

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“National Bird: the Automation of War”

Rev. Samuel A Trumbore May 28, 2017

Call to Celebration

We are a peace-loving congregation. Unlike patriarchal cultures that find meaning in world domination through military means, we would like to live in a harmonious world where war has ended. Our sixth principle lifts up the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.

Unfortunately we are not there yet, maybe a very long way away from that kind of world community. Memorial Day honors those who died in the struggle.

Here is a poem for us to begin our service this morning titled [Facing It](#) by poet Yusef Komunyakaa from the Poetry Foundation archive.

My black face fades,
 hiding inside the black granite.
 I said I wouldn't
 dammit: No tears.
 I'm stone. I'm flesh.
 My clouded reflection eyes me
 like a bird of prey, the profile of night
 slanted against morning. I turn
 this way—the stone lets me go.
 I turn that way—I'm inside
 the Vietnam Veterans Memorial
 again, depending on the light
 to make a difference.
 I go down the 58,022 names,
 half-expecting to find
 my own in letters like smoke.
 I touch the name Andrew Johnson;
 I see the booby trap's white flash.
 Names shimmer on a woman's blouse
 but when she walks away
 the names stay on the wall.
 Brushstrokes flash, a red bird's
 wings cutting across my stare.

The sky. A plane in the sky.
 A white vet's image floats
 closer to me, then his pale eyes
 look through mine. I'm a window.
 He's lost his right arm
 inside the stone. In the black mirror
 a woman's trying to erase names:
 No, she's brushing a boy's hair.

Spoken Meditation by the Rev. Chris Antal

Most Merciful God
 we confess that we have sinned against you
 in thought, word, and deed
 by what we have done, and what we have left undone.

We have become people of the lie,
 out to tame the frontier wilderness
 while the beast within lurks hidden in shadow
 paralyzing us in a perpetual state of denial.

We have made war entertainment
 enjoying box seats in the carnival of death
 consuming violence, turning tragedy into games
 raising our children to kill without remorse.

We have morally disengaged,
 outsourcing our killing to the one percent,
 forgetting they follow our orders
 the blood they shed is on our hands too.

We have insulated ourselves from the painful truths veterans carry.
 Our bumper magnets proclaim, "Support our Troops,"
 but for too many, suicide is the only panacea.
 Our insulation is their isolation.

We have made our veterans into false idols,
 blood sacrifice on the National Altar of War.
 Parades and medals perpetuate the hero myth,
 glorifying those who kill and die on our behalf.

We have betrayed the dead,
 saying, "They will never be forgotten,"
 yet how many among us can name
 a single war casualty of the past decade?

We have sanitized killing and condoned extrajudicial assassinations:
 death by remote control,
 war made easy without due process,
 protecting ourselves from the human cost of war.

We have deceived ourselves,
 saying, “Americans do not kill civilians, terrorists do,”
 denying the colossal misery our wars inflict on the innocent.
 The national closet bursts with skeletons.

We have abandoned our Afghan allies,
 luring them in with promises of safety and security
 then failing to follow through with promises made,
 using them and leaving them to an almost certain death.

Almighty God, on this [Memorial] Day
 help us to turn from this wayward path.
 Deliver us from indifference, callousness, and self-deception.
 Fill us with compassion for all who bear the burdens of our wars.

Grant us the courage to pay attention, to stay engaged
 so we may listen without judgment, restore integrity,
 accept responsibility, keep promises
 and give honor to whomever honor is due.

Sermon

I wanted to believe the narrative. Drones, carefully used to accurately target known terrorists who were clearly responsible for death and destruction would allow us to eliminate our enemies, demoralize and dismantle their organizations and stop attacks here and around the world without any civilian casualties. Not only could our military stop the terrorists on their own soil, we could do it without putting **our** troops on the ground and put their lives at risk. Drones seem like a very attractive solution to a problem that conventional warfare **cannot** effectively address.

Our former intern and military chaplain the Rev. Chris Antal who served to support a drone unit in Afghanistan changed my mind. His prayer I used as the meditation this morning was posted on Veteran’s day, in 2012. The chain of command above him didn’t approve of it, sent him home and tried to dishonorably discharge him. Chris fought them and won. He eventually resigned his commission to protest drone warfare in 2016.

Now I love Chris but resisted following his lead and doing the research on drones to find out for myself. It’s that liminal space of knowing he was probably right but not wanting to know enough to be outraged and feel compelled to act. There are so many things our nation is doing in the world that I object to, especially with our new President who reliably does the opposite of what I believe is just and morally right, that I didn’t want to add one more cause to my plate.

And then Chris invited me to a screening of [National Bird](#) in April. The producer was on tour promoting it and had invited Chris to be on a panel at the [Center for Independent Media](#) in Troy. Seeing the documentary and listening to the panel discussion penetrated my denial and I had to find out more.

