

## **Choirs of Wailing Shells November 6, 2011**

If you have been paying close attention to the Occupy Wall Street movement, you may have recently heard the names of Shamar Thomas and Scott Olsen. Do they sound familiar? Shamar Thomas is a former Marine sergeant, native and resident of New York City, who on October 16, single handedly confronted about thirty New York City police officers, some in riot gear, who were gathering around nonviolent protestors in Times Square. Thomas shouted at the police officers, "This is not a war zone! These are unarmed people. It doesn't make you tough to hurt these people!... These people are U.S. Citizens.... I've been to Iraq fourteen months for my people. They don't have guns. Why are you hurting these people... How can you sleep at night, going after people? You're here to protect us!" Thomas continued, "Why are you hurting U.S. Citizens? Do you get honor out of this? You're walking around in riot gear like there's a war. These people don't have guns. My whole family served this country!... My mom, my father, everybody has served in Iraq and Afghanistan. We fought for this country. I come home. And these cops are hurting people I fought to protect."

Having silenced and stilled the police around him, Thomas then walks calmly and confidently away. The youtube video of his speech has gone viral.

Scott Olsen is another Iraq War veteran. Having served two tours of duty, Olsen is a member of Iraq Veterans Against the War. On October 25, Olsen was standing at attention in front of and as a member of hundreds of protestors at Occupy Oakland. In front of him, on the other side of police barriers, were dozens of Oakland policemen. Suddenly, provoked or not by the crowd, the police began shooting tear gas canisters. Though Olsen had been standing perfectly still, not throwing anything or provoking anyone, a canister hit him point blank in the head and fractured his skull. When others ran to his aid, a police officer shot yet another tear gas canister directly into those gathered around Olsen, from just feet away. Critically injured, Olsen did not gain consciousness for days, and there are reports that he has had trouble speaking.

These two stories, set on opposite coasts of the country, each placing a war veteran in tension with law enforcement, each revealing an unusual solidarity between those who have served and those *whom* they have served, end with extraordinarily different results. One man is empowered,

the other is critically injured. One is celebrated for his righteousness, the other agonized over for his suffering.

But of course neither story really ends there. For one thing, Thomas, hearing of Olsen's injuries, then went and recruited other non-active marines to join him in protecting the people of the Occupy movement. He's also appeared on national news programs, and it is my hope that Olsen will some day be able to do the same. Perhaps together, these two men, as well as others, will be able to share their perspectives on the connection between military warfare abroad and so-called class warfare right here in our own country. Who and what, after all, are we fighting for? What exactly is war good for? Can we learn from Shamar Thomas--can we be *changed* by him--when we hear him say to the New York City police, "We fought for this country. I come home. And these cops are hurting people I fought to protect."

Whether it is cops, or banks, or elected officials, or oil companies or religious organizations doing the hurting--and plenty of hurt is being done--whether it's any of these bodies of power, or any combination of them, hurting U.S. citizens in one way or another, what sign of appreciation is this to those who went to war and risked their lives, believing they were doing so to *protect* those same U.S. citizens? In other words, how are we

showing war veterans that their efforts were worthwhile, or that the *values* they were told they were protecting--life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness--are actually practiced for and by all who live in this country?

After all, consider what veterans have to endure in going to war. Consider the stories--whether told through poetry or painting, film, memoir, or simple conversation--consider the stories that help us get just a glimpse of the fear, pain, sorrow, anger, and resignation that fighting in a war involves. World War I veteran and poet Wilfred Owen, asks, in his poem, "Anthem for Doomed Youth," "What passing-bells for those who die like cattle? Only the monstrous anger of the guns." Iraq war veteran Gerardo Mena writes, after Corporal Kyle Powell has died in his arms,

They said you are a bandage. So I was a bandage....

I jumped on Kyle's chest and wrapped my lace arms together around his torso and  
Pressed my head to his ribcage but there was no heart beat. They said no. You are a bad bandage.

You are a bad bandage. You are a bad spear, a bad flag. You are a *good* coffin. The thing about coffins, of course, is that they are buried with the dead. What part of himself, of his experience, had to be buried when

Gerardo Mena came home from his war experiences, without Corporal Powell coming home beside him? Who will wrap their arms around Mena's own torso, put their head to his ribcage, listen for his heartbeat, and be the bandage he might so desperately need?

No, I shouldn't *assume* he needs such things. I shouldn't assume Mena is a victim or to be pitied. Still, consider this. According to Veterans for Common Sense, who under the Freedom of Information Act, get their statistics from the Department of Veteran Affairs and the Department of Defense, since September 11, 2001, 2,226,056 American service members have been deployed to war zones. Among those service members there have been over 6,000 war zone deaths, with nearly three hundred of those being war-zone suicides. There are 1,442,987 men and women--basically half who were deployed--now eligible for VA disability benefits, and an average of 9,500 new claims are filed each month. What that means, by the way, for the VA is that over the next forty years an estimated \$900 billion will be spent on healthcare for veterans.

Here is another interesting number. According to an October 28, 2011, *USA Today* article, quote, "About 13,000 of the nation's homeless in 2010 were ex-service members between ages 18 and 30, a

disproportionately large number of the nation's overall homeless veteran population.”

Why might that be? A November 2, 2011 *Associated Press* article notes of veterans joining the Occupy Wall Street movement, and here I quote at length:

The veterans say those who fought for their country have the right to protest an economy that gives them a slimmer chance of finding jobs than most Americans.

From 2008 to 2011, veteran unemployment rose 5.1 percentage points, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. And in 2011, the combat veteran unemployment has been consistently more than two percentage points higher than the national average of about 9 percent. [The article continues,] Veteran unemployment is projected to worsen after 10,000 servicemen return from Afghanistan and 46,000 come home from Iraq by year's end.

