

## **Renewing Faith Amid the Rubble**

**Rev. Stephen A. Ames**  
**The Unitarian Universalist Church in Eugene, OR**  
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Next Saturday marks the seventh anniversary of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. We've been at war in Iraq now for 85 months. By way of comparison, U.S. fought in World War II for 45 months, World War I for 19 months, the Korean War 37 months, and the Civil War lasted 48 months. The only wars in which the U.S. has fought longer are the Vietnam War, at 116 months, the American Revolution, at 100 months, and Afghanistan, 102 months and counting.

Over four thousand, three hundred Americans have been killed in Iraq. We don't know how many Iraqis have been killed; the Associated Press put the figure at 110,000 last April, but other sources estimate one million. Scores of Iraqis are killed every day, more orphaned or maimed for life. In December 2007, the Iraqi government reported that there were 5 million orphans in Iraq – almost half of the country's children (Wikipedia).

Facing this killing and destruction, to which there seems no end in sight, we may easily fall into despair, rage, or a nervous numbness – trying to tune it out. If you have opposed the war, as I have, your anger may lead you into tunnel vision, into black-and-white thinking, where you can see nothing good about the war or anyone connected with it.

Yet for many, the war is surprisingly easy to ignore most days. There's no shared sacrifice to tether our daily lives to the war, no draft of young men (or young people) of all classes and backgrounds.

In the last stages of the Vietnam war, returning veterans received a

chilly, sometimes openly hostile reception. Our fallen veterans return out of sight – no photographs of their coffins – and many of the wounded are relegated to filthy, substandard medical facilities. We're not yelling at them, but we don't want to look at them, and most of us don't need to. I noticed my own avoidance of men and women in military uniform in airports as I've traveled during this war and the Afghanistan war.

About a year into the Iraq war, I saw a sturdy-looking man in army fatigues sitting near me, typing on his laptop. I caught myself wanting to look past him, then thought of saying, "Thank you for serving," but I wasn't sure I would mean it. I decided neither to avoid nor to seek out what could be an awkward conversation. I decided to acknowledge his presence and his reality to myself. If any eye contact or conversation ensued, it would begin with my taking in his presence, my mind freed as much as possible of its chatter about his uniform. I needed to see him as a human being, and take it from there. That might be all I would do. Turns out, it was.

I have a distant relative I have not seen since we were both teenagers who has served several tours with the army in Iraq. He's begun sending group emails in which he describes his pride in his service. Even though I'm sure he'd love to hear from me, I haven't emailed him, telling myself I don't want to get into a debate about the war with him. It won't change anything with him, except to feel unsupported by family. But perhaps I've also been afraid his testimony will complicate my position. Self-righteousness requires black-and-white thinking, and hearing his perspectives of how he thinks he is helping others could complicate my precious positions on the subject. Ambivalence and ambiguity can be extremely difficult to tolerate regarding a war, or any situation we perceive as a war. One of our favorite strategies for wars is to pick a side and hold on for dear life.

Do we dare simply to listen to the experience of parents of U.S. service men and women, without the walls and judgments of our opinions of the war? Do we dare to take in the experiences of Iraqi victims of violence, growing by scores each day?

**In this time of violence, how do we let go of our knee-jerk defense mechanisms, and remain present and faithful to life?**

I quote now at length from “Through the Rubble,” an essay by the Reverend Doctor Rebecca Parker, president of Starr King School for the Ministry:

*Images of ashes linger for many of us, even when our eyes are closed. For weeks after September 11, the smoke rose from the smoldering heap of collapsed concrete and steel at Ground Zero, where nearly three thousand human lives were turned to ashes in one horrible hour. More bombs followed. At a sidewalk café in Jerusalem. On a bus in Madrid. In the subways of London.*

*Similar images of rubble and smoke have greeted us in photographs from Afghanistan and Iraq, where war has killed thousands, destroyed great cities, and laid waste to the land. The toll of injured and dead Palestinians continues to rise as Israeli bombs and tanks raze cities and towns. A brutal genocide in Darfur, Sudan, has claimed the lives of thousands of adults and children. It’s almost more than the heart and mind can hold. A friend recently said she felt like she was living with violence fatigue.*

“Violence fatigue” – many of us are feeling this. And violence is not limited to the news: many of you witness the effects of violence in your

work, or more closely in your personal life. The attacks on homeless people in Eugene over the past year have shaken me. What I'm just beginning to learn about human trafficking in the Northwest Corridor is disturbing me – human slavery, not in the 1860s, not just in other countries, but between here and Seattle especially. I will preach on this later in the year, as I learn more about it.

