

**“Leave No Brother Behind”**  
**by the Rev. Ann Schranz**  
**Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation**  
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What if? What if the past were different in some way? Not dramatically different, not ridiculously different, but just a little different? Over the years, I have wondered now and then what it would have been like to have had a brother. The wondering was most frequent at two intervals separated by decades. In high school regarding the dating scene. How nice it would have been to have had an older brother with really neat friends, at least one of which might have been interested in dating me.

The wondering returned decades later, while learning about the family tree from genealogy fans. Including my cousins, my sister, and myself, six women bear the Schranz name in my generation. The Schranz name dies out in this branch of the family tree when the last of us dies. How nice it would have been to have a brother or two. Perhaps the name would have survived a while longer.

Recently, this “brother longing” emerged as a heartache and morphed into something else. If I had had an older brother, he might well have been drafted and been sent to Vietnam. He might have been wounded in body and/or spirit. He would have returned home changed, if he returned home at all. If he returned home at all, he would have returned to a country that often did not appreciate military service, even forced military service. I actually felt relieved that I did not have a brother. It was an unfamiliar feeling.

It is easy to wax poetic or regarding preferences and choices when the emotional stakes are theoretical. (I was quite willing to forego emotional connection with an imagined brother in order to avoid the potential pain of losing him.) It is something else entirely to have an actual emotional connection ripped away by death, especially by violent death. Love and loss are woven tightly in our lives.

Those who love deeply, grieve deeply. This is often true of romantic love, but the dynamic is not limited to romantic love. Loss of family members, of friends, of ideals, of religious

conviction, of vocation or avocations – with the loss of any of these, deep grief awaits those who love deeply. As the process of grief unfolds, our sense of self changes. We are not the same as before the loss. Our identity changes, either contracting in reaction to pain or expanding in response to pain. We become *less* than we were – or we become *more* than we were.

In our seasons of grief (and there will be seasons of grief), Unitarian Universalism supports us in becoming *more* than we were before. What does this transformation look like? We have an example in the life of Rev. Jan Christian. She describes her journey of transformation in her book *Leave No Brother Behind: A Sister's War Memoir*.<sup>1</sup> Rev. Jan serves the Unitarian Universalist Church of Ventura. On a more personal note, she was my mentor; we spoke on the phone about the joys and challenges of ministry for an hour a month for over a year.

Rev. Jan had a brother, an older brother named Robert Malcolm Christian, Jr. Everyone called him Bobby. Bobby was a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant in the Marine Corps. The Marine Corps motto is Semper Fidelis or Semper Fi – Always Faithful. Bobby served in Vietnam until the day in April of 1969 when he was killed in combat. She tells a story about Bobby. “My old parakeet, Lollipop, flew out [the front door] one Christmas Eve. That night, as we returned from visiting my sister and her family, I wondered out loud what would become of Lollipop. “Oh, she’s probably married to an eagle by now,” my dad offered. “She’s probably been eaten by an eagle by now,” Bobby responded.”<sup>2</sup>

“I was both horrified and amused. When I went to my brother for comfort, it was never for the cheap variety. If I wanted to have my illusions or prejudices or self-pity reinforced, he was not the guy for the job . . . He knew what I was capable of, for better or for worse . . . He had faith in my ability to face facts and to choose the higher road. Sure it was painful. Yep, Lollipop was most likely deader than a doornail. Had I dissolved into tears, he would have put his arm around me, but he was not going to insult my intelligence with cheap comfort or false approval. In this way and so many others, his life prepared me for his death. He prepared me to speak truth to power. He prepared me for ministry.”

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.sistersmemoir.com/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Leave No Brother Behind: A Sister's War Memoir* by Jan Christian, Mill City Press, Inc., Minneapolis, MN, 2010, page 154.

Rev. Jan's transformation did not occur by her simply thinking about her brother in isolation. The insights were sparked by conversations she had with those who served alongside her brother, the Marines of Kilo Company, Third Battalion, First Marines. She connected with them first through The Virtual Wall (<http://www.virtualwall.org/>). The actual Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. lists 58,261 names of the fallen in chronological order. On the "Virtual Wall," people can search the names by last name, state, city, date of death, or military unit. People can post photos, remembrances, and their email address so that survivors can contact each other.

Nor did Rev. Jan's transformation occur through conversations alone.

Three years ago, on her sabbatical, Rev. Jan and her son, Luke, went to Vietnam and visited the place where Bobby was killed. At 23, Luke was the same age as Bobby was when he died. Photographs and videos of the trip are still found on the Ventura County Star newspaper's website (<http://web.vcstar.com/special/2007/02/vietnamdiary/vietnamdiary.html>).

