

## Peaceful Veterans

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First Parish in Brookline

**Reading:** "*Matriotism*"

by Cindy Sheehan

Much as I wish I could take credit for the word "matriotism," another woman wrote to me and gave me the concept. I was so intrigued by the word that I have been meditating on the possible ideology behind it, and a new paradigm for true and lasting peace in the world.

Before I dive into the concept of Matriotism, let's explore the word "patriotism." Dictionary.com defines it as: *love of country and willingness to sacrifice for it.* [I believe] that patriotism in the U.S. means: *exploiting others' love for country by sending them and their children off to sacrifice for my bank balance!*

... The idea of patriotism has virtually wiped out entire generations of our precious young people and has allowed our nation's leaders to commit mass murder on an unprecedented scale....

... Samuel Johnson said, patriotism is the "last refuge of a scoundrel."

Matriotism is the opposite of patriotism...not to destroy it, but to be a yin to its yang, and balance out the militarism of patriotism.

Not everyone is a mother, but there is one universal truth that no one can dispute no matter how hard they try...: Everyone has a mother! Mothers give life, and if the child is lucky, mothers nurture life. And if a man has had a nurturing mother he will already have a base of Matriotism.

A Matriot loves his/her country but does not buy into the exploitive phrase of "My country right or wrong." (As Chesterton said, that's like saying, "My mother, drunk or sober.") A Matriot knows that her country can do a lot of things right.... However, a Matriot also knows that when her country is wrong, it can be responsible for murdering thousands upon thousands of innocent and unsuspecting humans. A true Matriot would never drop an atomic bomb or bombs filled with white phosphorous, carpet bomb cities and villages, or control drones from thousands of miles away to kill innocent men, women and children.

There is one most important thing that matriots would never do, however, and this is the key to stopping killing to solve problems: a matriot would never send her child or another mother's child to fight ... wars....

Women flocked to Camp Casey in August to run the huge enterprise and work for peace, and women from all over the U.S. and the world have invited me to visit and speak and advocate for true and lasting peace. Men, who are in touch with the matriot inside of them, have also been important to the cause of eradicating war....

It is past time for we Patriots to get together to stridently call for an end to the immoral bloodshed in Iraq.

I know one thing from the bottom of my heart. My son, Casey, who was an Eagle Scout and a true American patriot, was not served well by his idea of patriotism. I will never forgive myself for not trying to counteract more the false patriotism he was raised on, with a true sense of Patriotism.

I also know that the women of the world who don't have a voice, such as the mothers of Iraq who are struggling just to survive in their needlessly destroyed country, are counting on us women who do have voices to use them to end George Bush's ... doctrine of preemptive wars of aggression ....

War will end forever when we patriots stand up and say: "No, I am not giving my child to the fake patriotism of the war machine which chews up my flesh and blood to spit out ....

Patriotism above all is a commitment to truth and to celebrate the dignity of all life.

### **Sermon:**

Every person here could tell their life story in relation to times of war and peace.

For example, I was born in 1946, the first child of two United States Army veterans. My parents served in a stateside hospital in New Orleans. They never had to pull a trigger or toss a grenade. Yet army life in the middle of World War II was the only past my father and mother had in common.

World War I was the past my grandfather and his brother in law had in common. I heard their tales of fighting in the trenches of France every Thanksgiving.

In elementary school, I learned to "duck and cover" when the air raid sirens sounded. In High School I imagined nuclear war with my classmates as Kennedy and Khrushchev turned missiles toward each other. Vietnam wasn't far behind. The Gulf War arrived on schedule. And now yet another generation of young people have set aside their lives for fighting on foreign shores.

My colleague, the Reverend Davison Loehr reminded me that the oldest story we have preserved in Western Civilization is a war story — Homer's Iliad, probably written down 2,800 years ago: the story of the Trojan war of three millennia ago.

Our notion of the hero can be found in those stories. To the Greek mind the "hero" was the offspring of a divine and human couple— someone of nearly superhuman personal courage and skill in the service of some higher ideal the Greeks admired. A hero's courage is lived out in service, not of self, but in service to some transcendent ideal." Listen to Loehr's words:

*"On Veterans' Day, we try to remember the nobler, more selfless and heroic acts of men and women who put themselves at the service of orders they believed*

*served the best parts of our country's history and heritage... (E)very one of them made themselves available, and was there to do whatever was asked of them, the clerks and cooks just as much as the infantrymen. There is something here that is striking and heroic. These are ordinary people who will do what they are told because they trust that their country would not ask them to risk their lives if it weren't necessary. They trust their captains, their generals, their president. They trust us."*

The lure of war is the lure of giving ourselves to something transcendent. The danger of war is that, while it puts us in touch with our sublime aspirations, war also connects us to our most primitive behaviors. James Hillman observes that "war reveals our being, we are brutal and insane in action and we are ethical and loving in essence."