Parker reminds us that “this is hardly the first time we have been confronted with the human capacity for horrendous violence.” She names some of the 20<sup>th</sup> century horrors: “Rwanda and Guatemala, Auschwitz and Matthesen, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Gulag, Vietnam, Cambodia, Bosnia.”

In another essay, “After the Apocalypse,” Parker says that it's time we stopped talking about the apocalypse yet to be and instead reframe our situation as a *post*-apocalyptic world. She describes two apocalyptic visions: the well-known Apocalypse of conservative religion, and a variation of the apocalyptic dream embraced by liberal religion. In the former, popularized by the *Left Behind* series, “A catastrophic cosmic struggle is coming, when God's forces will battle the forces of evil. Evil empires will be destroyed, and from their collapse will rise a new heaven and a new earth. In place of the thousand years of wrong will come the thousand years of right.”

In the liberal religious and liberal secular versions, evil empires are also destroyed – but gradually, with the involvement of the people, not by the will alone of a transcendent god. I recall a sign I saw in college at a rally: “Smash racism!” That's apocalyptic thinking: destroy the evil empire, and a heaven, or a new reign of love will take its place. It's not altogether clear to me how one “smashes” a hurtful way of being arising from a limited view of self, but that's a sermon for another day.

Parker points to a hymn from our hymnal, a UU favorite, as an example of liberal religious apocalyptic theology: “We’ll build a land where we bind up the broken, we’ll build a land where the captives go free...” This biblical prophetic vision does energize us in our commitment to peace and justice, and it can gladden our hearts. But still, Parker notes, it is focused on an imagined, idealized, and most likely never-to-be-realized future.

We have a section in our hymnal, “In Time to Come,” with a handful of hymns with titles like “Wonders Still the World Shall Witness” and “Hail the Glorious Golden City.” This is part of our “onward and upward” orientation in liberal religion, one that can energize and brighten our spirits, but it can also seem strikingly discordant with reality during violent times. This section seems to me the most outdated in our hymnal. We don’t yet have a “finding faith amid the ruins” section in our hymnal.

Rather than look to the future with this idealistic vision, let us look to the present, however painful it is, and see what we can salvage amid the rubble to rebuild our lives. Parker writes,

*In the aftermath of Apocalypse, the religious enterprise can be imagined as a kind of salvage work, recognizing the resources that sustain and restore life – resources that are ready at hand, not in some distant promised land. After the Apocalypse, we accept our dependence on sources of life greater than ourselves and open our hearts to receive survival knowledge from those who have already found restoration. We know ourselves to be living in a time of breakdown and breakthrough, chaos and creativity, fragmentation and resourcefulness, pain and grace. Our tasks include tending to injury in ourselves and others, collecting resources buried in the rubble, and constructing shelters for body and spirit, family and community.*

Instead of working step-by-step on a clearly marked road to the Golden City, or to Heaven, Parker effectively defines the Beloved Community not as a place of perfection but as a place of healing, creativity, and resourcefulness. Religious work has less to do with envisioning than with truth-telling; she writes,

*... the religious community must provide a clear-eyed description of the world. We must refuse to look away or distract ourselves with imagined future worlds. We must refuse quick-fix sentiments...*

So where then is the hope, what sustains us? Is it not said, “Without vision, the people perish”?

I offer a story of my own to illustrate the human hesitancy to turn away from painful truths, and the faith that may be restored by beginning to tend to the aftermath of Apocolypse.

Two year after the start of the Iraq war, in 2007, I received an email from a colleague in peace activism, Natalie Merrill. The email was entitled, “Her name is Muna: PLEASE READ.” The email contained a letter and an attachment from Noah, Natalie’s husband, who had served as the director for the Southeast New England chapter of the American Friends Service Committee and the hub of peace activism in Rhode Island, where I then lived. Noah left his position and was in Jordan, trying to assist Iraqi refugees. Despite my love and admiration for Natalie and Noah, I didn’t open the email for several days. I knew it was going to put a human face on this war for me in a way I had not yet encountered, and I knew the source. I knew this email was trouble. And it was.

The attachment was a six-page document describing Muna, her life since the U.S. invasion, and her plight at the time. Muna was described as “a small, quiet 26 year-old woman with a beautiful face and deep, smiling eyes.” While she and her family were impoverished by the economic sanctions of the 90s, she was still happy on the eve of the war, in love and with a new baby girl and her work as a teacher. Just four days before the regime fell, she heard the thunder of US planes flying overhead and waved at them.

