Beyond "the Good War"

Katie Day

Growing up as a certifiable baby boomer in the 50's and 60's, I learned early on that my father was "a strong, silent type." Strong because he had fought in World War II, in the infantry in Europe. Silent because the experience had traumatized him. As children we were instructed by our mother to *never, ever* ask him about the war. I remember watching Dad watching war shows on our black and white TV – *Combat*, or even *Hogan's Heroes* – and worrying that he might emotionally implode right there on the sofa. My hunch is that he was not so very different from a lot of other men who had survived combat in what became known as "the good war." The image of VFW halls filled with WWII veterans recounting with swagger and gusto stories of glorious battles was not the case in our small town. There was a certain silence surrounding the war, during and after. Language could not adequately contain the complexity and the horrors of the Second World War, lending much of it literally unspeakable.

It is this silence which Ken Burns and Lynn Novick address in their epic seven part television series THE WAR, which begins airing on PBS stations this September. The documentary covers the well-known contours of the history of this country's involvement, from 1941-1945, from Pearl Harbor to Hiroshima, Northern Africa to Berlin. The series weaves these events into a narrative supported by a vast collection of visual resources dug up from many of the more obvious, as well as lesser known, archives. That in itself would make it worth viewing, albeit the genre is familiar to anyone who has watched the History Channel. What makes THE WAR more compelling is that the narrative is told through the experiences of four prototypical American towns: Luverne, Minnesota; Waterbury, Connecticut; Mobile, Alabama; and Sacramento, California. Veterans of both the war front and the home front give voice to the silenced struggles of their generation. They speak eloquently at times, haltingly at others, about the very human dimensions of that war. Behind the headlines and newsreels, the patriotic symbolism and triumphalist rhetoric, was human experience marked by fear, confusion, moral conflict, and death. That is not to say that courage, clarity, faith, and even joy were absent during the war. But the public construction of the Allies' victory was rendered in such glowing terms that there was not space, or language, to process the struggles that took people to the edges of their humanity. The honesty and vulnerability of those who speak in the series chip away at the cultural prison created by rosy stereotypes of "the good war" and "the greatest generation." The war in its fighting seldom seemed good, and those in this generation who sacrificed so much did not always feel great.

The silence started during THE WAR itself. Soldiers were not allowed to keep journals, and they were limited in what they could say in letters home. Loose lips, after all, sunk ships. But soldiers were also protective of their readers, not wanting to cause them further worry. Newsreels put the best possible spin on dire situations, accompanied by their signature brassy music meant to stir the patriotic soul and assure the folks back home that we were moving toward victory. Daily news, brushed with the broadest strokes, had to be strategically worded, leaving families huddled around the radio hungry for details about their loved ones fighting in God-only-knows-where. Meanwhile, popular music kept those at home frantically jitterbugging or crooning along to homesick tunes.

But silence also extended to those most in need of human contact – those fighting through mud, blood, salt water, and smoky skies. They had seen too much death, Quentin Aanenson of Luverne remembered, so he stopped making friends, adding loneliness to the daily physical and spiritual struggle. "I'm not the same person you said good bye to," he wrote in an unposted letter to his fiancée. "We are all casualties." Returning home, there was no way to speak of combat experience in the context of post-war celebration. "Nobody knows…nobody understands," Aanenson reflected with sadness 60 years later.

For most boomers and our children, World War II has been reduced to remembering battles and dates in school, sometimes with shaky black and white film images. We've been drawn into the pathos at times through Hollywood renditions like "Saving Private Ryan." But the sheer scale of the war is incomprehensible and can have its own silencing effect. Although the current war in Iraq has lasted longer than U.S. involvement in WWII, it pales in comparison to the scope of our parents' war. Everyone, it seemed, was touched directly by that war: 16 million Americans were in uniform, or 12% of the population. Today less than half of one percent of Americans are on active military duty – just 1.4 million volunteers. As horrific as our own casualty levels are, it is difficult to wrap our minds around the human sacrifice of that earlier war. Globally, it is estimated that between 50-60 million people died. More certain is the fact that most were civilians, including the six million Jews killed by the Nazis. The U.S. lost 400,000 young lives; 700,000 came home wounded. The numbers are mind-numbing, but only begin to tell the story. Finding a language in which to tell that story is the difficult part.

One of the gifts of religions, and specifically the Church, is that we have a liturgical voice, shaped by sacred and ancient texts and theological reflection, which enables us to speak of things unseen. The language of faith provides metaphor for mystery and the capacity to communicate about human experience in terms of meaning. Further, we have a community – the Church – in which to engage in difficult conversations to help believers navigate their way during troubled times. The Christian community, in its very DNA, is about addressing the silence. But do we? Did we?

Although the Church's role in public issues has been dissected in just about every other context, one of the least studied is her role during World War II. For good reason: major Christian traditions were bogged down in internal debates about entering into the war, torn between the pacifism which had been in vogue in theological circles after the first World War and the sense of national duty after the invasion of Pearl Harbor. Reinhold Niebuhr, a leading theologian at the time, argued strenuously on political and theological grounds for joining in what he saw as a struggle for the survival of Western civilization itself. "We are witnessing the first effective revolution against Christian civilization since the days of Constantine." [1] However, he and denominational leaders were also cautious about joining in a "war hysteria." The boundary between church and state loyalties seemed to melt as the Church was caught in an ambivalence, the most positive construction being "a cautious patriotism."[2] The Disciples of Christ denomination articulated the conundrum: "The church of Jesus Christ cannot bless war, but the church in

---

[1] Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Crisis," in Christianity and Crisis vol. 1 (Feb 10, 1941) pp. 1-2.