We are called to remember that every war, whether just or unjust, sends home wounded warriors -- the soldiers, the families, the anti-war activists. They belong to all of us.

How does a warrior go home? How does a person who has removed the inhibition to kill return to the ordinary stress of a traffic jam and office politics? How does a person who has learned to banish pity turn toward family and friends and remember himself go back to life? How does a parent, like Cindy Sheehan or Pat Simon, a veteran of grief, transform anger into purpose and meaning?

This is the work, this is the journey of every combat veteran and gold-star mother-to be rewoven into the fabric of human community.

Listen to the perils of that journey in the coming home experience of Dan Barker, a medical corpsman with the Marines in Vietnam:

*A company of Marines sits very quietly in the tubular fuselage of a TransWorld 707, crossing the Pacific, heading for home, ... heading back to the World. But everyone is subdued, there isn't much to say. We can't even talk to each other because there is no framework on which to hang our experience, our experience not being the one we'd come to get. We are soaring through the stunning air, and I am . . . trying to figure why we each and all went to Vietnam....*

*On the street back home I saw two women wheeling a baby in a carriage. They were young and beautiful and the baby was healthy, cooing happily in the comfort and protection of the two women. I approached the women, asking permission to look at the baby. It was first round-eye baby I'd seen since coming back. In Vietnam the babies were sick or malnourished or had flies sucking at their eyes or had skin ulcers. Seeing a healthy new baby was an assurance of well-being, of continuing life.*

*But there must have been something about me, mad faraway tree-line stare that hadn't yet shown up the street in the World yet. The baby's mother hovered over the child, guarding it against me though I'd done nothing threatening. It was like I had baby-killer stamped*

*all over me. It was the worst injury I sustained. I'd been an American soldier. In my love I would have died for them.*

(Dark Honor: "Vietnam Remembered," The Sun, October, 1991, p. 12)

Even now, more than 40 years after Vietnam, veterans are faced with flashbacks from combat. Hear the voice of Claude Thomas:

*"I shut myself up in my house, afraid to leave. When I walked outside and heard jets flying overhead, I cringed and saw treelines going up in napalm and young Vietnamese fleeing their villages. In the grocery store, I couldn't take a can of vegetables from the shelf for fear it was booby-trapped. The feelings were vivid, and I struggled to maintain my hold on reality. A social worker in Cambridge, Massachusetts told me there was a Zen monk who'd had some success helping Vietnam veterans. She didn't tell me that he was Vietnamese. ...six months later ... I telephoned the retreat center and registered, not because I wanted to, but because nothing in my life was working and I didn't know what else to do.... Terrified I went to the retreat... .When Thich Nhat Hanh walked into the room and sat down, I looked into his face and started to cry. I realized at that moment that I knew the Vietnamese people only as the enemy. And if this simple, peaceful man was my enemy then surely everyone was my enemy.*

("Finding Peace After a Lifetime of War," The Sun, March, 1997, pp. 11-12)

Several years ago I attended a week-long retreat led by Thich Nhat Hahn, and the monastics of his order. I didn't know how many of the 900 of us who attended were veterans. I only knew that there was a veteran support group meeting every afternoon.

On the second night of the retreat, Sister Chân Không, a longtime colleague of Thich Nhat Hahn, led a special evening of relaxation. The college gym was filled with people lying on their backs in the near darkness. Her gentle, accented voice invited us to let tension flow into the earth. We smoothed out our faces, relaxed our shoulders, deepened our breathing. She invited our ancestors to help us return to the roots of being fully human. She led us step by step into a profound relaxation. As I melted into this mass of humanity, Sister Chan Khong began to sing lullabies -- one after another, after another in French, in German, in English, in Vietnamese. Like an ancient grandmother her voice washed old terrors from our bodies. We were restored. We came home to ourselves in the space of the breath.

