

Memorial Day 2010

Ken Mayers

Good morning, friends. It is indeed both an honor and a privilege to be standing before you sharing the lectern with one of my favorite fellow agitators, Reverend Holly Beaumont.

Tomorrow is Memorial Day in the United States. It is a day marked by a great deal of flag waving and speeches in honor of those whose lives have been taken whenever our government has seen fit to sacrifice them. We rightly grieve for the dead and their survivors. We bow our heads in sorrow.

But I would suggest that when we raise our heads, we consider a broader horizon.

At the opening of this service we sang one of my favorite hymns, one that always brings tears to my eyes and, I happen to know, to Reverend Beaumont's eyes as well. Among those moving lyrics are these: "... but other hearts in other lands are beating with hopes and dreams as true and high as mine."ⁱ

That is the sense that prompts these reflections. That and two of the UU principles that are particularly relevant when considering the cross-generation effects of war: the second principle – Justice equity and compassion in human relations; and the seventh principle – respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

The meditation poemⁱⁱ that we heard moments ago is a testament to the ongoing effects of the second world war, the so-called "good war" and the impact of our technological response on generation after generation.

In it she asks the question: “What stories were silenced, and why and from whom?” Several phrases from her plea particularly struck me: “The truth must be told/From the people who lived it.

Look again at that picture of Beate and her daughters for a moment.



It is easy to think of them as part of your own family or of mine. In one sense, for Beate and her family, as for many others, World War II has never ended.

Similarly, our more recent debacle in Vietnam goes on and on – a particularly vivid illustration of the effects of war across generations.

I recently spent 10 days in Vietnam as part of a delegation of American veterans documenting the continuing impact of Agent Orange on both the people

and the land of Vietnam. Although I was the only UU in the group, we were all there seeking justice, equity, and compassion for fellow human beings and healing for that part of the interdependent web that has been so disrupted by the 20 million gallons of dioxin-containing herbicides we dropped on Vietnamese land and people between 1961 and 1970, claiming an estimated 20 million casualties.

Beate's poem asks that truths be told

So my children can play

Splashing and laughing as we tend to our gardens

Beneath the loving gaze of our sacred mountains.

I imagine that all of us can identify with that feeling. Certainly I can. Here are my granddaughters and my sacred mountains.



But carrying on the theme of our opening hymn, there are other mountains as sacred as ours.



This is the A Shau Valley in Vietnam. Instead of a river, the famous Ho Chi Minh Trail runs through it.

In the shadow of those sacred mountains live the counterparts to Beate and her daughters.



Instead of radioactive fallout that threatens their health, it is dioxin, said to be the most toxic chemical human being have ever produced, raining from the sky as a byproduct of the herbicide, Agent Orange. The small Special Forces air base at A Shau is especially contaminated. In 1997 there were 15 confirmed diseases in the housing area adjacent to the airbase; so the government moved all the residents out. The two girls in this picture were 1 and 3 years old at the time. The 14 year old is larger than her 16 year old sister, but has had encephalitis that may have stemmed from dioxin poisoning. The family has experienced 8 births. Three were stillborns, including one born without a head. One of the surviving children was born blind and deaf on one side. This family has suffered dearly just because they happened to live near a concentrated residue of our activities in Vietnam decades earlier.

Elsewhere in the valley we visited these two families.



The young woman on the left, shown with her mother, is 21 year old Qi Van Vac. A visiting US doctor both treated her and provided the wheel chair. A sign on house indicates that it was donated by the Vietnamese Red Cross. Qi is deaf and mute. The

mother's husband, who had been sprayed as a soldier, died 10 years ago of an intestinal tumor. As is the case with many second and third generation Agent Orange victims, the mother cares for her daughter 24 hours a day with very little support.

The young man on the right is Qi Tihn's 20 year old son. He is also deaf and mute. He can't even recognize his mother or father. Qi Tinh has had 5 children, one of whom died from "soft head syndrome." Two older children appear to be normal but not healthy.

The effects of Agent Orange vary from unbelievably grotesque stillborn fetuses to relatively slight mental or physical impairments, and in our 10 day tour we saw the full range. While the severe end of the spectrum can be overwhelming, much of the range leaves room for great hopes. The Vietnamese government and NGOs and religious bodies from many countries have contributed significant – though far from adequate – support to institutions that provide at least some healthcare and vocational training to Agent Orange victims. One of the best facilities we visited was the Tien Phuoc Children's Center outside of Ho Chi Minh City where 72 children from surrounding provinces are cared for under the leadership of Sister Le Thi Lau. All these children have some degree of mental disability. But they are cheerful and well cared for. I found it very difficult to tear myself away from this little angel.



The largest facility of this kind is the Peace Village at the Tu Du Hospital in Ho Chi Minh City. This hospital deals with the full range of impacts described earlier – in some cases from cradle to grave. Whenever possible, the hospital finds homes for these children. In some cases, children are sent to vocational training centers to facilitate their integration into society. Those who are physically but not mentally handicapped are sent to school.

Here in Tu Du hospital is a living example of indomitable spirit.



