

**“Gone to Soldiers”**  
**30 May 2004**  
**Unity Church–Unitarian**

**Worship Leader: Rob Eller-Isaacs**  
**Worship Associate: Virginia Lanegran**

**READING: Folk Poem of Memorial Day – Francis Miles Finch**  
**(from *The Blue and the Gray*)**

From the silence of sorrowful hours  
The desolate mourners go,  
Lovingly laden with flowers  
Alike for the friend and the foe:  
Under the sod and the dew,  
Waiting the judgment-day;  
Under the roses, the Blue,  
Under the lilies, the Gray.

So with an equal splendor,  
The morning sun-rays fall,  
With a touch impartially tender,  
On the blossoms blooming for all:  
Under the sod and the dew,  
Waiting the judgment-day;  
Brodered with gold, the Blue,  
Mellowed with gold, the Gray.

No more shall the war cry sever,  
Or the winding rivers be red;  
They banish our anger forever  
When they laurel the graves of our dead!  
Under the sod and the dew,  
Waiting the judgment-day;  
Love and tears for the Blue,  
Tears and love for the Gray.

**READING: The truth about war... – Chris Hedges**  
**(from What Every Person Should Know About War)**

“The truth about war is hard to confront, especially if we have come to believe the romantic image of war. But the truth will arm us to wage war. It will make us conscious of the sacrifices we demand from those we send to fight. Our young men and women do not deserve to be deceived about the difficulties they must undertake. In a democracy, the voting public must grasp the exacting toll of war. And when we know what it is we face, and the possible

consequences, we will be better prepared to cope with the stress, pain, and loss. Those who come back from war will be better able to handle their own trauma. They will understand that they are not alone. Perhaps they will also come to realize that we all need help. We all need each other. War is a cross no one should have to bear alone. 'Give sorrow words,' William Shakespeare wrote, 'The grief that doesnot speak whispers the o'erfraught heart and bids it break.'

### **READING: Wildpeace – Yehuda Amichai**

Not the peace of a cease-fire,  
not even the vision of the wolf and the lamb,  
but rather  
as in the heart when the excitement is over  
and you can talk only about a great weariness.  
I know that I know how to kill,  
that makes me an adult.  
And my son plays with a toy gun that knows  
how to open and close its eyes and say Mama.  
A peace  
without the big noise of beating swords into ploughshares,  
without words, without  
the thud of the heavy rubber stamp: let it be  
light, floating, like lazy white foam.  
A little rest for the wounds-  
who speaks of healing?  
(And the howl of the orphans is passed from one generation  
to the next, as in a relay race:  
the baton never falls.)

Let it come  
like wildflowers,  
suddenly, because the field  
must have it: wildpeace.

### **SERMON: Gone to Soldiers – Rob Eller-Isaacs**

When I was young the Civil War was not yet ancient history. Every small town square still held a cannon. A bronze foot soldier still stood guard all through the year. In every city generals on green horses still kept watch at major intersections. On Decoration Day, just past the lilacs in the North and with rhododendron in full bloom down in the South, Americans went to the graveyards and out to the battlefields, and to the sound of muffled drums and plaintive bugles we still mourned our dead.

Now we're not allowed to mourn. Now we're not allowed to see the body bags and flag-draped coffins coming home. When I was young the veterans of the first World War sold blood-red paper poppies. We pinned them on and went downtown to stand on the sidewalk on State Street and watch as veterans marched by. I don't remember going to the graveyard but I do

remember knowing that the poppies grew in Flanders field. And I do remember knowing why the poppies were blood red. As a child I believed that the blood of the dead flowed up from the ground and into the roots to color the poppies. Back then it all seemed somehow glorious. I remember the thrill of martial music and the polished brass and uniforms with epaulets and eagles.

My father was a student of the Civil War. As a young man he worked at the Abraham Lincoln Bookstore on Chicago's near North side. He helped supply the books and manuscripts and additional background material Carl Sandberg needed to produce his great biography of Lincoln and the war. All his adult life my father read and wrote about the Civil War, the War Between the States, a war in which good brothers served on either side.

“Cain said to his brother Abel, ‘Let us go into the open country.’ While they were there, Cain attacked his brother Abel and murdered him. Then the Lord said to Cain, ‘Where is your brother Abel?’ Cain answered, ‘I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?’ The Lord said, ‘What have you done? Hark! Your brother’s blood that has been shed is crying out to me from the ground.’”

Do you remember what infuriated Cain? He was the first-born son of Adam and Eve. He and his little brother Abel both made offerings to God. Cain offered grain. He was a farmer. Abel offered “some of the first born of his flock.” Abel was a shepherd. God accepted Abel’s sacrifice but would not accept Cain’s sacrifice. The story is silent as to why. Most scholars speculate that the story is intended to point to God’s wish for sacrifice to be rendered with spiritual purity as well as material generosity. The fact that Cain would kill his brother is proof enough his sacrifice was tainted. Just as the story is silent as to why Cain’s offering was unacceptable, it also refrains from saying how Eve must have felt, one son dead, the other marker forever as a murderer. Don’t talk to Eve about glory.

Bob Fulghum tells a story about visiting a German military graveyard on the Isle of Crete. As he came through the gates he noticed an old woman, dressed in widow’s black. She was sweeping fallen leaves away from where they covered up a grave. He approached and asked her why she tended the graves of her enemies. “I had a son who died in Germany,” she said. She pointed to the broad, flat stone that marked the grave. “I want to believe that now and again his mother tends to my son’s grave.”

