

Bless All Who Serve: A Memorial Day Service
May 29, 2011

As I shared with the children earlier during Time for All Ages, my father, Bob Galaher, had an annual tradition of taking a one-day solo hike around the timberline trail of Mt. Hood, in Oregon. It's about a forty-mile hike all the way around, and has an elevation change of about 10,000 feet. A letter that my dad wrote to his mother, back in Massachusetts, describes the beginnings of such a hike this way:

I got up about 1:30 Sat and drove up to the Mt. after getting together some gear and sandwiches etc. I got up there about three thirty just in time to register on the climbing book for the forest service. At 4 sharp while there was just a trace of light beginning to show in the East I started out on the Timberline trail. I *went* East Most people go West. I had to use my flashlight often to keep on the trail that drops down into Salmon River canyon. I crossed the river in the first pale light. Then I was into the woods and climbing up through a series of open meadows scattered through the forest. At last it leveled out a little and I was at Hood River meadows. It was now getting quite light and I began to flush deer in groups of three to eight. Some of them were quite unaware that I was so near them and snorted in surprise. Some of them were quite curious and hardly moved off. It was by now evident that I was to have a

beautiful day and the cool breeze was welcome. I ate a deviled ham ,Underwoods of course, sandwich on the way, without stopping.

To this daughter, my father's descriptions of his hike are eloquent and humorous, healing and informative. I'm grateful my brother Matthew has recorded passages from my dad's diaries such as this one to remember him by.

And, in some part, I can't help but wonder what didn't get written down. I wonder especially if, on those hikes, my father was seeking to walk both toward and away from something. An avid skier and rock climber as a young man growing up in Massachusetts, he had enlisted in the Army immediately after the attack on Pearl Harbor, joining the newly forming 10th mountain division. He believed his particular skills and his love of the mountains would meet a particular demand in the European war, and he did put them to valuable use, training British and Indian troops in mountain warfare in Sepino, Italy, near the Apennine mountains.

But it *was war*, and though my father did not participate in the famous Riva Ridge ascent for which the original 10th Mountain Division is best known, he had his own share of traumatic war time experiences. For instance, he witnessed the aftermath--just the aftermath, but still, the aftermath--of the dreadful battles of Monte Cassino. It was in that series of

battles that American troops had dropped over 1,400 tons of bombs upon the ancient monastery, the original home of the Order of St. Benedict, believing German troops were holed up there. It was in that series of battles that over 55,000 Allied troops were either killed or wounded, along with approximately 20,000 German casualties.

So, I can't say for a fact, but part of me imagines that my dad's hikes around Mt. Hood spoke to a desire to move away from his memories of the war, and at the same time to reclaim his love for the mountains, where so much of the war had happened for him. And I sometimes wonder if the two perhaps had become inextricably tied.

Related to my *father's* experiences of wartime Europe, I remember a story my mother told me, of her travels to Europe shortly *after* World War II. She had graduated from college in 1947, and had the privilege of spending a year traveling abroad. In a train ride through a certain stretch of Italy, or maybe it was Germany, she told me that the train conductors made the passengers close all the curtains. The damage done during the war was too severe and too far from any sign of real repair for tourists to see. Best that they wait until they arrive somewhere a little less frightening, a bit more presentable, I suppose.

But rather than stay in some place like Paris or London or Rome, my mother chose to spend most of her time while in Europe in Norway, a land of its own steep mountains and deep fjords. Years later she told me how, when she was there, because of the war, certain foods were still scarce, and times still hard. But she stayed, and after that she, like my dad, was one always to return to the mountains. I think the mountains may have been where they felt most at peace together. Here is an excerpt from a passage my dad wrote about a joint hike around Mt Hood that they did in 1960:

After breakfast we crossed the river bed and started a steep climb up, then heavy forest with patches of big juicy huckleberries. After reaching the top of the ridge we came out into a wonderful meadow where we wound along, crossing wonderful little clear brooks passing through patches of trees. For some time we kept pretty much at the same altitude with only small canyons to descend and climb out of. Around noon we had to drop into a deep canyon and there we ate lunch. Then we crossed a scene reminiscent of Himalayan expeditions. A roiled glacial river with great moraines on either side.

Reading and sharing these passages and seeing the photos of my parents which I shared earlier with the children, of course I become nostalgic about my parents, and am tempted to romanticize who they were. But more so, what I hope to do with *you* is enter into a larger question, a larger exploration about the relationship we human beings have with the earth, especially when we are or have been in times of war, as both my mother and father experienced, and as I'm sure many of you, or your parents, or grandparents have.

Actually, just Friday night, at the breaking-of-the-fast worship service, a Wildflower Vietnam veteran told me about how, while in Vietnam, he and his company would drive through miles and miles of forest that had been completely exfoliated by the spraying of Agent Orange. Now he too suffers from its effects.

Ultimately, we all suffer from the effects of war, all of us being inhabitants of this earth, which we continuously pummel with explosives and stain with our own blood. We here may not see it or feel it as directly as some, but literally everywhere we go, while we walk upon the beauty of the earth, we walk through scenes of devastation. Whether we journey across the Great Plains of this country, the jungles of Vietnam, the fields of Belgium, the deserts of Iraq or the mountains of Afghanistan, the ghosts of

war surround us. And the scarring, the wounding of the earth is right beneath us as well. War is not just about stranger against stranger, or even neighbor against neighbor. It is humanity destroying its own sacred home.

