Dawn slowly overtakes the floodlights on the flight deck of USS Kitty Hawk. Steam seeps from the catapults, dissolving in tendrils, giving an otherworldly air to the always surreal scene. Red shirted ordnance men, ordies, load the last of the 500 pound bombs on the A-7 and A-6 bombers. F-14’s receive their complement of AIM-9 heat-seeking missiles for planes and anti-radiation missiles to take out radar sites.

Plane captains in their brown jerseys ready their charges for the pilots and crew. The flight deck, always a tense and dangerous place during flight operations, is on this morning a bit more tense and dangerous than usual. This launch, only about 30 minutes away, is sending planes into Iran. Flight crews, finished with their mission briefing, are on their way to the flight deck. I am one of them.

The time was summer in 1984. The Iran/Iraq war had escalated. The Ayatollah Khomeini’s military had sunk a couple of oil tankers coming from Iraqi ports. The United States was going to put a stop to that. Kitty Hawk, on station in the Indian Ocean, was sending war planes into Iran to take out U.S. made weapons and planes, military hardware we sold and trained Iranians to use in the days before the Shah was overthrown.

I don’t remember when we found out that we were part of a drill, a nearly full scale practice, a fact known only to the Admiral and a few others. I know that the 93 days I spent in the Indian Ocean that year thinking about the possibility of flying into Iran played a huge role in my decision to leave the Navy, an institution I had thought was going to be my career.

I was lucky. I never had to drop bombs on people. I’ll probably never know how close I came to being ordered to drop bombs on Iranians. In practice, I was good at it. A more remote possibility, but still real, I could have been asked to drop a nuclear bomb on Iranians. Again, in practice, I was good at it. At that time in my life, I would have done the first, would probably have done the second, if ordered. I am eternally grateful that order never came. Homeless people we serve on Saturday mornings, people in our congregation, were not as lucky as I.

As originally enacted, Armistice Day commemorated the end of fighting between the Allies and Germany at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918. It was meant to honor and
remember the dead of the “Great War”, only later known as World War I. Armistice Day was renamed Veterans Day in the United States after the Second World War.

Today we rang our bell 11 times at the 11th hour of the 11th day and month in remembrance of all those who have fought and died for our country; but we also remember those who have not died, but who have returned home different than when they left, broken in body or in spirit. It is those broken in spirit who are the subject of this sermon, and the subject of the newly released book *Soul Repair*, by Gabriella Lettini and Rita Brock, from which I draw some of my material.

Camilo Mejia found himself holding a rooftop position against a crowd of protestors in Iraq. A young male Iraqi below him brandished what looked like a grenade. Camilo was ordered to shoot. He has no memory of shooting, but recalls seeing the young man dead in a pool of blood. Alone, later, he counted his cartridges; he had shot 11 times.

He was appalled that his ability to decide, to make a conscious decision, had been overcome by his training. He writes “nothing ever prepares you for what that does to you as a human being…to kill an innocent person. Nothing is going to prepare you for the level of destruction you bring upon a nation and you bring upon yourself for being part of it.”

Moral injury occurs when we do something counter to our deepest moral convictions. It turns out that soldiers can be trained to kill, but that for most, this killing comes at a terrible price. It doesn’t matter much whether the killing takes place in a “just” war such as World War II or in the incredibly dangerous and confusing theaters of most wars since and including Viet Nam. In these wars, anyone and everything may be about to kill you, including women, children and animals.

Post traumatic stress disorder, PTSD, has become recognized as a widespread medical issue in our returning veterans from Afghanistan and Iraq. PTSD is a physiological response in the brain to extreme trauma or danger. Among other symptoms, later events can trigger “flashbacks” of the original episode. PTSD is clinically treatable, but it is not Moral Injury, although there is much confusion in the literature and in the military about this.

Moral injury occurs when an individual violates their most deeply held moral convictions, something which soldiers are asked and trained to do. “Thou shalt not kill” is the core moral
tenet of every major religion in the world, and is deeply embedded in the souls of all of us. To violate this tenet, no matter how justified, causes irreparable damage. When there is doubt about the justification, the damage only grows worse. As the Iraqi war veteran Camilo Mejia (p87) puts it, PTSD is a breach of trust with the world; moral injury is a violation of the moral agreement he had with his own internal world.

Many Unitarian Universalists have conflicted feelings about war and the soldiers who fight them. Those only a few years older than I were often among the protestors and conscientious objectors to the Viet Nam War. Later generations of us have protested the more recent wars. Coming from this background, we often don’t know how to treat our veterans.

Oh, it’s easy for us to admire our World War II vets, or even Korean War vets, but what about Viet Nam? The two Iraq wars? Our longest ever war in Afghanistan? In our minds, and internationally, these wars, possibly excepting the first Gulf war, do not stand up to accepted standards for “just” war. Our ambivalence towards the men and women who fought, and fight, these wars is palpable.

