

‘Brathood,’ Violence, and Discipleship: Seeking Insights for U.S. Religious Education by Exploring Stories of Unwrapping the Flag from the Cross

By Joshua Lunde-Whitler and Lakisha Lockhart-Rusch (Boston College)

OUTLINE and VIGNETTES

OUTLINE

- I. Introduction** (Joshua)
 - a. Story: Robert Schuller and the Flag
 - b. Introductory Ideas
 - i. Focusing image for project: the phenomenon of “wrapping the cross in the flag” (S. Claiborne)
 - ii. The U.S. Church’s Relationship to the Military
 - c. Our Stories: Military “Brathood” and the Disentangling of Narratives (i.e. “unwrapping”)
 - d. Purpose and Outline (according to perceived “entangled” themes)
 - i. Method:
 - 1) Generative dialogue for “deep” life-history analysis
 - 2) Listening for common themes/symbols, inspired by discourse and narrative analysis
 - 3) Composing vignettes (“portraits”) based on these themes
 - ii. Goals:
 - Determining resources and strategies for disentangling
 - Defining role of religious education in negotiating identity
 - iii. Grounding Sources:
 - P. Freire, b. hooks
 - liberation psychology: M. Watkins and H. Shulman
- II. Entangled Symbols** (Lakisha)
 - a. Brief discussion of how our stories and emotion have been perpetuated by appropriated language and symbols
 - b. Language and symbols will serve as meta-themes throughout presentation
 - c. Examples of language and symbol usage: “service” and “sacrifice” over killing and maiming and Military parking before religious parking
- III. Theme One: Fear and Salvation** (Lakisha)
 - a. Re: Vignette #1
 - b. Brief Explanation of Theme
 - i. Hero complex: Military as Savior
 - ii. Fear: In communities of power fear is used for submission. (Ferguson)
 - iii. Systems of Domination
 - c. Theme relevance to US church context
 - i. Churches encouraging no reporting for fear of consequences of military (i.e. rape and abuse)
 - ii. Military targeting recruiting to underprivileged and urban youth
 - iii. Seeing military as just as important if not more than God; Physical saving over unseen “faith” and “miracles.”
 - iv. Religious education: Military children raised with view of military rules that are more important than Ten Commandments.

IV. **Theme Two: Shame and Duty** (Joshua)

- a. Re: Vignette #2
- b. Brief Explanation of Theme
 - i. Seeking to earn love/respect: conflating God and Father
 - ii. Jesus as Ultimate Soldier who sacrifices (and soldiers as Christ-figures), a resulting ambiguous sense of duty as Christians
 - iii. *Sola gratia* and duty: living indebted to God, to country, to family
 - iv. Low anthropologies benefit domination systems: breaking down to build up
- c. Theme relevance to US church context
 - i. High depression/suicide rates not just of military personnel but all people: Need to examine our *practical* theological anthropology.
 - ii. Utilizing shame/duty in churches, now to combat under-attendance, overscheduling, lack of participation, etc.
 - iii. What “allegiance to Christ” looks like

V. **Theme Three: Anger and Atonement** (Joshua)

- a. Re: Vignette #3
- b. Brief Explanation of Theme
 - i. Anger as modified fear (and sometimes shame)
 - ii. Anger must *go* somewhere: typically to “others”:
 - Sacrificing scapegoats
 - God’s anger is “worked out” through the sacrifice of Jesus; Violence “works out” our self-hatred (but also promotes it)
 - Destroying enemies
 - to “fetishize” (J. Kristeva) = a thorough destruction
 - iii. Effects:
 - Dissociation or “splitting”; violent fantasy
 - Trauma
- c. Theme relevance to US church context
 - i. Key Premise: We are all affected by military violence
 - ii. Numbness: Many of us are “distant” from military violence; yet we are all over-exposed.
 - iii. A Nationwide Nuremberg defense?
 - iv. Examples:
 - School and police violence: a “militarized” society, living out fantasies
 - “Culture wars” and churches becoming battlegrounds
 - Segregation of the church body

VI. **Summary and Questions** (Lakisha)

- a. Resources for Disentanglement
- b. Questions
 - How do we bring this conversation into the wider world of religious education? How do we learn from these stories and the common stories of others? Where do we go from here? How do religious educators take this into account in the classroom and in deciding curriculum? Can religion and the military ever co-exist in a healthy way?

Vignettes

Below are some “portraits” based on our (Lakisha and Joshua’s) reflections upon the many personal stories that we shared together during a June 2014 dialogue about our respective experiences as “military brats.” Out of the myriad of topics discussed at that meeting, we isolated three overarching themes describing how our personal, national, and religious narratives intermixed together in ways that have shaped us. We then composed these three corresponding vignettes, each attempting to capture the spirit and tone of that initial dialogue, in order to illustrate these broad and complex themes in brief.

Please take a moment to look these over prior to the presentation.

#1: Fear and Salvation (Lakisha Lockhart-Rusch)

Growing up my mother was a single parent with three children working two jobs. When she married my stepfather, who was in the army, she told us that we "had been saved." She told us that the military would take good care of us and that we would never have to worry about money or anything again. Not only was my military stepdad the savior of our family, but the military was like God, saving all of us. As we reached high school we always knew that if we did not do well in school, or we didn't know what we wanted to do once we graduated, we could always rely on the military to be our saving grace. Both of my sisters went into the military, and my mother continues to work as a civilian in the military, mostly out of fear of not living the comfortable life they live. They have benefits, and feel taken care of and saved by the military, and fear any life that doesn't include that “security.”