The arrow in this picture points to a 19 year old young woman named Hoan. You can't quite tell it in this picture, but her legs end at the knee, and her left arm ends at the wrist. But Hoan has an independent streak as wide as the Mekong Delta. She is completing college and has a job.

She could move into an apartment, but she has chosen to continue living at the hospital where she can help with kids growing up with problems like those she has overcome.



She commutes on a 3 wheel motorcycle of which she is most proud.



Our delegation's visit to Vietnam has ended, but we are continuing our work in striving to fulfill the UU principles of justice equity and compassion in human relations and respect for the interdependent web of all existence. With support from a member of Congressman John Conyer's staff, we are drafting legislation to provide humanitarian aid to support the delivery of services to Agent Orange victims and to clean up the remaining concentrations of dioxin-contamination.

I am therefore giving you advance warning that when the time is right, I will be approaching you to help put pressure on our congressional delegation to support the legislation. There will be resistance to our efforts. Such resistance is understandable, but our UU principles call on us for a different response. So I implore you to remember tomorrow, when the flags are waved and the fly-over goes by, that

... other lands have sunlight too and clover, and skies are everywhere as blue
as mine.

Now I invite you to join me in a minute of silence, after which I will ask you if you so
desire to call out the name of someone dear to you who died as a consequence of
warfare.

This Is My Song (1934 song)

[\[edit\]](#) Lyrics

This is my song, Oh God of all the nations,
A song of peace for lands afar and mine.
This is my home, the country where my heart is;
Here are my hopes, my dreams, my sacred shrine.
But other hearts in other lands are beating,
With hopes and dreams as true and high as mine.

My country's skies are bluer than the ocean,
And sunlight beams on cloverleaf and pine.
But other lands have sunlight too and clover,
And skies are everywhere as blue as mine.
Oh hear my song, oh God of all the nations,
A song of peace for their land and for mine.

ⁱⁱ Growing up I was disconnected
Some things were not discussed
Among people who valued hard work and employment
One-sided silence through years of schooling
I learned about the nuclear age
From movies and propaganda and Bradbury field trips
The glorified versions of a history that happened in my own back yard
In our state of Enchantment
Pristine open spaces and a population
Not respected by a higher nation
Still living off the land as the industrial age passed them by
Only to get thrust into nuclear realization

Beneath a mission
Urgent and thick with intensity
Beneath a shroud of secrecy
I was not yet born
The day scientists feared for our sky
Thoughts of atmospheric ignition
And that everyone would die
I was not yet born when the Jemez was taken
Homesteaders relocated, not of their volition
Uranium miners on the road to perdition
Beloved mountains, occupied before I could praise them
Disconnected from ancestral knowledge
In three generations
Clan animals vanished
Even as the jobs began to appear
Unprotected hired hands from the valley
A job was nothing to fear
It was a welcome exchange in hard times
I wasn't yet born
The day silver ash rained down for days
And a plume of poison drifted over state lines
Radioactive fallout, on cisterns of drinking water
On crops and livestock, who all miscarried that year
The people were lied to
And went about life as usual
While the truth fled
With bread over their mouths
To keep from breathing air they knew was foul
And the world was changed forever
A month later, 80,000 people were killed instantly
Justified atrocity named enemy
And the book was closed on Trinity
Even though it was our own citizens who were bombed
Children born into an experimental population
With a cancer rate way higher than the average nation
Entire families still sick and dying
Still crying, for the elders they lost too soon
I- was born into military healthcare, mixed blood and desert beauty
Free from the shame of colonized blame
My grandfather employed by Sandia
My down-winder grandmothers who birthed babies and taught me songs
While washing tainted laundry and making pots from local clay
I wonder now, can earth decay?
Eating the elk my uncles brought down
Breathing fire smoke from trees that drank
From discarded waste placed... anyplace
Today- my daughters are born
Into single driver car twice daily parades
Dependence on industrial weapon economic charades
The sound of bombs exploding
As we pray to the sun in mornings
Will my cornmeal prayers
Protect them as they play in ditches
Carrying water from a source three miles away from tritium releases?

What did my oldest get exposed to?
As I breathed in smoke from a tech area burned 3 times over
What kind of poison
Can penetrate the walls of my womb?
What stories were silenced, and why and from whom?
The truth must be told
From the people who lived it
Who dwell in this place that houses our spirit
Respectfully, I pray, for past, present and future souls to be at peace someday
For clean earth, air and water
So my children can play
Splashing and laughing as we tend to our gardens
Beneath the loving gaze of our sacred mountains
Free of fear from invisible poison
Free to hear, undisturbed and clear, the birds sing in the morning
As we continue to question
And speak our points of view
Let us share the stories anew that have never been told
And release the pain not even a century old
No longer shamed by accusations of ignorance
Let our diverse voices be our deliverance
No breath here is unimportant
We are free to pray
Each in our way
For justice, strong leaders, and supportive institutions
A foundation for our expectations
As we welcome in this time of healing
For the good
Of all future generations

Beata Tsosie-Peña (c 2010)

(Dedicated to the women of Las Mujeres Hablan, and those working for justice in their communities,
with special thanks, to Tina Cordova)