I think our ambivalence may be helped by better knowing; Who are our soldiers? We can get clearer about this by understanding why people join our “volunteer” military. People join out of a sense of duty, love of country, patriotism. They are looking for a purpose and higher calling than our consumer driven culture can provide.

At its best, the military can provide these things, and military recruiting materials play this aspect well. It’s difficult for most young persons to understand the dark side of war when inundated with propaganda and popular culture which says otherwise.

I joined partly out of a sense of higher purpose, of wanting to serve my country. When I became disillusioned with the mission and left the military, it took me decades and several false starts to again find a sense of mission and higher calling.

People also join for income, structure, free education and stability. Studies have shown that the military is a way out for the disadvantaged among us, and that the disadvantaged in our society are disproportionately represented in our volunteer forces. While certainly not disadvantaged, I
also joined for economic reasons. A Navy ROTC scholarship was my ticket to attend an otherwise unaffordable Ivy League college.

Finally, there is a strong American myth of regeneration through violence. I know that there was a time in my life when I truly believed that I could never reach my highest potential without being tested in battle. This myth is perpetuated in some of our most successful movies. I understand that *Top Gun*, first released when I was serving, is being remade. (smile)

Movies and documentaries which examine the true personal costs of war do not do well at the box office. Films such as *The Ground Truth, Lioness, In the Valley of Elijah* and *Stop Loss*, are not titles that jump quickly to our tongues (smile). *Let There Be Light*, the final part of a trilogy commissioned by the Army during World War II, followed the struggles of veterans in a military hospital. While there were heroic stories, there were also stories of moral anguish and brokenness. The film was suppressed until 1981. 35 years! Because broken soldiers did not fit in the Army myth.

Pause: The veteran suffering from moral injury experiences a “collapse of meaning, and sometimes a loss of will to live.” Coming home and healing are difficult, complex and dangerous.

Viet Nam vet and philosopher Camillo Bica writes in his poem *Warrior’s Dance*

I fear I am no longer alien to this horror.
I am, I am, I am the horror.
I have lost my humanity
And have embraced the insanity of war.
The monster and I are one.

…

The blood of innocents forever stains my soul.
The transformation is complete,
And I can never return.
*Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.*
Returning to parades and celebrations, to a culture of consumerism, celebrity worship and casual commitment offers no purpose worth pursuing. Veterans find that they cannot relate their experiences except with others who have experienced what they did. In the words of Tyler Boudreau, “one’s humanity can be quite difficult to recover, once evicted.”

Those suffering from moral injury count significantly among our homeless. The National Coalition for the Homeless estimates that between 1/5 and ¼ of our homeless population are veterans. Think about that. 40 to 50 of the 200 we serve on any given Saturday morning are likely to be veterans.

Suicide among active duty military is reaching epidemic proportions. In a front page article on August 17th, the Christian Science Monitor described how July, with 31 suicides, was the worst month ever. There were 301 suicides in 2011, and 2012 is running well ahead of that number and may reach one per day.

We have members of this congregation, veterans of wars from World War II forward, who suffer from moral injury. They struggle with what they have done in war. To a large degree this is invisible to the rest of us. They don’t talk about their experiences and their internal conflict. They are coping better than our homeless vets, for whatever reasons. This doesn’t mean that they don’t struggle.

What can we do as liberal religion? I think there are several things we can do, both at the societal and at the personal levels.

At a Societal level

The soldier comes to recognize, if not in the moment, then later, that the enemy they have killed is also human, despite their training. This is more than we have been able to do as a society. The enemy is other than human. It is incumbent on us to counteract any talk that dehumanizes the enemy, as ubiquitous as it is. The enemy as other runs completely counter to our 1st principal, where we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Repeat.

While there may sometimes be reasons that justify going to war, it is incumbent on us to be a voice of reason, a voice that offers up the true costs of any war, the cost to our young men and
women who do the fighting, and to their families, and to our society as a whole. The military
industrial juggernaut is a powerful force in this country. What would it be like to hold our
leaders accountable for war and fear mongering and for war crimes committed under their
watch?

Personal level—what to do. What not to do. What to do.

Don’t thank them for their service. I myself have done this, but in reading Soul Repair, I
discovered that these words often ring hollow, especially for the vets of recent wars. For those
struggling with the purpose and meaning of what they have done, these words offer no comfort.
Don’t offer forgiveness. It is not yours to give, you who have not experienced their horror.
Forgiveness is between them and their Almighty.
If you know families of vets, ask how you can support them. Do listen if you are lucky enough to have a vet share with you. Don’t judge, don’t console, just listen. Having their story heard is important. Be compassionate. When a vet is having a bad day, or week, or month, put it in context. And remember, among the homeless we feed, this important work that we do, that vet could be any one of them. And to this, on this day when the guns were silenced in Europe 94 years ago, I say Amen.