As a military child there was a great deal of fear. Again there was the fear of a lack of security and of losing everything we had been saved from. There was also the fear of my father, of not doing his duty or not being a good soldier. There was also a fear that we, as children, would not be reflective of everything that a military child should be: silent and dutiful. This fear was cyclical. The fear my father felt was sure to be passed down to me as his child. The power he lost or did not hold at work...well, he was sure to come home and instill this sense of power, authority and fear into his family. I was terrified of making any mistakes, making bad grades or doing anything that would “dishonor” my family or the military. I became the “perfect child,” often to my own detriment, holding my own anger, fear and resentment inside of myself.

I worked as a youth minister, for the first time, at the military chapel that I grew up in. One day in our Sunday school class we were talking about the Ten Commandments, what they mean for us today and how to live as “good Christians.” One of the young people raised their hand and asked, “If we are not suppose to kill people, does that mean that my father is going to hell because he kills people for a living?” I was literally in shock after this question that I did not see coming. I had no idea how to approach it, and so I asked the young person what he thought. He continued, “Well, I think he should go to heaven ‘cause he is serving our country and doing his duty for God so God should be ok with this... but then why does God say it’s not ok in the Bible? And also does that mean its ok for me to hurt people at school?” Needless to say, there was much conversation after this encounter with the youth. I also spoke with our other church leaders and ministers about the various messages we are sending, and our very nature of being a church on a base, and all the baggage that comes along with that.

#2: Shame and Duty (Joshua Lunde-Whitler)

The worst thing growing up, I think, not just military brats but for any children growing up in authoritarian environments, is to face the disappointment of your parents, even more than their anger or punishment. For military brats, though, the disappointment is never only that of your parents, but of my dad's peer and superiors. If you get into trouble, or mess up, you make the family look bad, and you disappoint the squadron, and thus the base, and ultimately the United States of America, and even God! We may not have been soldiers or airmen ourselves, but we were no less driven by a sense of duty—even if ours was more ambiguous.

You learn very early on as a brat that flags are holy things. We pledged allegiance to them every morning as it was raised at school, and put our hands over our hearts every evening as it was lowered at HQ, the national anthem playing over the loudspeakers throughout the base to let you know it was happening. As a third-grader living in Germany, I was on school color guard with two other boys, as we were all Cub Scouts together. One day they were picking on me even harder than usual, culminating in my utter exasperation and my hurling the half-folded U.S. flag into the air, an early subconscious act of defiance against all the standards and measurements to which I was psychologically bound. Yet that great deterrent, that great and terrible shaper of human nature, shame, quickly engulfed me in response. Such a small event when viewed with some perspective...but to willingly let the flag touch the ground? That was the greatest sin my little mind could conceive. Who knows what untold pain and suffering I had caused my family, let alone my country? The shame was compounded by those two kids, who proceeded to blackmail me. Two Filipino coins that I treasured, given to me by one of the many friends I had who had since moved away, turned out to be the price of their silence. Yet the shame of this seemingly-insignificant event emotionally imprisoned me, and was seared into my memory, and helped contribute to my then-building depression that would come to engulf my school-aged years. Such is the power of shame.

#3: Anger and Atonement (Joshua Lunde-Whitler)

Lakisha and I discussed many of the differences between being in the Army versus being in the Air Force. Army soldiers are frequently stereotyped as hapless brutes, while the Air Force is seen as full of egghead sissies who conveniently avoid the fray. Yet both are no less responsible for enacting incredibly destructive violence. It was all too recently when I first realized, to my chagrin, that my dad had not only bombed SAMM sites in Iraq during the first Gulf War; he had conducted multiple missions throughout the Middle East during the three years we lived in Europe, doing God knows what. And even though pilots continue to wage war from thousands of feet above the earth—or increasingly today, from 12,000 miles away via remote controlled drone—violence affects one's mind and soul no less. Perhaps even more so, or at least more insidiously.

And we as brats are a step removed from this violence. Only one step closer, though, than everyone else who lives in the United States, with military neighbors and access to CNN. We all “benefit” from their exploits; we all live marked by this state-sanctioned violence. It can fuel self-righteousness; it can create xenophobia out of the fear of retaliation, leading to narratives of justification of violence against sworn enemies, who deserve to feel the tip of our sword. We all remember 9/11 and the swirl of reactions that followed, the indignation, the anger—and the consequent willingness of many residents to champion and cheer on the ensuing war campaign.

While on the surface I appeared to be a relatively peace-loving kid, I remember as a child being in my room alone, drawing graphic, bloody pictures of Saddam Hussein, the man who took my dad away from me for six months while he dropped bombs. I made a caricature of his face into something Hitler-like, stuck it on my dartboard, and flung darts for six months. I look back now and see the anger coming from another source: the volatile temper of my dad himself against me, against my mom, my brother. Lakisha's sisters would unleash themselves against each other frequently, leaving her to the role of peacemaker. From whence did their anger come? Violence is not only a response to anger; it also produces it, imprinting itself onto our thinking patterns, instigating the ire of victims and creating vicious circles. We are all swimming in a sea of anger; it seeps into us through our skin. The question becomes, what do we do with it?