

"Into the Wild"
Rev. Hannah Petrie
November 11, 2018

CALL TO WORSHIP #695

PRAYER

In the name of all that is holy, we pray. God help us.
Our world is on fire. In the span of a few weeks,
Two mass shootings have left their tragic mark on our souls,
One of them very close to home. We pray for all the victims'
Families to find hope again, to heal from what is unhealable.

We pray for gun control and a change of heart in our sickened culture that has lost its way. Please, we pray, help us to find our way.

We are deeply saddened for our administrator, Claudia Moscotte,
Whose daughter's good friend's fiancé was killed in the Thousand Oaks shooting.
My brother had met the two brothers that were killed in the synagogue, they were family members of friends.
My niece survived the Parkland, FL shooting in February. Such close degrees of separation remind us what a small and fragile world we live in, and how very precious life is, every minute of every day.

And now the fires on top of it all. We pray for the residents of Newbury Park, where Rev. Nica Eaton-Guinn has her church of fellow Unitarian Universalists. We have offered our help and assistance. We are in shock at the devastation of fires all over California, fires that are still smoldering, people that are still missing.

In this time of shock and devastation, we draw nearer to one another. We hug more. We find out how we can help. We take comfort in our fellow human beings, family members, friends. We admit how vulnerable and afraid we may feel.

And we find hope in each others' hearts, hearts that believe there is a better way, a new tomorrow. At times like this, it is okay to just get by, to shake our heads, to cry, and get through the day.

We pray for all those who are suffering as the result of the shooting and the fires, may they have loved ones to turn to.

And we will not stop working for a more peaceful world, until all are safe. AMEN.

SERMON

The worship theme of the month is Memory. Our religious community observes memory through rituals, especially this time of year. Every year, we make a Day of the Dead altar, to remember our loved ones who have died. Next week, we will do our 2nd annual ritual of witness, when we view in silence the photos of all the trans women in America who have been murdered in hate crimes, for Trans Day of Remembrance. There are well over 20 so far in 2018.

And on Veterans' Day today, we place our new, American flag (that was given to us for our 75th anniversary by our local US congressman Brad Sherman) on our altar to honor and remember the service of our men and women in uniform.

The service stories of our soldiers and our military staff are often ordinary, but sometimes they are mythic and heroic. Today I want to talk with you about the mythic notion of the hero's journey, using the Chris McCandless story, against the background, and in honor of, our soldiers past and present.

As your newly settled minister, you're still getting to know me, and one thing you can count on is that I will always observe Veterans' and Memorial Day, because during my lifetime, and especially since 2003 when we invaded Iraq, I have seen soldiers sent to the front lines of pointless wars, and for me this is a moral question for religious liberals to wrestle with – we, who reside comfortably stateside and never have to think about the trials of war.

The other thing to know about me is that I love the Chris McCandless story, which I'll describe in a moment, for it is a compelling true story on a mythic scale. I will preach on it again in February, when we look at the worship theme of Trust, and I use the book his sister wrote a few years ago called "The Wild Truth."

The idea of the hero's journey is an insight of Joseph Campbell, who wrote widely about the meaning of myth. Myths from around the world that have survived for thousands of years all share a common structure that contain a number of stages. First there is the call to adventure, which the hero has to accept or decline. Second is the road of trials, where the hero succeeds or fails. Third is the achieving of the goal, which often results in valuable self-knowledge. Fourth is the return to the ordinary world, again in which the hero can succeed or fail. Fifth, and finally, the hero applies what was learned to improve the world.

The stories of Buddha, Muhammed, Jesus, Moses – these are all examples of the hero's journey. Sometimes the hero comes from a rich family, as did the Buddha, but often not. Any myth to survive must ring true to the common man. In today's world, the differences between a rich hero's journey and a poor hero's journey remain distinct.