Now, in my personal search to know my father a little better, several years ago I watched a documentary called *Fire on the Mountain*, about the original 10th Mountain Division. While several of the founding 10th ended up establishing major ski resorts after the war, one 10th mountain veteran, David Brower, went on to found the Sierra Club Foundation, which helps fund the Sierra Club. He also founded Friends of the Earth, and the John Muir Institute for Environmental Studies. In the film, Brower speaks of how his direct experience of warfare in the mountains of Italy led him to see the futility of war, and the extent of its destruction, beyond how it effects human beings, and into how it permanently scars and alters the face of the earth.

It is Brower who said, "We don't inherit the earth from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children." If that is the case, how are we doing with our loan? How are we doing with Franklin Delano Roosevelt's four proposed essential human freedoms--freedom of speech, freedom to worship as we wish, freedom from want, freedom from fear? How are we doing, in the words of Starhawk, in nam[ing] "the world alive"?

Another documentary I recently watched, which I recommend, is called *Restrepo*. Have any of you seen it? The film's title comes from the name of one soldier in a platoon stationed in Afghanistan's Korengal Valley. The film was directed by Sebastian Junger and Tim Hetherington and was nominated this past winter for an Academy Award. You may recognize Tim Hetherington's name. He was one of two well-known photojournalists killed in Libya this past April.

Restrepo is an intense film. You witness the journey of the platoon, the building of their observation post, which the men name after Restrepo after he is killed. As the film moves forward, you endure with the men the year that they are stationed in that observation post, engaging in gun battles and ambushes, going on patrol, living a life of unimaginable stress as well as emotional intimacy. And surrounding the platoon is this extraordinary landscape of valleys and mountains, spotted with hamlets and villages. The Korengal Valley is rugged, it is harsh, it is beautiful. And most of the time, during battle scenes, the only thing you see getting hit is the earth itself. Sides of mountains bursting, trees exploding, rocks sliding.

Of course, though, we know it is the earth, *and* so much more. And *that* so much more is not just "the enemy." It's human beings. Brothers, sisters, sons, daughters. And animals. *Life*. All forms of life.

Knowing this to be true, today being Memorial Day, in which we are called to honor those men and women who have served and sacrificed their lives in times of war, I think of the third reading Jeff shared this morning, the one by Unitarian Universalist minister Barbara Merritt. And what if this were a prayer not only to those men and women who serve in times of war, but to all people, at all times--in Roosevelt's words, "everywhere in the world"--and a prayer to the earth itself. Merritt proclaims:

It's time that somebody told you that you are lovely, good, and real; that your beauty can make hearts stand still. It's time somebody told you how much they love and need you, how much your spirit helped set them free, how your eyes shine full of light. It's time somebody told you.

Perhaps it's simplistic, unrealistic to believe that a soldier or marine or sailor or airman could pick up this little book which that reading comes from, and, reading it, suddenly put down his gun and refuse to fight. It's probably downright naive to think that, just because one fighter would put down his gun, his enemy would suddenly hesitate to shoot. Because it's not just a matter of noble or patriotic intentions. As soldiers in the documentary *Restrepo* attest, they don't know how they will manage to return to civilian

life, because the intensity of war has become like a high to them. *Restrepo* co-director Sebastian Junger, in an interview for his new book, *War*, states, “There’s some common truth to all wars. Why do men miss war? I think men miss war because there’s a lot of adrenaline involved in combat, and once you adjust to that level of stimulation, it starts to feel kind of necessary.”

Dear God, Spirit of life and love, let us not perpetuate war because, as a result of its stimulating, adrenaline-rushing effects, it begins to *feel* necessary. Let us instead bless all who serve by remembering the statement of David Brower, that we “don’t inherit the earth from our ancestors; we borrow it from our children.” Let us bless all who serve by remembering the words of Franklin Delano Roosevelt: “The fourth [freedom] is freedom from fear--which, translated into world terms, means a worldwide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor--anywhere in the world.”

Starhawk says that by naming something, we invoke it. Let us therefore name the earth sacred, and let us name it sanctuary to the children of the world--not just the children of this country--but the children of the *world*. In doing so, may we not rush to or attach ourselves to the thrill of

combat, but make our way toward the beauty of the mountains, the vastness of the ocean, the solace of the desert, the flowers of the fields. May we bless all who serve by pointing them to their own beauty, beyond their heroism or bravery or patriotism. For as Barbara Merritt says:

It's time somebody told you how absolutely beautiful your laughter is. You bring joy into our world.

Just possibly, messages of love and acceptance have always been circulating in our midst. The hard part is not seeking out these positive and creative affirmations that remind us we are loved. The hard part is taking in the love.

It's time someone told us all that we are valued and infinitely worthwhile.

And it's time we believed it.

So may it be for all humanity. So may it be for all life on earth. So may it be for this sacred home. Amen.