

Worship and Action Update, 10/29/03

Dear Friends in New York Yearly Meeting:

Thinking about soldiers may pose paradoxes for Friends. We grieve for those injured and killed; at the same time, we decry the violent system in which they have enlisted. We experience concern for the soldier; yet we see that concern coopted into a badge of support for the war. And we must acknowledge that many pursue soldiering willingly, that they believe in the U.S. military mission, and that they inflict, as well as suffer, death, pain, and harm.

In considering these paradoxes, Friends may struggle to distinguish the individual from ideology. As a symbol of a system of violence, the soldier too easily becomes an abstraction. Some may extol the virtues of the warrior in order to make virtuous the cause of war. We, on the other hand, must resist the temptation to indict the soldier for the acts of the war machine. How can we dissent from the message without deserting the messenger? And how can we embrace the humanity of the soldier without becoming complicit in his or her employment of lethal force?

In *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* (Anchor Books 2002), Chris Hedges discusses the enduring harm to the soldier and the nation caused by war (at pages 162, 173, 176, 177):

The cost of war is often measured in the physical destruction of a country's infrastructure.... But probably worse is the psychological and spiritual toll. This cost takes generations to heal. It cripples and perverts whole societies....

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The military histories - which tell little of war's reality - crowd out the wrenching tales by the emotionally maimed. Each generation again responds to war as innocents. Each generation discovers its own disillusionment - often after a terrible price.... Those who can tell us the truth are silenced or prefer to forget....

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There is among many who fight in war a sense of shame, one that is made worse by the patriotic drive used to justify the act of killing in war.... The shame and alienation of combat soldiers, coupled with the indifference to the truth of war by those who were not there, reduces many societies to silence. It seems better to forget.

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Discarded veterans are never a pretty sight. They are troubled and some physically maimed. They often feel betrayed, misunderstood and alone. It

is hard to integrate again into peacetime society. Many are shunted aside, left to nurture their resentment and pain.

The media have begun to pay attention to the human costs (at least the American human costs) of our nation's war on Iraq (and to a lesser extent our war on Afghanistan), to the inevitable choices we make in opting to expend precious resources on military undertakings, to the use of soldiers as "fodder" for political and ideological ends.

We are hearing with greater regularity reports of soldiers dying in Iraq (and Afghanistan), and we are beginning to see reports of the physically and emotionally maimed. Since the start of the war, over 1,900 soldiers have been wounded in Iraq (nearly 1,600 in hostile action). About 20% have suffered severe brain injuries. Many of the wounded wait weeks and months in U.S. military hospitals for proper medical care, with substandard living conditions. By early October, almost 4,000 soldiers had been evacuated from Iraq for noncombat illnesses and psychiatric disturbances. Soldiers are committing suicide. And attacks on American troops in Iraq have increased in recent weeks to about 20 to 25 a day. (Recent articles exploring the harm befalling soldiers in Iraq include: "Press Underreports Wounded in Iraq," by Seth Porges, *Editor & Publisher*, October 23, 2003, www.commondreams.org/headlines03/1023-06.htm; "The Pentagon's Achilles Heel," by Steven Rosenfeld, *TomPaine.com*, October 22, 2003, www.tompaine.com/feature2.cfm/ID/9194; "War's Bloody Fallout," by Patrice O'Shaughnessy, *New York Daily News*, October 12, 2003, www.nydailynews.com/front/story/126008p-112902c.html; "Healing the Wounds of War," by Joseph Galloway, *Knight Ridder Newspapers*, August 21, 2003, www.bayarea.com/mld/mercurynews/news/special_packages/galloway/6587490.htm; "The War after the War: Soldiers' Battle Shifts From Desert Sands to Hospital Linoleum," by Anne Hull and Tamara Jones, *Washington Post*, July 20, 2003, www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn?pagename=article&node=&contentId=A16510-2003Jul19¬Found=true.)

We read about soldiers' low morale, of their and their families' disillusionment, of their needs being shortchanged to finance the endless needs of the war machine. (See "Many Troops Dissatisfied, Iraq Poll Finds," by Bradley Graham and Dana Milbank, *Washington Post*, October 16, 2003, www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn?pagename=article&node=&contentId=A32521-2003Oct15¬Found=true.)

And we also see current and former members of the military and their families acting to shine public light on the plight of soldiers in Iraq. A few of these articles include: "After Iraq, the Guilt of Killing Tears a Life Apart," by Scott Calvert, *Baltimore Sun*, October 26, 2003, www.sunspot.net/news/nationworld/iraq/bal-te.soldier26oct26,0,2285991.story; "Unrest in Iraq: Chico Soldier Shares His Discontent with Bush, U.S. Military Policy," by Tom Gascoyne, *Chico News & Review*, October 16, 2003, www.newsreview.com/issues/chico/2003-10-16/news.asp.

Among the many groups of military persons and families working to end the war and occupation are: National Gulf War Resource Center (www.ngwrc.org/); Veterans for

Peace (www.veteransforpeace.org/); Military Families Speak Out (www.mfso.org/); Bring Them Home Now (www.bringthemhomenow.org/); Veterans for Common Sense (www.veteransforcommonsense.org/); Veterans against The Iraq War (www.vaiw.org/).