There was both a book, by Jon Krakauer, and a film, directed by Sean Penn, made about Chris McCandless. Chris was a young man who came from a family with resources. But it was a family with a very abusive husband and father, and Chris wished to reject everything associated with his upbringing. After graduating from

college from Emory, in 1992, he set out west in an old car, never to be in touch with his family again. He loved his sister, but his parents represented everything he did not want to be: dishonest; ruthlessly obsessed with the conventional definition of success; and materialistic.

Chris McCandless understood that if he were to take on the hero's journey, he would need to purge himself of his parents' resources. He had \$24,000 in his bank account, given to him by his parents to help pay for graduate school at Harvard. He sent a check to a charity in the amount of his balance, with a note to "feed the hungry."

Chris tests his abilities to be self-sufficient, without money. He works in a grainery in South Dakota, he hitchhikes, he hangs out with hippies and lives with the homeless, he hops freight cars. Several months later he arrives in Alaska, where he attempts to survive alone in the wilderness just north of Denali National Park. Tragically, he doesn't make it, and dies of starvation.

I first came across this story back in the mid-90's; the New Yorker had a long article about it that was also written by Krakauer, before he wrote the book. As an experienced back-packer, I had always scorned the notion that Chris McCandless was a hero. He was an idiot, I thought. He was arrogantly unprepared for the unforgiving elements. I could have visited the famous bus he occupied, when I lived in Alaska for two summers, in 98 and 99 – I was just a few miles away on one of my particular out-trips in Denali Park, but my friend and I refused to show any such deference to Chris McCandless.

I wish I had, and maybe someday I will still make it out there. The film, *Into the Wild*, changed my mind about what Chris McCandless was trying to do. He did take the hero's journey, and failed, but even though he didn't make it back, what he learned did.

Who of us, at some point, hasn't considered for ourselves a version of Chris' story? A time when we might have had the courage to reject all expectations, to be truly free of what we suspect is false? If you had answered yes to that call, what would you have done? Which "wild" would you have crossed into?

The Chris McCandless story is a modern American parable for people close to his social class – for people who have choices. I doubt members of working class America would find it so poignant. Especially those who enlist in our volunteer army, with the hope of higher education down the road.

Chris was after powerful life experiences, as are many of the brave young people who volunteer to fight in our armed conflicts, who are told they will "see the world." But they, too, are often unprepared for the wilderness they face. For many of them, it's not about being a hero, it's about making a living. It is not dissimilar to ordinary Iraqis or Afghans having little choice but to work for groups with violent ends, not because they are terrorists, but because they will be paid enough to feed their

families. For some of our young people in under-resourced neighborhoods, it is trading one war zone for another: they have a better chance of surviving in a war zone than they do in a gang.

Into the wild, these soldiers go, to poor countries like Iraq and Afghanistan, and more recently to our own southern border to ostensibly protect America from “invading” poor and desperate refugees. These sorts of efforts define a severe regression of our country’s leadership and values, yes, but more tragically, when soldiers learn that their blood, sweat, and tears are for such cheap interests, with such drastic consequences, such as hundreds of thousands of dead civilians in Iraq, and their fellow soldiers’ loss of life, they understand how terribly misused they have been, and they return to civilian life often in a broken state, physically maimed or with the psychic wounds of PTSD. We know the gunman in Thousand Oaks on Wednesday night was a marine veteran with a history of PTSD, a machine-gunner who served a tour in Afghanistan. Sadly, one of the symptoms of PTSD can be to be homicidal, although we’ll never know exactly what was going on with him; but it’s hard not to draw these connections here.

Of course most veterans return in a whole state, able to adapt to civilian life, able to become contributing members to our society. But this doesn’t change that too many come back broken, and for what? We are breaking our moral contract with them, when we send them off to wars that don’t accomplish anything of value.

Even so, the broken soldier can still travel the hero’s journey. Let’s look at the example of veteran Tomas Young. A documentary was made about him called *Body of War*. Tomas is an example of a soldier who enlisted in the army out of patriotism, not desperation. He accepted the call to adventure, to find Bin Ladin. He was disappointed when he got sent to Iraq instead of Afghanistan. Now he is doing his best to be true to his authentic self as he is now, paralyzed from the chest down, after being shot in an unarmored vehicle – only 6 days after arriving in Iraq. He became an outspoken anti-war vet. He says to his fellow veterans, “you can either tell the truth and be called a traitor, or you can stay silent and self-destruct.” For him there is no choice but to speak out. In addition to the film, he’s been featured in *The Nation* magazine and *60 Minutes*. Tomas made it to the fifth step of the hero’s journey: trying to improve the world with what he has learned.