So. There are at *least* 13,000 homeless Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans between the ages of 18 and 30. Shamar Thomas, the marine who chewed out the police in New York, is 24 years old. Iraq War veteran Scott Olsen, who remains in the hospital today with his head injury suffered not

on the front lines of Iraq, but on the streets of Oakland, is 24 years old. While I couldn't find an average age for Occupy protestors, I did find that of the 984 Occupy Wall Street protestors that have been *arrested*, the median age is 27.

As Buffalo Springfield noted back in 1967, "There's something happening here..." And while the next line in the song goes--can you help me?--"What it is ain't exactly clear," what seems to be happening *here* in 2011 is that those people born in the 1980s, in the era of trickle down economics, are now getting just that--a trickle. Similarly, they were born toward the end of the Cold War era, and by the time they reached young adulthood, were those called up to serve in the newest era of hot wars. Subsequently, they are the generation--the first since the Vietnam war era--that is spilling tremendous amounts of blood, sacrificing incredible numbers of lives--in order to protect the same country that cheats them of their own well being.

And now, now that service members are returning in large numbers from Iraq as well as Afghanistan, the question is, what future will await them? Just yesterday, the *Austin American Statesman* had a cover article asking that very question: "As Soldiers Leave War behind and Return to Fort Hood, What Comes Next?" The article begins with these words:

By next summer, this sprawling Army post will be more crowded than it has been since U.S. soldiers began pouring into twin war zones a decade ago. With combat operations ending in Iraq and slowing in Afghanistan, times are changing at what has been the Army's busiest deployment hub since 2001.

But while Fort Hood braces for the return of nearly 20,000 American soldiers, many of whom have served three, four or five tours overseas, Army leaders are struggling with the unprecedented task of reintegrating soldiers who have known nothing but war for the past decade.

The article then goes on to say, "Experts warn that America is stumbling into uncharted waters as it deals with the return of hundreds of thousands of troops — the 1 percent of the nation that shouldered the load of America's two longest wars."

The one percent of the nation that shouldered the load of America's two longest wars. That's a different kind of one percent than we've been talking about in the Occupy movement. And yet, there they both are, facing one another, in New York City, in Oakland, and right here at Austin's City Hall.

And we, the 98%, neither rich, nor veterans of these two longest wars, what is our role in the confrontation? (By the way, I don't purport to know everything about everyone in this congregation, so if you *are* one of the one percenters, on either side, please know I speak to you as well.)

What is our role? Well, I'm not sure I can speak for all the nation's 98%, or for the other 2. But I can speak *to* Unitarian Universalists, and remind us of the religious principles which we proclaim. Most of you have got that first principle down, which states that we affirm and promote, what? The inherent worth and dignity of every person. And you're good at the seventh principle, which is--respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. But what about the second principle, that one that says we affirm and promote "justice, equity, and compassion in human relations." Or how about the fifth, which affirms and promotes "the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process, in our congregations and in society at large." And, most optimistically, the sixth principle, "the goal of world community, with peace, liberty, and justice for all."

If these are our religious principles, it sounds to me then like we have some religious *obligations*. I think we're pretty good at the affirming part of our principles, that is, at stating them as fact. But what about the promoting? To promote means literally to move forward. It involves action. It means that we not only *support* people beating swords into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks, but that we do so ourselves.

How? Well, you may have noticed that people between the ages of eighteen and thirty are probably our own lowest demographic here at

Wildflower Church. Yes, we do have the few, the proud, the young. But that's the *few*, the proud, the young. And, in honesty, that's not true just for this generation of twenty-somethings. It's almost universally the case, at least in Unitarian Universalist churches, for people in their twenties not to feel quite at home. So, we could work some more on making Wildflower a sanctuary for the very age group that is in the formative years of its adulthood, studying, working, exploring, discovering who they are and what their future is meant to be.

But we can't necessarily sit and wait for the young adults of our time to come pouring through our doors, nor can we assume this is where they want or need to be. If *ever* Iraq or Afghanistan war veterans start coming through our doors, though, leaving Fort Hood for the Wildflower neighborhood, I hope we will work proactively to make them feel welcome, and to provide for them, even if from scratch, support for their reintegration into non-war centered life.

In the meantime, we can walk through our doors in the other direction, out into the world, and show our support for this other 1% by working for economic justice. Bring food and water to Occupy Austin. Talk to Wildflower's own Mike Ignatowski about other ways we can support the

people at City Hall. Become and occupier yourself. Come to our next planned vigil, on November 20th at 5:00 pm.

Or, if you are a trained mental health worker, consider looking into volunteering with Give an Hour, an organization that provides free counseling for veterans and their families. Offer your support to Team Rubicon, a volunteer organization that provides veterans the chance to use the skills they learned in warfare by doing disaster relief in places as close by America's tornado-hit Midwest, and as far away as earthquake-hit Turkey.

No matter what you might do to support this young, hurting, passionate one percent, as Veterans Day comes this Friday, please do one thing. Just one thing. And as you're choosing what that one thing might be, remember, as one veteran wrote, "As the war in Iraq ends, suits and jobs are what we need, not yellow ribbons and unemployment checks."

If we, as the hymn says, are to build a land where we bind up the broken, yellow ribbons won't do the trick. We must be willing to be blacksmiths, beating swords into plowshares, and then plowing the fields, where justice can come rolling down like waters, and piece like an ever flowing stream.

So let us be blacksmiths, let us sow a safe future. May the veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan and their families be safe and supported. And so may we commit to transforming ourselves and the world around us through acts of compassion, love, and social justice.

Amen. #121 We'll Build a Land