In the depth of my own relaxation I remembered that Sr. Chan Khong was Vietnamese and that there were Vietnam vets in the room. Take a moment to grasp the vision of an elderly Vietnamese woman singing lullabies in the dark to hundreds of former soldiers, stretched out, side by side in the dark. I felt myself to be a witness to a forgiveness flowing from a heart wide open with compassion. Here was a woman from the Mekong Delta singing to the men who had brought down destruction upon that land.

Here was a woman who had built up villages, again and again, after they'd been burned by American soldiers, singing a grandmother's song of love to the very same soldiers. I was being touched by the heart of forgiveness, the heart of wisdom and compassion. This was a fierce love. This was a hero who had learned to come home to herself with courage, again and again.

When I asked my friend and former colleague to read her speech to the draft board, I asked Pat about her work with the Peace Alliance to establish a U.S. Department of Peace. She has a heroic vision for our nation—that the U.S. become a leader in the promotion of non-violent conflict. My specific question to Pat was, “I know you have been struggling to get people in power to listen, how do you manage to stay peaceful while you do this hard work?” My real question was, “how can a bereaved mother turn anger into non-violent action?” I could hear the tension in her voice as Pat told me that she loses her patience with people who say they want peace, but have not time to support this effort.

All heroes who serve with courage in the service of higher principles need help in the journey of coming home.

Today we are remembering veterans. Please include the families of our soldiers in the category of returning hero. Please include yourself in the category of a hero on the way home to peace.

We are not yet home if we despair that peace will never be achieved. We are not yet home if we flinch at the sounds of planes overhead and imagine the next attack. We are not yet home if we spend our days hating our leaders for not making peace.

Elise Boulding, Quaker sociologist and peace educator, once said to me, when I asked her the same question I asked Pat Simon, that the only peace we'll ever really have is the peace we make in ourselves. She told me that everything I do must be in the service of peace. She expected me to be heroic. She encouraged me to study cultures of peace as an antidote to my pessimism. She encouraged me to practice conflict resolution in dialogue circles. She encouraged me to spend part of every day imagining peace.

In my journey toward understanding the courage necessary for making and keeping peace, I discovered the story of my great grandmother, who sent her two young boys across the sea to America to prevent them from being drafted to fight in another bloody nationalistic war. Her sacrifice was heroic. This is the peacemaking that Elise Boulding and Cindy Sheehan and Pat Simon are inviting us to join. This is the transcendent value to which they have dedicated their lives.

We are being asked, in this project of human development, to harmonize our behavior with our loving essence. We are being asked to live out a courage that can say “no” in a loving and yet decisive way.

Homer certainly knew about the “odyssey” that is required for a person to return home from war or from conflict, healed. The journey of Odysseus from Troy to Ithaca took ten years, and even when home the journey toward peace was not finished.

I finish with a map for us, a map for returning to peace, drawn by the poet Cavafy, after the work of Homer:

***Ithaca***

*When you set out on your journey to Ithaca,  
pray that the road is long,  
full of adventure, full of knowledge.  
The Lestrygonians and the Cyclops,  
the angry Poseidon -- do not fear them:  
You will never find such as these on your path,  
if your thoughts remain lofty, if a fine  
emotion touches your spirit and your body.  
The Lestrygonians and the Cyclops,  
the fierce Poseidon you will never encounter,  
if you do not carry them within your soul,  
if your soul does not set them up before you.  
Pray that the road is long.  
That the summer mornings are many, when,  
with such pleasure, with such joy  
you will enter ports seen for the first time;  
stop at Phoenician markets,  
and purchase fine merchandise,  
mother-of-pearl and coral, amber and ebony,  
and sensual perfumes of all kinds,  
as many sensual perfumes as you can;  
visit many Egyptian cities,  
to learn and learn from scholars.  
Always keep Ithaca in your mind.  
To arrive there is your ultimate goal.  
But do not hurry the voyage at all.  
It is better to let it last for many years;  
and to anchor at the island when you are old,  
rich with all you have gained on the way,  
not expecting that Ithaca will offer you riches.  
Ithaca has given you the beautiful voyage.  
Without her you would have never set out on the road.  
She has nothing more to give you.  
And if you find her poor, Ithaca has not deceived you.  
Wise as you have become, with so much experience,  
you must already have understood what Ithacas mean.*

America is our Ithaca. Always keep America in your mind, but do not hurry there. Let the voyage be beautiful, and sensual, and learned, and full of music.

Let us sing "America the Beautiful" and mean every word.