Facing the past takes courage, especially when popular wisdom is to let sleeping dogs lie, to let some things remain buried. Popular wisdom can be wrong. "Some buried things are like bodies buried near the water supply," she writes. "We keep drinking from the well and wondering why our life is poisoned. Sometimes what we think is buried is really keeping us from the life we long to live, and we may not even know it. Sometimes we sense it but think the answer is to bury the body deeper. There are other times when life here and now really is good and there seems to be no real need to muck around in the past, and yet, the past may help us see the larger tapestry that is our life and reveal and deepen connections."<sup>3</sup>

Facing the past takes courage. It is the *quality* of the "facing" that makes all the difference. If we confront the past as an adversary or enemy, we are unlikely to be able to take in new insights. What is the alternative? We could *befriend* the past instead of confronting it or burying it. If we befriend the past, going back can change the way we go forward. When we befriend the past, we

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<sup>3</sup> Page 69.

expand our sense of self in response to pain instead of contracting our sense of self in reaction to pain.

When we befriend the past, we let go of rigid and simplistic conceptions about the people in our lives. We come to know ourselves and others as three dimensional, not two dimensional. We come to know others more nearly as they are, not as we want them to be. We come to know ourselves more fully, as well. Rev. Jan had placed her brother on a pedestal. As she befriended her past, she allowed Bobby to step down from the pedestal. They both became more human.

Memoirs as sensitively written as *Leave No Brother Behind* do not have a single overriding take-home lesson the way that children's stories often have a "moral of the story." Yet if I had to select one take-home lesson, it would be this one: Peace and justice require as much or more sacrifice as war. What kind of sacrifice? We can let go of the illusion that we are powerless to influence the war machine. That is not true. We must create, claim, and "credential" our own power. That use of the term "credential" comes from broad-based organizing, such as this congregation is beginning to do through the Inland Empire Sponsoring Committee. We who may lack political power or economic power still have relational power. We can generate power through our connections with each other.

Generating relational power is precisely what theologian Rita Nakashima Brock and others have done in creating the Truth Commission for Conscience in War. The Commission released a report last Thursday on Veterans Day. The Commission's main point is that we need *Selective* Conscientious Objection, not "all or nothing" conscientious objection. After all, people in the military retain their moral conscience. They are taught *not* to turn off their moral conscience. Therefore, they must be able to object to some wars though not necessarily to all war. It is not necessary to be a pacifist to object to some wars on the basis of moral conscience.

Who appointed this Commission on Conscience in War? In a true relational power creation way, the Commission appointed themselves, inspired in part by South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In the winter of 2008, a small group gathered for dinner in Berkeley, CA: Rita Nakashima Brock of Faith Voices for the Common Good, Gabriella Lettini

of Starr King School for the Ministry, and Catherine Ryan and Gary Weimberg of Luna Productions.<sup>4</sup> Four people sat around talking during and after dinner!

The Truth Commission on Conscience in War (TCCW) was launched on March 21, 2010 with a public hearing at Riverside Church in New York City. The TCCW public hearing began with a screening of excerpts of *Soldiers of Conscience*. The screening was followed by live testimony. The nearly 80 commissioners from all over the U.S. listened to four hours of testimony from veterans, a gold star mother, and expert witnesses in law, religion, psychology, philosophy, and journalism about questions of conscience facing service members and veterans, as well as the current limitations of military regulations governing conscientious objection.

The Commission's recommendations are included in your Order of Service. This is an urgent matter for several reasons, including the death and injury of civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan and the "opportunity cost" of funding wars on our nation's economy. It is also urgent because of the suicide rate among active military personnel and among veterans.

The Commission reports that "In addition to unprecedented suicide rates among active duty military, veteran suicides, 6,000 a year or 20% of U.S. suicides, have taken more American lives than the Afghanistan and Iraq wars themselves. Tragically, an average of 18 veterans kill themselves each day, and from 2005 – 2007, the suicide rate among younger veterans rose 26%. Some of these deaths, perhaps a substantial number of them, occur because people are forced to fight wars they believe are morally wrong."<sup>5</sup>

There is good news, however. Seven researchers connected with the National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (part of the Veterans Administration), have proposed a conceptual framework and a set of "moral repair" intervention strategies designed to repair "moral injury."<sup>6</sup> According to the abstract, "Although there has been some research on the consequences of unnecessary acts of violence in war zones, the lasting impact of morally injurious experience in war remains chiefly unaddressed. To stimulate a critical examination of moral injury, we review

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://conscienceinwar.org/about/history-of-the-commission/>. The history is from the Commission's website.

<sup>5</sup> See [http://conscienceinwar.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/TCCW\\_REPORT\\_FINAL\\_110710.pdf](http://conscienceinwar.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/TCCW_REPORT_FINAL_110710.pdf), page 5.

the available literature, define terms, and offer a working conceptual framework and a set of intervention strategies designed to repair moral injury.”<sup>7</sup>

I give the poet T.S. Eliot nearly the last word:

“We die with the dying: See, they depart, and we go with them.

We are born with the dead: See, they return, and bring us with them.”

May we befriend our past, for the past is not our enemy. May we agitate and organize for recognition of *Selective* Conscientious Objection. May it be so!

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<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19683376>.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19683376>