She woke up in a hospital bed, soon to learn that her house was destroyed by a missile. She had ten pieces of shrapnel in her body, from her big toe to her chest, and three pieces of metal lodged in her head. She barely survived, and when she was preparing to leave the hospital, she learned that she was the only survivor of her house. Everyone else had been killed: her mother and father, her four brothers, her baby girl.

Her story is absolutely heart-wrenching. She begins suffering seizures. She plans to escape to Jordan with her husband. He tells her to go there first, promising to follow her, but then he abandons her. By the time Noah met her, she is living in an unheated basement and often goes days without food or medication.

Noah writes,

*I believe that in some way God brought me to her.” His letter is a plea for financial help. He writes, “There may be hope for her future, if we, a few Americans, can take small steps to help one person, recognizing that we can’t help everyone, but that we can help to give one person hope, and to change one life. And that one life could be part of rebuilding Iraqi society for all of her country’s children.*

*If we can do this, we can demonstrate to others in our country that this can be done, and over time we can help more people. If we do this, we can invite others to do the same, and help them help others in the same way that we few have first helped Muna.*

*So I'm asking you to participate in a crucial first step to developing relationships across the boundaries of violence, ignorance, and suffering. I'm asking you to be part of this... opportunity to recognize that our lives are intertwined with those of Iraqis who have suffered in this war. I'm asking you to help us give hope in darkness, and a gift that is one clear, concrete step toward peace.*

*... I can't think of how many times, in the face of such overwhelming violence and suffering, I have asked myself whether anything I was doing to help end this war and alleviate the suffering was useful. I know that this is that kind of real step. I believe in the power of real human relationships to build peace, and I believe that we will be given the strength to do great things if we seek to act in the spirit of love, humility, and justice. Please join me, if you are so led.*

This is what it means to renew our faith amid the rubble. Noah is not about to break into a chorus of “We’ll build a land” here. Please know that I do still love that song and we’ll be singing it! But there is a different kind of faith that is emerging now, and our ability to cope with violence and our aftermath will depend in great part on our ability to live it. It’s a faith in our ability to help one person afflicted by suffering, or to help change the position of one person in power. It’s a faith in the power of such acts to have greater power than they first appear, though they will not likely make everything better, though we may not see any of their effects. It’s a faith in

the power of *developing relationships across the boundaries of violence, ignorance, and suffering*. It's a faith *in the power of real human relationships to build peace*, a faith that we will be *given the strength to do great things if we seek to act in the spirit of love, humility, and justice*. It's a faith not in what will yet be, but a faith in a power at work when we have the courage to say, *Please join me, if you are so led*.

Noah continued with his work in Jordan and Iraq for nearly three years through an organization he and Natalie founded, Direct Aid Iraq. He developed a strong network with ten dedicated Iraqi partners, all refugees, while recruiting an American team to engage in advocacy and education in the US. Noah himself spoke here in Eugene, with an Iraqi partner, a few months into my ministry in 2007. "Direct Aid Iraq provided lifesaving medical care, material aid, and crucial advocacy to more than 450 displaced Iraqis," as well as raising consciousness in the US with three documentary films and many other creative projects. It held up a mirror to the US for the need for restitution to the Iraqi people. The organization finally folded in December. I wish I had done more to support it – and yet, this is how peace and justice grow these days – in fits and starts, a little life here, a little truth-telling there. There is not one-time, forever fix in sight, for anything. I'm sure there was disappointment when the organization ended for lack of funds, and yet I'm certain that Noah does not regret it. He helped saved lives. He helped his own sense of alive-ness. He turned to the rubble of war and found his faith rekindled in those who survived it and in the efforts of so many to help them.

The kind of faith Rebecca Parker writes of, and has, and that I have seen exhibited by my colleagues and friends serving Iraqi refugees, is transformative. This is a faith that will not only help us cope with the

suffering in the world; it will also lead us to a deep sense of connection and aliveness capable of bursting out in a light-filled joy. This joy derives not from good fortune, or from living in or helping to build the Glorious Golden City. It comes from the power of engaging with the world as it is, one person at a time, and experiencing love, experiencing the sacred, in acts of compassion across boundaries of violence.

Amen.

Please join with me in the spirit of prayer...

Benediction – we close with the words of Adrienne Rich:

My heart is moved by all I cannot save  
So much has been destroyed  
I have to cast my lot with those who, age after age,  
perversely, with no extraordinary power,  
reconstitute the world.