Our military doesn't like the term drone. Their names for them include Unmanned Aerial Vehicle, Remote Controlled Aircraft or Remotely Piloted Aircraft. Their resistance to using the term drone would be like calling Humvees Tactical Horseless Carriages or THCs. Whatever they are called, they represent the fruition of a desired aircraft design since the military started using them.

As soon as planes were used in warfare, the opposing side started shooting them down. That meant valuable pilots were killed. Nothing interferes with civilian enthusiasm for war like parents getting their sons and now daughters coming home in body bags rather than with chests covered in medals.

The first attempts to create unmanned aircraft during World War One were miserable failures. Attempts during World War Two were not much better. It wasn't until the computer chip revolution, advances in optics, satellite communications and GPS technology came together, that drones become effective tools in the 1990's.

The first uses of drones were for battlefield surveillance and targeting for more conventional weapon systems. The September 11th attack changed that. Drones were armed with the first missiles.

The first use of one of those missiles happened in February of 2002. The CIA had been using drones for surveillance over Afghanistan since 2000. In February, drone operators saw three people at a former mujahedeen base called Zhawar Kili. One was a "tall man" which made the observers think maybe he was bin Laden who was tall and might have been in that location as his erstwhile home wasn't far away in Kandahar. The military thought that bin Laden and his Al Qaeda forces might have fled to Zhawar Kili after the battle of Tora Bora. It was enough to get the White House to authorize firing that missile at the men killing all three of them.

Pentagon spokeswoman Victoria Clark said, "We're convinced that it was an appropriate target." But she added, "We do not know yet exactly who it was." Gen. Tommy Franks told ABC News that he expected the identities of the three to prove "interesting." Upon later investigation, the men turned out to be three scavengers looking for scrap metal from previous bombings of the site. None were militants, terrorists or Al Qaeda operatives, just tribal villagers, one of whom was 5' 11" – much shorter than bin Laden.

The story of this first lethal drone attack was a harbinger of things to come. Bush used drone strikes sparingly compared to Obama who ramped up their use several fold from tens of strikes to hundreds then thousands of strikes. As those strikes increased so did the deaths of civilian men, women and children.

Now let's discuss why drones don't live up to their hype and expectations.

The first problem to tackle is the optics. The imaging that drones send back is amazing but not quite clear enough to recognize people from the air. The observer can tell whether the person is male or female by dress and whether they are adults or children usually by size. The activities a person might be doing can often be recognized. But understanding exactly why someone is doing something requires context and interpretation. The image of a man digging by the side of the road could be someone planting an improvised explosive device ... or it might be a fellow digging a drainage ditch to get water off the road or to install a new stop sign at an intersection. The view from 10,000 feet might not reveal this.

The drone hellfire missiles are not as precise as we might like them to be having a blast zone of 20 to 30 meters with shrapnel flying further. Those of you who saw the 2015 movie *Eye in the Sky* remember Helen Mirren's character wanting to stop a terrorist attack in the making by blowing up a house with two suicide bombers inside strapping explosives to their bodies getting ready to go blow up a mall. A little girl was selling bread outside the house inside the blast zone. The movie has us on the edge of our seats wondering will they or won't they blow up the house before the bombers leave or the girl sells her last loaf of bread. In reality, the decision makers often don't know who else is around the target they have identified and civilian lives are lost.

Let's talk about targeting in general. How do we determine who is one? What does it mean to be labeled a militant? What happens now is if a person is identified to be killed and has young men around him, they are considered militants. Any male above a certain age can pick up a gun according to military logic and thus is expendable. There are no considerations for uniforms or aggressive behavior. These so called militants are only guilty by physical proximity. They could be local merchants, family members, Imams, old men, conversation partners, anybody. The eye in the sky only sees the label militant. Today, groups are being identified by patterns of behavior – called signature targeting – as militants. There is no awareness of who these people are besides how they move together.

Now let's think about what the effect of being seen that way from the sky is like for people on the ground living their day to day lives. Here is a description from one report I read:

Drones hover twenty-four hours a day over communities in northwest Pakistan, striking homes, vehicles, and public spaces without warning. ... Those living under drones have to face the constant worry that a deadly strike may be fired at any moment, and the knowledge that they are powerless to protect themselves.

These fears have affected behavior. The US practice of striking one area multiple times, and evidence that it has killed rescuers, makes both community members and humanitarian workers afraid or unwilling to assist injured victims. Some community members shy away from gathering in groups, including important tribal dispute-resolution bodies, out of fear that they may attract the attention of drone operators. Some parents choose to keep their children home, and children injured or traumatized by strikes have dropped out of school.

Waziris told ... researchers that the strikes have undermined cultural and religious practices related to burial, and made family members afraid to attend funerals.

It isn't just the people being watched that are traumatized, so are the observers thousands of miles away flying the drones. They aren't allowed to take their eyes off the brutality of war happening right on their screen in HD.