[2] Gerald L. Sittser, A Cautious Patriotism: The American Churches and the Second World War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press): 1997.

wartime should have something more significant to contribute than a negative attitude. The church has positive and constructive duties to perform to the nation and to the world."[3] Not wanting to appear unpatriotic, most church groups followed suit, quelling their prophetic voice which had led in other times to public critique.

The problem is, this theological ambivalence did not give those in battle much to hang onto during their dark nights of the soul. Many of the questions haunting those in fox holes, in cockpits, or at home holding telegrams were profoundly theological. For some, the very nature of God was at issue. One Marine who found himself shaking with fear in the costly and misguided Battle of Pelelieu reported, "I concluded I couldn't be killed because God loved me, but then I thought about how God loves us all and many would be killed anyway…." Without resolution but with a simple faith, he continued to repeat the 23rd Psalm.

What did the universality of God's love mean anyway? Soldiers who were Jewish, African American, or Asian American brought different experiences and passion to the war, even as they exposed the irony of discrimination at home. Anti-Semitism had taken root in the American psyche. Despite theological pronouncements against it by Church bodies, there was not widespread moral outrage in the Churches when stories of the extermination of the Jews in Europe were covered in religious publications. God's love was carefully nuanced and constructed. Theology, for the most part, failed to make sense of it all or to mobilize the faithful to "prophetic" action.

The meaning and expanse of God's love came up not just in human relations or the possibility of being killed, but in doing the killing as well. These teens and young adults who had been raised on the Christian teachings not to kill now found themselves shooting at other human beings. In many cases the baptized were killing the baptized. Some described a moment of transformation when, in the words of journalist Ernie Pyle, killing was no longer a sin, but a craft. For some the transformation brought clarity and resolution. Despite being brought up not to kill, one soldier saw the smile on the face of a Japanese pilot who had just strafed his area, killing many of his comrades. It changed him. After that, "I hunted 'em down…I felt if I didn't kill a Jap during my day, I hadn't done my job." Others never felt comfortable with "doing their job," even to the point of revulsion and alienation from themselves. Despite President Roosevelt's prayerful language after D-Day about the "righteousness of our cause" to defend nation and religion, many still struggled with their consciences, no doubt throughout their lives. In the daily grind of warfare, many were never sure if they were agents of God's will fighting evil, or pawns in the hands of political and military leaders. Confronting the possibility of evil within or the horrifying realization that "we are expendable," many of the veterans interviewed for THE WAR groped for the language, if not the answers, from their Christian faith. No doubt, many found comfort and support in conversations with military chaplains. Even so, one in four soldiers suffered "battle fatigue" – emotional distress debilitating enough to take them out of combat, if temporarily.

Religion only makes cameo appearances in THE WAR, in fleeting images of services on deck or in the field. Yet it was woven into the whole war experience, an ongoing subtext for many. The lived faith of those at home or in the military was not so defined by a grand narrative but by moments, small decisions, individual

---

[3] Ibid, p.35.

actions. It was here that faith found substance…or not. Men made life-changing choices to enlist, not necessarily because they felt called to confront evil, but because their girlfriend had broken up with them, or they were afraid to appear "yellow," or everyone else had.

THE WAR is an invitation to conversation for all Americans, and particularly for people of faith. It does not romanticize war but puts often gruesome images on the screen to provide a glimpse of the realities confronted by those who fought. The boredom, courage, confusion, fear, pain, humanity, and inhumanity that marked their experience of war provide a counterpoint to dry historical narratives or gauzy tributes to Allied Victory. Triumphalist or upbeat dance music of the 1940's, which often accompanies wartime documentaries, recedes to make room for a haunting score composed and arranged by Wynton Marsalis, with performances by YoYo Ma and Nora Jones. THE WAR recovers the experience of typical Americans and typical towns during what seemed like an apocalyptic struggle. It brings voices into a silence of our own making.

Many of these veterans are still in our congregations, their stories unheard. For them, viewing the documentary, particularly the interviews, will undoubtedly trigger a flood of memories. Perhaps it will provide permission – with the congregation being a safe space – for telling those stories. This will not only help us to know our fathers (and mothers), but ourselves as well. We are again at war, and again we're not very good at talking about it, particularly in our congregations. Our war is different, of course. The radio, newsreels, and telegrams have been replaced by the Internet, cell phones, and satellite photographs. The terrain is different; the cultures and stakes differ as well. But many of the larger questions of meaning remain the same, and our faith tradition gives us a language for framing them: What does the universality of God's love mean? How do we understand our loyalty to both God and nation? Are followers of Christ called to kill for a national cause? How can we recognize sin within ourselves and our government as well as in the enemy? What is the relevance of forgiveness in the context of war?

These are not easy questions which lend themselves to answers packaged for a children's sermon. But they can take us more deeply into understanding ourselves and our community. The veterans of WWII, thrown into battle too early in their lives, are now the elders of the community. Their stories and their struggles are a gift as we try to sort through the call to be faithful and effective in a rapidly changing world which sometimes doesn't seem to change at all.

For more information, go to pbs.org/thewar. You can access veterans' stories, as well as contributing your own, thanks to a collaboration between THE WAR and the Veterans History Project.

Katie Day is the Charles A. Schieren Professor of Church and Society at The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. As well as being a sociologist, she is a Presbyterian minister and the proud daughter of Donald Day of Salisbury, Maryland.

This piece was originally written for WETA Washington and is used with permission.