Attention also has been focused on the war's impact on troops in an "Open Letter to Soldiers Who Are Involved in the Occupation of Iraq" posted on the internet on September 19. The Open Letter was written by James Skelly, now a senior fellow at the Baker Institute for Peace Conflict Studies at Juniata College (Pennsylvania) and a navy lieutenant during the 1960s who applied for discharge on the basis of his conscientious objection and, when turned down, sued the Secretary of Defense for being illegally held by the military; and by Guy Grossman, a graduate student in philosophy at Tel Aviv University and one of the founders of Courage to Refuse, a group of over 500 soldiers who refuse to serve in the Palestinian "Occupied Territories" for reasons of conscience. Excerpts from the Letter are offered at the base of this Update. The entire document is available at numerous Web sites, including these:
http://paxhumana.info/article.php3?id_article=321;
www.notinourname.net/troops/letter-to-occupation-soldiers-26sep03.htm.

How can we as Friends understand the situation of the soldier? How can we speak to his and her condition? How can we listen to his and her questions and concerns? And how can we do this without descending into proselytizing, moralizing, and condescending?

Friends in Purchase Quarter, Long Island Quarter, and New York Quarter, with financial assistance from New York Yearly Meeting (Peace Concerns Committee) and Purchase Monthly Meeting, have become involved with the National GI Rights Hotline and are exploring ways for further participation. This leading includes taking telephone shifts answering questions and providing assistance to soldiers troubled in conscience by participation in war and by other concerns. In early October, the *New York Post* reported that the GI Rights Hotline "has logged a 75 percent increase in calls the last 12 weeks, with more than 100 of those calls from soldiers, or people on their behalf, asking about the penalties associated with going AWOL...." ("AWOL State of Mind: Calls from Soldiers Desperate to Leave Iraq Flood Hotline," by Leonard Greene, *New York Post*, October 5, 2003, www.nypost.com/news/nationalnews/7316.htm.)

Might Friends also find openings to visit those physically and mentally disabled by their military experience? To comfort those grieving loss of loved ones? Are we led to sit with the fears of families with loved ones in dangerous surroundings in Iraq or Afghanistan (or elsewhere)? To counsel those who can no longer participate in warfare without violating their conscience? Are there other ways we can act to nourish the Light within those most directly affected by our nation's war campaigns?

Peaceable greetings,

Linda Chidsey, Vicki Cooley, and Fred Dettmer
NYYM Worship and Action working group

Excerpts from "Open Letter To Soldiers Who Are Involved in the Occupation of Iraq," by Guy Grossman and James Skelly, September 19, 2003:

We write this letter because we have both been military officers during conflicts that descended into a moral abyss and from which we struggled to emerge with our humanity intact. We know the moral dilemmas that some of you have begun to confront. Those of you now in Iraq may have begun to wonder about the purpose of the war, the occupation that has followed, and why so many of the Iraqi people want you to leave as soon as possible.

It is clear that many of you have been propelled into situations that may haunt you for the rest of your lives. You undoubtedly did not expect to be killing Iraqi civilians as now happens on a regular basis....

You have undoubtedly begun to feel rage at the seemingly senseless deaths of your comrades, and your inability to distinguish who is the enemy among the civilians you have come to 'liberate.' From time to time we're sure that some of you may want to take revenge for the deaths of your fellow soldiers.

We urge you to step back from such sentiments because the lives of innocent people will be placed at further risk, and your very humanity itself will be threatened....

* * *

You should also be aware that people all over the world, and a significant number in the United States as well, will understand your actions as truly heroic should you say 'No!' to further participation in both the murderous occupation that you and your comrades now face and the murky moral swamp that the war has wrought....

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Should your moral doubts become so strong that you know, as each of us did with regard to Vietnam on the one hand, and the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories on the other, that your very humanity is at risk, we urge you to consider refusing orders that you can no longer in conscience carry out. One of us refused to serve in the territories occupied by Israel because he knew he could no longer carry out military orders that had little to do with the safety of his country. He could no longer justify the use of indiscriminate military force in the name of unjust political policies, well disguised. He could not tolerate his country's use of himself as a means serving an unjust cause. He could no longer live with the outcome of his actions.

You probably know that as an American soldier, the Uniform Code of

Military Justice requires that you obey only 'lawful orders' of your military superiors.... You can also apply for discharge by conscientiously objecting to war. Rather than serve in Vietnam, one of us refused orders by filing for discharge as a conscientious objector, and when the Pentagon refused the application, sued the Secretary of Defense in federal court for being illegally held by the US military.

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Finally, we would urge you to recognize that you are not alone with regard to the moral dilemmas that you are facing. Each of us initially faced our moral questions as individuals. But we soon realized that many of our comrades had similar qualms about what we were being ordered to do. We both were instrumental in helping to form organizations of military personnel who were opposed to the policies of our respective governments.... [S]uch efforts do help to bring the moral and political issues involved into the clear light of day.

On a personal level, speaking to the truth of what we have seen as humans has helped to preserve our humanity in circumstances that conspired to deny it. Whatever you do, try to maintain a degree of civility with your buddies and superior officers. They are in this too.... If they act unprofessionally and verbally or physically harass you, recognize that it is probably a result of their own anxieties about the moral dilemmas that political leaders have forced them to confront as well.

It is our hope that you will be able to confront these dilemmas clearly and with the support of as many of your comrades as have courage similar to yours. Although we would disagree with it, you may decide that the morally correct course is to continue participating in the occupation. Regardless of what you decide, it is our fervent desire that your actions are chosen in the bright light of moral illumination and political understanding. We also hope that you ultimately return to your home with your humanity enriched, rather than diminished.