Wing commander, Col. Jason Brown said about his pilots, "They're exposed to the most gruesome things that you can think about that could happen on a battlefield. They find mass graves; they witness executions." One in five had witnessed a rape within the past year. A wing surgeon said some had witnessed more than 100 incidents of rape or torture within the past year. The airmen can't just look away; they're supporting and often helping to protect U.S. troops and their allies on the ground by watching out for threats, and guiding aircraft and drone pilots. The surgeon continued, "You don't need a fancy study to tell you that watching someone beheaded, or skinned alive, or tortured to death, is gonna have an impact on you as a human being. Everybody understands that. What [is] not widely understood is the level of exposure that our wing has to that type of incident. We see it all."

I hope you are getting a sense of the death, destruction and trauma generated by drone warfare. People are being killed for no reason except how they congregate together. A line of people carrying a body to a grave can be misidentified as a military supply line. Drone operators must make life or death decisions discriminating combatants and women and children when deciding to strike. And it all happens half a world away.

That distance is a key part of the problem of drones.

Former Nazi and Nobel Prize winner Konrad Lorenz spent much of his life studying violence in animals writing the book titled *On Aggression*. In the book he noted that most animals can be aggressive but also have a counteracting response that limits aggressive behavior. When their opponent shows submissive behavior, it limits that energy to harm and kill. In that way, most animal violence is checked before it occurs. This manifests in people as well. Signs of submission moderate human aggressive behavior.

What interferes with this mechanism is distance "When a spear or sling is used to kill, victims lose the opportunity to engage in submission and trigger the aggression 'off switch'." Drones are the extreme of that distance.

The citizens of this nation are even further shielded from what is happening. We don't see or interact with the civilians on the ground who are being watched 24 hours a day. We don't talk to the drone pilots and don't see what they see. Because their work is classified, they can't even share much of it with us.

We are also not experiencing the casualties of the actions taken in our name. And we are not seeing our sons and daughters coming home in body bags. The ease and the invisibility of the technology

from the citizens means the military and political leaders make the choice to kill people without our knowing it is happening, unless they decide to report a kill to us. It gives us the permission to ignore what they are doing in our name because we mostly don't even know what they have done.

Reporting of the strikes is difficult in the areas affected as they are dangerous places where now Americans are not welcome.

The effect of terrorizing a population with drones does not endear them to us. More the opposite. It makes the terrorist recruiting all the more easy.

Attempted Times Square bomber, Pakistani-American Faisal Shahzad, at his sentencing hearing when the federal judge presiding over his case, Miriam Goldman Cedarbaum, asked incredulously how he could possibly use violence that he knew would result in the deaths even of innocent children he responded:

"Well, the drone hits in Afghanistan and Iraq, they don't see children, they don't see anybody. They kill women, children, they kill everybody. It's a war, and in war, they kill people. They're killing all Muslims' . . . I am part of the answer to the U.S. terrorizing the Muslim nations and the Muslim people. And, on behalf of that, I'm avenging the attack. Living in the United States, Americans only care about their own people, but they don't care about the people elsewhere in the world when they die."

Chris Antal knew this reality while he served in Afghanistan. You are hearing more about it this morning than you probably want to know. Me too. From my research, I now know way more than I did before – enough to question and condemn how we are using drones today. I refuse to believe we would conscience the use of drones on our soil the way they are used in Muslim countries.

We must demand that an ethically defensible protocol be created for the use of these weapons that is nationally and internationally binding. If we don't establish that principle of law now, established practice will become a norm. If not, when our government decides to use weaponized drones on our soil at some time in the future, and you know that time is coming, we all will be sorry.

References:

Here are links and articles used putting this sermon together and sources for the quotes.

<http://nationalbirdfilm.com/> (was on PBS - can watch it on Amazon.com for a fee)

5 big problems with the drone programs By Matt McClure

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/12/10/5-big-problems-with-the-drone-programs/>

The Ethics of Drone Warfare by Laura Maguire

<https://www.philosophytalk.org/blog/ethics-drone-warfare>

A Brief History of Drones by John Sifton

<https://www.thenation.com/article/brief-history-drones/>

New Study Documents the Civilian Terror from Obama's Drones by Glenn Greenwald

<http://www.worldcantwait.net/index.php/features/covert-drone-war/7979-new-study-documents-the-civilian-terror-from-obama-s-drones>

The excellent study referenced in the article: http://livingunderdrones.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Stanford_NYU_LIVING_UNDER_DRONES.pdf

Drones in Contemporary Warfare: The Implications for Human Rights by Alexandra Funk

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/humanrights/2016/07/07/drones-in-contemporary-warfare-the-implications-for-human-rights/>

The Warfare May Be Remote but the Trauma Is Real

April 24, 2017 (Heard on All Things Considered) by SARAH MCCAMMON

<http://www.npr.org/2017/04/24/525413427/for-drone-pilots-warfare-may-be-remote-but-the-trauma-is-real>
