

CAN THERE BE A 'JUST WAR' OR A 'GOOD' DEATH?

A Sermon Delivered at First Parish in Needham
Sunday, January 29, 2006
The Rev. John A. Buehrens

First Reading

Homegoing

John Muir

The rugged old Norsemen spoke of death as Helmgang – homegoing. So the snow flowers go home when they melt and flow to the sea, and the rock-ferns, after unrolling their fronds to the light and beautifying the rocks, roll them up close again in the autumn and blend with the soil. Myriads of rejoicing living creatures, daily, hourly, perhaps every moment sink into death's arms, dust to dust, spirit to spirit – waited on, watched over, noticed only by their Maker, each arriving at its own Heaven-dealt destiny. All the merry dwellers of the trees and streams, and the myriad swarms of the air, called into life by the sunbeam of a summer morning, go home through death, wings folded perhaps in the last rays of sunset of the day they were first tried. Trees towering in the sky, braving the storms of centuries, flowers turning faces to the light for a single day or hour, having enjoyed their share of life's feast – all alike pass on and away under the law of death and love. Yet all are our brothers and they enjoy life as we do, share Heaven's blessings with us, die and are buried in hallowed ground, come with us out of eternity and return into eternity. "Our lives are rounded with a sleep."

Second Reading 583

The Young Dead Soldiers

Archibald MacLeish

The young dead soldiers do not speak.

Nevertheless, they are heard in the still houses: who has not heard them?

They have a silence that speaks for them at night and when the clock counts.

They say: We were young. We have died. Remember us.

They say: We have done what we could but until it is finished it is not done.

They say: We have given our lives but until it is finished no one can know what our lives gave.

They 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 their meaning.

We were young, they say. We have died. Remember us.

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I know I am taking a risk when I offer at the church auction the right to a sermon on a topic chosen by the highest bidder. Some topics don't make for very good sermons. So I always reserve the right to do an adult ed or lecture if I think that's better. But when Ed Quinlan gave me his suggested topics, two were "Existential Angst: Learning to Live with Your Mortality," and "Just War: Is It Always an Oxymoron?" I immediately I knew I wanted to deal with both issues by preaching about one person: Louis Pojman, philosopher, ethicist, my one-time parishioner, and a long-time, dear, personal friend.

Lou taught ethics at West Point, for a decade, starting in 1995. He would joke that it was the students were the best he'd ever had, because they knew that doing the reading and homework was a military order! But I also think he hoped to help some future Colin Powell think more clearly about world-shaping issues of war and peace, life and death. So he dedicated a book on *Global Environmental Ethics*, one of more than 30 Lou wrote, to a group of them, for "giving new meaning to the green uniforms they wear."

In love with life, with the earth, and with the privilege of teaching and writing, Lou retired from West Point and went to teach at Cambridge University in England. Where last winter, after he had learned that he had advanced metastasized cancer, he sent me an email headed "Leaving the Banquet," telling me that he was coming home to die, and that he wanted to see me. So several times last year I drove to the Hudson Valley near the Point to see Lou and dear his wife Trudy – as she, often a volunteer hospice nurse, applied her skills to seeing her husband of 43 years through his final illness.

My last visit was in October, on the morning he died, Trudy and their two children present. In late December, at the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York, where Lou was a member and where I had been minister, I led his memorial service, after the annual meeting of the American Philosophical Association.

Some of you here may recall meeting Lou. He spoke at First Parish two years ago, and gave the sermon at the Needham Interfaith Thanksgiving Service.

He grew up in a working class family in Cicero, Illinois. His father, a tool-and-die maker, was an adamant atheist. So when Lou rebelled as a teenager, he turned to a higher Father. Smart, aware, in era when the news was all Hitler, Holocaust, and Hiroshima, Lou took seriously the idea of human sin and the need for repentance. So at 15, listening to *The Revival Hour* on the radio, he became a born-again Christian.

God works in mysterious ways Her wonders to perform! Lou was a fine student, but his family had no money to send him college. So the Christian Missionary Alliance put him through Nyack College in New York. Yet his analytic capacities were early in some tension with his newfound faith. So when he decided to study for ordination, he chose the Reformed Church in America and its more intellectually rigorous seminary.

While Lou was there, his younger brother, just home from the Navy, died in a tragic car accident. Lou did the funeral, just as he'd later do for a 2nd brother, and for their dad. For a time, this renewed encounter with death reaffirmed his need for faith, and when graduation came close, he thought about becoming a missionary – and also about getting married. Seeking a suitable partner, he arranged to lecture to the Christian Nurses Association of New York City, and met Trudy, the daughter of a Reformed minister on Staten Island.

Within months of their wedding, Lou felt called to join the March on Washington, where he heard Dr. King give his famous “I have a dream” speech. So they did not go as missionaries overseas. Instead, they crossed racial and cultural lines here in the US, with Lou becoming minister of the New Reformed Church in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. An African American woman from that church, now ordained herself, spoke at the memorial service about how Lou reached out to young black men like a father. He and Trudy gave their first child, Ruth, the middle name “Freedom.” She now works internationally against human rights abuses, especially “trafficking in persons.”

