

Two Ways to Remember **By Heather Janules**

Every Wednesday and every other Friday, I have the privilege of sitting with members of our congregation's Aging Support Groups. Membership in these groups is open to everyone, you just need to be aging to belong.

But, as one might imagine, many of the members of these groups are significantly older than I. In their company, I am granted a window into decades of experience. Sitting together in the church library, our chairs in a circle for easy conversation, I regularly receive the gift of American history, as lived by our friends, everyday people in our faith community.

This past week, as our country turned its thoughts to Memorial Day, I asked the members of these groups about their experiences with war and remembrance.

Honoring soldiers lost in combat is a long-time and familiar tradition. Our church elders remember Memorial Day celebrations from their childhood. Some remember ceremonies that included veterans from the Civil War, elderly men in fading uniforms riding in motorcades and receiving medals. There were memories of town parades with brass marching bands, picnics and visits to local cemeteries with flowers in hand.

But there were also memories of what it was like to live in wartime. One woman who was born in Europe and lived through the Second World War said very simply, "If you live in a war zone, you never forget it. You never feel comfortable when you hear a plane flying overhead, even today."

In America, the days of World War II were days of deprivation and sacrifice; civilians could not travel easily as the railroads were given over to the military; meat and sugar were rationed and communities gathered aluminum scraps to melt them into fighter planes and other war machines. The ladies remember that because raw materials were scarce, there were no decent stockings to wear. Women resorted to painting their legs to give the illusion that they were wearing stockings. They even went so far as to paint a line, like a seam, up the back of their calves.

But in America the cost of this war was much more than social and economic. World War II was a frightening time, when the fate of the country and its people was uncertain. In our remembering, we recalled loved ones – family members, friends and neighbors – who went to war and never came back.

While my family is not a military family, men on both sides of my family tree served in the military in wartime. Neither of my grandfathers ever said much about their experiences in war. Strangely, it was only until my Grampy Charlie's funeral, when the soldiers played "Taps" at the conclusion of the graveside gathering, that I really understood my grandfather as not only a family man and a loyal employee but also a soldier, a private in the United States Army. I was fortunate that my grandfather returned

from World War II unharmed so I could know him, but his time in war was something I know nothing about. The sorrowful sound of the graveside music reminded me that there were others who did not forget.

My father also served in the military. The war of his generation was the Vietnam War. His family feared that he would be drafted into the Army so he enlisted in the Navy, a branch of the armed forces removed from the most intense conflict.

In the same way that my family is not a military family, it is not an activist family either. However, my mother often spoke with pride about how she and my father once marched against the war, she in the eccentric clothes of the era, he in his crisp white uniform. The way they remembered those who lost their lives in war was to petition their government for change. Members of our extended family were angry and embarrassed by their stance. But this was their way of bearing witness, their own way of remembering.

In my life time, I have watched my country enter a number of armed conflicts – Grenada, the Persian Gulf, Kosovo – but I have been so far removed from the front lines of these wars that, in my memory, they do not have the same vivid reality that I hear in the stories of our church elders and my parents.

When the U.S. invaded Kuwait in January of 1991, I was in my first year of college, just beginning to understand what it means to be a politically engaged citizen. I remember coming back to campus after my shift ended at my part-time job and seeing dozens of students camped out in the lounge in front of the television, all eyes glued to the live CNN broadcast. Along with this media vigil, there were peace vigils and protests and petitions and fliers and cries to call our elected representatives. What was this war about? I wondered. Why was the school community so outraged?

But 12 years later, my experience of the second Gulf War was different. Living in a seminary community, I was immersed in the questions and events that moved us closer to war with Iraq. As America's call for war grew louder, so did the call for peace.

I remember, like my parents long ago, marching against the war. I was a student chaplain at Northwestern Hospital; every day we led a service in the chapel for those wanting to pray about the imminent conflict. Together, we prayed for the courage and safety of our soldiers. Together, we also prayed for peace. I remember how hard it was for us six ministers to craft a liturgy that reflected what we imagined was on the hearts and minds of the people in the hospital. We were confused people in a confusing time.

Despite the marches and the petitions and the international outcry, America invaded Iraq. I remember one of my professors sharing a simple yet profound observation by his son, also a minister, on the eve of the war: "Some who are now alive will soon die." And, in the midst of the "shock and awe," we began to receive reports of these deaths. This time on CNN, with every casualty there was a report of the name, age, branch of the military and often a short biography. With every remembrance, there was a sense that these would

be the women and men whose lives would represent the cost of the Iraq War, those who made such swift success possible.

Yet in September of the next year, I remember gathering at the front lawn of the Hyde Park Community Center for another vigil. At this point in the conflict, we no longer heard on television biographies of the American soldiers who died, only body counts. That night, dripping candles in hand, we gathered to acknowledge that the war had claimed one thousand of our citizens. At the center of our circle was a full-page newspaper ad that listed names of all the deceased.

That gathering was three years ago. As of this morning, not counting soldiers from other countries, Iraqi soldiers, Iraqi citizens or the wounded, we have lost 3,444 Americans in the Iraq War.

This week, through speaking with the wise ones of our community and remembering stories from my family and the wars from my own lifetime, it is clear that in every age and in every generation, we will always honor and remember those who give their lives in military service.

Yet there remains the question why we as a people keep turning to war when, generation after generation, we experience and remember these losses. We will always honor and remember our fallen soldiers but somehow we, as a country, forget these sacrifices each time we turn to violence to solve problems.

There are two ways to remember our soldiers: to remember the fallen and to remember the profound cost of war across generations. This Memorial Day weekend, I pray that we as a nation move closer to remembering on a deeper level. I pray that we remember by beginning a commitment to cooperation and reconciliation over warfare.

This Memorial Day weekend, may it be so.