and undermine most of the moral argument to start a war. Come along with me when grave village leaders take me to their village, which was hit accidentally. Come into the house with the roof blown off and with crying children cringing in the corners and see with me the young mother and father in their blood-soaked bed clasping each other in a last loving embrace of death. That experience leaves me disturbed that our national leaders say, as recently as the war in Iraq, that as a matter of policy we won't count civilian deaths. We won't count the thousands of civilian or enemy military deaths because it might undermine public support for the war. Yes. If people really understand the true and total cost of war they will question whether the projected outcome is worth the costs – fiscal, human, and moral.

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In 1975 fortune again propelled me into an unusual opportunity. That year South Vietnam finally fell to the invaders from the north. You recall that hundreds of thousands of South Vietnamese people took to the sea in boats of all kinds to escape from their overrun country. Most of those who did not perish at sea were brought to the U.S. In the whole U.S. Army there was only one active duty Civil Affairs battalion and I happened to be the commander of that battalion. The mission of Civil Affairs units is to deal with refugees or occupation situations. So I found myself in charge of a chaotic situation where thousands of refugees were arriving daily that were in dire need of nutrition, medical care, and psychological attention. These people had no idea where the rest of their family members were. Most of these frightened people had no idea who we were or even what country they were in. All they knew is that they had been fleeing for their lives, many for weeks or months.

I divided my battalion among the main camps in Guam, Arkansas, and Pennsylvania. Within a few days we had some 130,000 desperate human beings on our hands to feed and clothe, to deliver their babies and tend to their wounds and diseases. Every hour of every day brought new instances of pathos and occasionally joy as we were able to sometimes unite family members who assumed that their loved ones were dead or lost. We worked around the clock for over a year to try to bring some comfort and stability into their lives and prepare them for life in their new homeland. These were wonderful people who had been doctors, teachers, administrators, or soldiers in their homeland and now they had nothing left of their former homes and lives.

We hear the word refugee often and don't give it much thought. Currently the world refugee population – people displaced from their homes by conflict who are living in other countries – stands at more than 12 million. Imagine if your children and grandchildren, or your parents were refugees, restricted to life in a squalid camp with little hope for a better future. The impact of war goes far beyond those who are killed, burned, maimed, and traumatized. Lives are changed and disrupted for generations. What a strange blessing for me to be able to experience this reality and to give of my time and energy and experience to help them. Their faces and voices, their cries and laughter are with me today.

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Yet another version of reality was in store for me. I was selected to spend about seven years on the staff of the Secretary of Defense where my responsibilities included arms control negotiations and U.S. foreign policy formulation. In Geneva, Switzerland I was a delegate to U.S. negotiations with the Soviet Union and other nations to negotiate treaties on banning chemical weapons, prohibiting nuclear weapons tests, advancing nuclear non-proliferation, and so on. Day after day we faced our cold war adversaries across a long table in a sterile room. We became immersed in the technical details and the effects of these weapons of mass annihilation.

It has been said that making policy is like making sausage – you wouldn't want to see either process. To me that was true. On many issues the enemy was not the foreign counterpart sitting across the table, it was the politicians and special interests back home. When we would be near agreement in our arms control negotiations there would be intervention from our own U.S. government, driven by the special interests that were afraid we were on the verge of actually banning those destructive weapons. I can tell you from personal observation that some of the allegations you hear are true – intelligence is sometimes fabricated to serve the policy goals of people who have the reins of power. Their message is: "Damn the facts, damn the international community – we will do what we want to do to serve our own narrow interests." I can recount many disturbing real-life examples.

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These are poignant but conflicting realities, the mystique of war, the glory of a West Point parade, the horrors of a Nazi death camp, the body bags of Vietnam, the pathetic

refugees, the perfidy of policy formulation ... Where does this take us? What can we make of it? Here's where it has brought me.

### Five conclusions.

1. Yes, human conflict is endemic. Without laws backed by deadly force we cannot be secure. Doing away with the police would not do away with crime. Quite the opposite. And so it is among countries. Doing away with armies would not do away with war.
2. Therefore, given the warlike nature of mankind so far, the maintenance of a professional, disciplined, and non-political military force is essential to the preservation of a democratic nation. The military values of duty, honor, country, and – ultimately – the willingness to die in the service of one's country are, indeed, a high calling.
3. But, the use of deadly force should be an absolute last resort – not used to settle old scores or make a point. Human lives are much too precious. War waged for partisan political motives is wrong. Our government has such a monopoly on the control of information that the true motives are often not known by the public until many years later when the archives are declassified. We have only learned in recent years for certain how much deceit was exercised for political motives in taking us to war in Vietnam. That deceit makes the pathos of the Vietnam Wall with its fifty-eight thousand names a monument to human folly. Sadly we finally heard from a chief architect of the current war on Iraq, Paul Wolfowitz, that the publicized motives were chosen for bureaucratic reasons.
4. I have learned that to be a good citizen is to be skeptical and not to become caught up in war fever. What, truly, are the government's motives? Domestic policy gets intense scrutiny and is subject to law and the constitution. But international policy often has no comparable level of debate and the weak constraints of international law are often disregarded. The nation can decide to kill, devastate, and conquer at will. Might makes right in the international sphere. The warriors and decision-makers of the losing side are tried and punished in trials convened by the victor.
5. I have learned first hand that the military professionals are more reluctant than the civilian politicians to threaten or start a war. Who was the president that warned his nation of the dangers of the military-industrial complex? General Eisenhower. Who counseled against the invasion of Iraq? Former National Security Advisor General Brent Scowcroft, General Anthony Zinni, General Frank's predecessor as commander of the Middle East region, and – until they were overruled by the politicians – the U.S. military. What Senator stood against the tide and voted against the Iraq war resolution? Prominently, Senator Jack Reed, a West Pointer and combat infantryman in Vietnam, one of the few left in Congress who has seen war first hand.

But war is popular in the U.S.; there is no doubt about it. Especially war is popular among those who don't have to do the fighting or suffer its effects. People who question the justification for war are derided as "appeasers." "Anti-war" sentiments are often

viewed as unpatriotic. If you don't love war you are suspect to many, viewed as something less than a good red-blooded American.

I trust we can be open to the beauty and the good of those who are willing to serve their country with professionalism and honor and who are ready to make the ultimate sacrifice in defense of their people. And I trust we can be skeptical and stand against those who would send the youth of their nation to wage war for less than as a last resort but as a means to political or economic gain. I believe we are right in our Unitarian Universalist Principles to affirm:

*The inherent worth and dignity of every person*

*Justice, equity and compassion in human relations*

*The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all*

*Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.*

Bob Weekley

August 14, 2005