

**Now and Then with a Furtive Half-Smile  
November 8, 2009**

We come to Veterans Day this year accompanied by the tragic irony of this Thursday's shootings at Ford Hood Army Base, where 13 people were killed and over 30 were wounded.

Holding this strange juxtaposition of salutation to our veterans and resignation about these murders, just how do we honor those who died on the very ground which was supposed to be their place of happy return from, or their last home front of safety before being deployed to, Iraq and Afghanistan? How do we make sense of the killing of innocent civilians and soldiers by an Army major, the very purpose of whose work was to companion those suffering from post traumatic stress disorder after serving in places of war? How do we reconcile with the fact of the shooter's religion being a religion against which too many in the world rail, and with whose followers others in the

world strive to bridge religious and cultural differences? How do we seek to move beyond our initial anger or prejudices upon hearing of the shooting, in order to examine the complex contexts in which this man and all of his victims had been living?

I hold the scenario of Fort Hood up beside the scenario of several of our kindred Wildflowers standing before us this morning during Time for All Ages—military veterans, people whom I know, respect, and admire—and I am stopped for a moment in silent uncertainty about the world of war and those who experience it, especially through the Armed Forces—what it teaches us, how it serves us, how it changes our lives, the values it perpetuates.

I myself have only ever been, and only ever will be, a civilian witness to the lives of those who have served in our Armed Forces, whether in times of war, or in times of relative

peace. Furthermore, my own father's experiences serving in the 10<sup>th</sup> mountain division in World War II has and most likely always will inform the lens through which I see the functions and the effects of war in peoples' lives.

That said, in my father's memory, as well as in honor of the veterans here today, I strive to uphold the valor beyond the violence, the lessons that have and can be learned and, most certainly, I strive to uphold a humble gratitude for the sacrifices made.

Gratitude, and yet also grief. For who can help but grieve at the sound of the poet's words, "We are the Dead. Short days ago/ we lived, felt dawn, saw sunrise glow,/ loved and were loved, and now we lie/ in Flanders Fields"? And having heard those words, who can help but, in turn, think of those men and women shot down at the soldier readiness center at Fort Hood? Short days ago, they too had lived, had felt dawn, seen

sunrise glow. 22-year old Jason Hunt had recently reenlisted after serving in Iraq, and he had also recently married. 21-year old Francheska Velez had just returned from Iraq, and three months pregnant, was planning to continue her military career after her baby was born. 21-year old Michael Pearson had joined the Army a year before, in hopes of coming closer to going to college and realizing his dream of pursuing a career as a musician. His older brother, also having served in the Army, had begun to see his kid brother, as he called him, becoming his own person. Now all these people, along with ten others, are needlessly dead.

Do these dead say to us, as do the soldiers in Flanders Fields, "Take up our quarrel with the foe: to you from failing hands we throw the torch...." If so, the question arises, just *who* is our foe, and exactly what quarrel must we take up? For too many in this world, this country, this xenophobic culture,

I'm afraid it will be too easy to give in to the temptation to say the foe is the shooter alone, along with, perhaps, his religion. Moreover, some will say it is *because* of his religion that he is the foe. And since *he* lies hospitalized in some undisclosed location, let's just go find someone else, who looks or sounds or dresses like him, to confront with our anger, our rage, our quarrel.

If this *is* the foe, if *this* is the quarrel, do we indeed, at the request of the dead, take it up? The poem says, "If ye break faith with us who die/ we shall not sleep...." In other words, if *we* do not take up the fight, *we* will be haunted.

But aren't we already haunted enough by such quarrels? Isn't there a different kind of foe we can fight? The poem, "In Flanders Fields," though it ends with a plea from the dead soldiers to pick up the fight where they left off, the poem, or at least its symbolism, does not actually *begin* in early twentieth

century Flanders Fields. True, John McCrae wrote the poem as a result of some of the bloodiest battles of World War I, all on the Belgian front. But the image of the poppies springing up where soldiers had died goes back at *least* to the 1693 Battle of Landen, in what is modern day Belgium as well. British historian Thomas Babington Macaulay, writing in 1855, says of the Battle of Landen, “The next summer the soil, fertilised by twenty thousand corpses, broke forth into millions of poppies. The traveller who, on the road from Saint Tron to Tirlemont, saw that vast sheet of rich scarlet spreading from Landen to Neerwinden, could hardly help fancying that the figurative prediction of the Hebrew prophet was literally accomplished, that the earth was disclosing her blood, and refusing to cover the slain.”

Through the very beauty of the scarlet red poppies, the earth refuses to cover the slain. Whose slain? Just “our” slain?

Or do we also acknowledge the slain of our alleged foes, as well as all of those caught in the crossfire? Those millions of poppies growing in all their prophecy-fulfilling beauty call me back to the final line of that other poem we heard Tom read this morning, the one in which the poet concludes after writing all his poems against war, “But death went on and on/ never looking aside/ except now and then/ with a furtive half-smile/ to make sure I was noticing.”

Are we noticing? For it seems to me that *we* are the travelers now, whether on the road from Saint Tron to Tirlemont, from Austin to Waco, or from Killeen to Kabul. We are the travelers, to whom all the dead might throw from failing hands the torch for us to hold high. But the question again arises, how might we use that torch to guide us? Again, how do we honor those who died just days ago at Fort Hood, as well as those serving this very moment in the distant places

where many of those dead were deployed to go? How do we honor veterans this Veterans Day, when the identified foe, for the moment, is among our own, and the question goes unanswered, how could a man, trained to companion those suffering from the traumas of war, perpetrate such trauma himself? What system, cultural, ideological, spiritual, familial, psychological, was he living within that finally tipped him over the edge?

Forgive me if these aren't the kind of questions I'm supposed to ask on such a day, if it's off-putting of me to raise such quandaries. But if that is the case, then it only makes me ask, still again, just which veterans are we supposed to honor? Only the ones who were "truly great," only those who *never* strayed from honor or duty or courage or valor?

I hope we can honor not so much the uniformity or conformity of some, but the humanity of *all* veterans. I hope

that we can honor that these are soulful, vulnerable, searching human beings we are talking about: those among the Fort Hood thirteen who are now dead, those among the thirty, hit yet still alive; those who, not hit but witness, are struggling with the guilt ridden question, why them and not me?; the Muslims among them, patriotic, dedicated, proud, and yet terrified of retribution by association; the front-line hardened who've suddenly been pierced to the heart in their own homeland.... The list goes on.

The list goes on, and death, as the poet says, goes on and on, "never looking aside except now and then with a furtive half-smile." For the truth remains, for every poppy we wear today, thousands upon thousands of lives have been sacrificed, and thousands upon thousands more have served and survived, whether in times of war, or of relative peace.

What will bring us travelers peace today? Will we simply admire the poppies' beauty and ignore their deeper significance? Or will we feel, underneath the poppies we wear, the scarlet red blood running through our own hearts, and know we must never take for granted the preciousness of the life that's been given to each and every person on this earth?

In this life, on this Veterans Day, we have the chance to honor not only those who "traveled a short while towards the sun and left the vivid air signed with their honor," but also those who are scarred, scared, and traumatized. We have the chance to honor the bereaved on all front lines and home fronts of war, and we have, perhaps most importantly of all, the opportunity to show our thanks to all the veterans by living lives of tolerance, faith, understanding, reconciliation, peace, and love. For the sake of those who've come before us,

those here today, and those who follow, let our lives and our  
thanks be not in vain. Amen. #143