What we don’t like to talk about much, is that war, while it’s been with us throughout our history, and especially in the last 100 years it’s been essentially constant, war is a symptom of dwindling resources, and the reluctance to let go of a way of life that is unsustainable, that is so dependent on products that are oil-based. We cling to a narrative of false prosperity.

Many of our troops are in the Middle East, where the oil interests are. You may have thought those wars are over but here are the stats of where our soldiers serve today: we have 5,500 in Iraq, 9,000 in Afghanistan, nearly 12,000 in Kuwait and

Bahrain, and this is out of 200,000 we have stationed worldwide, in over 1,000 military bases.

We know from the accounts of soldiers who have served there, that terrible things go on in the wars in the Middle East. We have insane wars supported by our insane, unsustainable way of life. It's one aspect of Chris McCandless' story that is so jarring – his total rejection of our beloved, consumerific society, his quest to free himself of the materialistic world. What he learned too late is that to be free doesn't include being free of human bonds. He learned too late that happiness is only real if shared.

Deep down we know that human bonds are the only thing that matter; deep down we know we don't need this much stuff to live a good life. We don't have to be as extreme as Chris McCandless and go into the wild, but we do need to deepen our connection to the earth and our local communities. We need to understand our food sources, and how the meat industry contributes to one of the leading causes of global warming. At one point in Chris' story, he shoots a moose, but since he is so inexperienced at dressing the huge amount of meat, it all goes to waste. How symbolic that is of how removed we've become from the animals we eat.

When we put our minds to consuming less, we are actually promoting peace and our domestic democracy, rather than the foreign empire. We can't have both – there is no example of any civilization in history that has ever held on to both.

It's as if our country as a whole is on the hero's journey, on step 2, a little lost on the road of trials. But we're becoming more self-aware, as painful as it is. It's painful to see the truth, and painful to be so far from home, as our soldiers are. It's terrifying to no longer recognize the country that we love.

As individuals, I urge us all to take heed of the 5th step of the hero's journey, to apply what we have learned to improve the world. That, in essence, is what religious liberals are called to do. To make use of the varied experiences we've had, to use our fancy educations, to use not only our privilege, but also the passion of our creative minds – in service of a better world. It is a much richer road than using these things to acquire things.

Chris McCandless could give his money away to “play poor,” but those who really are poor can't play at being rich. The route of our soldiers today is not a slam dunk for the hero's quest, as much as it often was for World War II. Let us honor the soldiers' sacrifice, their patriotism, and their bravery, with some bravery of our own. For we are not asked to sacrifice very much.

All of the heroes' journeys are just variations on a theme. The hero arrives at the same place the journey began, only to recognize and value it as it had not been before – only to *know* it for the first time.

As romantic as it may sound to roam the earth, to see the world, or even to go to war, in the end, we all learn there is no place like home. In the end, after all our journeys, we return again and again to this simple truth: all we have is each other.

What makes the journey worthwhile are the people we meet along the way, the magic of human connection: the brothers and sisters of platoons, the strangers who become friends, the foreigners we discover need the same things we do. The elders who spoke to us when we listened.

Let us be thankful for the heroes on the hero's journey who come back alive, who return to the people who need them most: daughters and sons, husbands and wives, parents.

And may we remember the heroes who do not return to the ordinary world, or those who do return, but can never be ordinary people again. May we not look away, but have the courage to meet their gaze.

May we struggle, as they have struggled, for a home, for a country, that is truly worthy of their sacrifice.

Will our veterans present today please stand? Thank you for your service, veterans. We who sent you, now owe you our own service, in the name of those high ideals that might yet unite, and save, us all.