But Lou's restless mind couldn't stop questioning the evils in this world. So first he did an M.A. in ethics part-time at Union Theological Seminary in Manhattan. Then he became a full-time Ph.D student. One of his teachers was the great Reinhold Niebuhr.

I, and many others, consider Niebuhr to have been America's most important public theologian the 20th century; because he challenged us to quit believing that “we are the good people,” as President Bush recently put it; and because, as a German-American

in the 1930s, he helped rouse Americans to face evil in the rise of Hitler. He taught that while individuals *can* be moral, human groups and nations almost always try to disguise their more hidden and self-interested motives; because facing them causes, well, “existential *angst*.” He challenged Americans, even while we were winning World War II and then fighting to Cold War, to beware of the arrogance and self-righteousness than could come from victory. Toward the end of his life Niebuhr was a scathing critic of our war in Vietnam -- just as Lou later was of our unnecessary invasion of Iraq and of its aftermath – one in which many of his student cadets were led to death or disillusionment by what many of them came to feel was incompetent and dishonest civilian leadership.

On my visits to Lou we often talked about all this. We agreed that -- in *theory*, “just war” need *not* always be an oxymoron. When it is defensive, necessary, proportional, and protective of civilians, and a last resort. I had been to the Pentagon after the genocide in Rwanda, for example, to talk to then Secretary of Defense William Perry, a fellow UU. Who clearly regretted how little had been done, when the intervention of just a battalion or two of US and French troops, seizing the airport and radio transmitters, might have saved half a million lives. But global politics, we also agreed, are such today that war is less and less often either justifiable or just. More often than not, it simply sows the seeds of further violence and crises, as has proven to be the case in Iraq, I’m afraid.

Often “existential angst,” say, over supposed “weapons of mass destruction,” masks the guilty knowledge that we ourselves possess the nuclear weapons to destroy the whole planet. Secretary Perry proudly showed photos of the decommissioning and destruction of *some* nuclear weapons at the end of the Cold War. But more needs to be done. And we must not pretend to be all innocent and good when history, generations to come, God, will clearly judge us by what we’ve done or left undone.

As ministers, both Lou and I knew how often we human beings make unethical and self-destructive choice out of misplaced fear. We self-isolate. Nations dismiss their long-term allies and make mistakes. Individuals who need help and listening and counsel push it away. All when we fall into the throes of misdirected *angst*.

It was Kierkegaard who first focused attention on existential angst as central to the human condition. And Lou’s doctoral studies involved moving to Denmark and learning Danish in order to master *Fear and Trembling, The Concept of Dread*, and the

brilliant ruminations of existentialism's founder. Why? Perhaps because Kierkegaard forces us to face the existential fear of our mortality. Lou did not find the 'leap of faith' to deal with it philosophical coherent. But he never denied the human problem. As my one time colleague at All Souls, Forrest Church, put it succinctly, every human being has a religion, whether we choose to call it that or not; or at least a philosophy. Which can be read more in our deeds than in our empty words. Our religion, whatever it may be, is our existential response to the dual mystery of being alive and knowing that we have to die.

Most of us spend our early lives largely dodging and denying the reality of death. Then we seek out vocations and causes worthy of our dying. When we either embrace or reject the causes of our parents. Lou found working with young men and women who thought that they might express that calling through military service to be his vocation. Not because he wanted to see them martyred, or used, as they now often are, as an excuse for persisting in a deeply flawed effort to promote democracy; or as if that were our only motive. Lou himself gave his life to the notion that one should question very deeply every cause that says, "Give your life to me! I will rid you of your 'existential angst.'"

When I first met him I was in my mid-30s. He was a dozen years older and had gone not only into Bed-Stuy, but to Denmark, and to Oxford, where he earned a second doctorate, and then to Notre Dame, to teach among Catholics, before coming to the University of Texas at Dallas – where I led the local Unitarian church he began to attend, and where he joined me in challenging the smugness both of the local forms of Christian orthodoxy and the smugness of liberals who simply hated religion, but who rarely asked themselves whether they hadn't given themselves to a shallow counter-idol.

He and I began the kind of Socratic dialogue that I aspire to have with all of you. Because of Lou, my family found me reading Plato even when we went off on vacation. When his son Paul rebelled against a father who had turned from religion to philosophy, by doing the opposite, and joining the Hare Krishna movement, Lou was philosophical.

But that son, now long done with Krishna, and a professor of philosophy himself, spoke at his father's memorial service. He talked about how Lou had read to him, when he was only about six, the passage in Plato's *Apology*, in which Socrates, a war veteran, is accused of corrupting the youth of Athens by challenging the empty, mythic gods. Tribal gods that demagogues held up, then as now, as alone worthy of a soldier's dying.

Lou did not buy that. Instead, like Socrates, he lived fully, loved generously, taught as best he could, and went to his grave with his intellectual and spiritual integrity intact. Jesus did the same. But one does not have to be a martyr, hero, or saint to do likewise. One simply has to learn to live with mortality, and to overcome some of one's *angst* about living. So as to lead a life that really will be worth the dying. We can all help, through testimony and example, one another to do that. So may we all. Amen, and amen.