Every war is at its heart a civil war. How can we claim to be one family, one world community and still sit by as children, men and women die uncounted at our hand? There are 58,000 names carved into the black granite face of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. And there are more than three million Vietnamese war dead whose graves we should be tending. Whose sacrifice is recognized? Which brother is remembered? Who bears the mark of Cain?

We liberals like to claim that human beings are essentially born good. Unfortunately, there is considerable evidence to the contrary. “I know that I know how to kill, that makes me an adult,” writes the Israeli poet-soldier Yehuda Amichai. As the photographs of ridicule and torture at the Abu Ghraib Prison spread around the world, we see we stand on shaky ground in assuming we’re born without sin. The attempt to hold those who engaged in these despicable

crimes accountable for their actions must be pursued. But we cannot afford to imagine that what went on at Abu Ghraib is not an inevitable by-product of any and every war.

Waging war requires a deadening of the senses. Only once we're numb can human beings witness suffering of such magnitude and not be moved. That same numbness brings out a pornographic quality in war. What has always been taboo becomes permissible. People do things they would never do back home. My Lai, Abu Ghraib, and other incidents too numerous to name are not anomalies, they are among the costs of war. The administration is ingenuous at best when it claims to be surprised that American soldiers are torturing prisoners of war. At worst what has been going on there conforms to policy. The only breach being in the fact that the policy has now been made public.

How can we honor the war dead without saying "*your brother's blood that has been shed is crying out to me from the ground.*" We can decry war but we cannot deny it. Chris Hedges writes, "War, I believe, is an inevitable part of the human condition. I doubt if it will ever be eradicated. But it should never be waged lightly or without good cause. The cost is high. Most of those killed, wounded or left homeless in modern warfare are innocents, families, including children. There are millions of people on this planet who, because of war, have been thrust into a life of want and misery. And their dislocation, along with their loss of dignity and basic human rights, has created legions of the disenfranchised."

We honor our war dead best when we do not deny the simple, human agony each loss inspires. Among the many strong images I remember from our long hard struggle to end the war in Vietnam, the Days of Rage stand out. We honor our war dead best when to the pomp and circumstance we add the dignity of rage. "Bring the war home," we chanted. And our parents wondered what we meant. Playwright George Bernard Shaw wrote to his friend Stella Campbell, having heard that her son had recently been killed in action.

*London, 7 January 1918*

*Never saw it or heard about it until your letter came.*

*It is no use: I can't be sympathetic; these things simply make me furious. I want to swear. I do swear. Killed*

*just because people are blasted fools. A chaplain too,*

*to say nice things about it. It is not his business to say nice things about it, but to shout that the "voice of thy son's blood crieth unto God from the ground."*

*No, don't show me the letter. But I should very*

*much like to have a nice talk with that dear Chaplain, that sweet sky-pilot, that...*

*No use going on like this Stella. Wait a week, and then*

*I shall be very clever and broadminded again and have*

*forgotten all about this. I shall be quite as nice as the chaplain. Oh, damn, damn, damn, damn, damn, damn, damn, damn, DAMN.*

*And oh, dear, dear, dear, dear, dear, dearest!*

As the technology of warfare becomes more and more sophisticated, fewer and fewer uniformed combatants are needed. Fewer and fewer American lives are being lost. The technology allows for centralized command control. It also gravitates against the need to draft

large numbers of men and women into the military. Now the ranks are being filled with the devoted sons and daughters of America's small rural towns (places where there is no work to found). Members of the National Guard who signed up to be weekend warriors are ending up in Baghdad. The military-industrial complex is being rejuvenated and restored. It has always required fresh blood for its fuel. Weapons must be tested after all. Far from conforming to the Constitutional constraints on making war, the Bush administration, and every administration since Harry Truman took us to Korea, has refined the art of waging war without declaring it. An integrated, democratic army helps to temper the enthusiasm of the militarists. That's why we don't have one.

There is a direct relationship between the war in Iraq and the lack of civic engagement here at home. We turned away. And someone stole our country from us. The time has come to take it back. The young dead soldiers say, "Our deaths are not ours; they are yours; they will mean what you make them. They say: Whether our lives and our deaths were for peace and a new hope or for nothing we cannot say; it is you who must say this. They say: We leave you our deaths. Give them meaning. We were young, they say. We have died. Remember us."

I know of two ways we can give their deaths meaning. Both require time, courage and commitment. The first has to do with who we are. The second has to do with what we do. First of all we need to be a community in which people can recover, a place where stories too terrible to tell can be told. Cain was not killed for killing Abel. Instead he was marked as those who've seen battle are marked. We need to be a place where even Cain can find his way back home. We need to be wise and compassionate enough to recognize our own capacity to be caught up in the pornography of war. And in that recognition open our hearts to those who walk among us bearing their oftentimes invisible wounds. We honor the dead with our trumpets and our tears. We honor the living by listening to stories we really do not want to hear.

If we can be a community where people can come to recover, then as a community we ought to be able to help to see that the Nation recovers as well. If we really want to honor those who died we will summon the will to join together across lines of party and opinion to build a partnership to help invigorate the Nation's civic life. Twenty million new voters registered, a massive increase in voter turn-out on November 2nd and then an effective, organized, national effort to keep people involved – now that would be a tribute far more fitting to remember those whose battle cry was and still is "freedom."

The future of our Nation, the future of humanity depends on whether or not we succeed in the great democratic experiment. Our task is to take citizenship seriously again and then to remember that we hold the whole world in our hands. This is our birthright. This is our obligation. May it also be our promise and our prayer.

Amen.