

## OUR BETTER SELVES

By Linda McKim-Bell

Good Morning. It is good to be with you. I would like to begin with a quote from the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1967 sermon at Riverside Church, in New York City. He calls to our better selves to act against the Vietnam War. He said:

Perhaps a new spirit is rising among us. If it is, let us trace its movement well and pray that our own inner being may be sensitive to its guidance. For we are deeply in need of a new way beyond the darkness so close around us.

I am here today as the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee's Pacific North West Representative. We are a human rights organization funded by UUs and separate from the UUA. The UUSC's major campaign this year is "The Iraq War: Who Pays the Price". Those who recently attended G.A. had an opportunity to receive UUSC activist training workshops to end the war in Iraq.

Our campaign is focused on Americans of every political stripe and it's a cause that can bring us all together as Americans. The activist tools on our new [www.UUSC.org](http://www.UUSC.org) website will give UUs in every church and fellowship tools to hold politicians accountable in the coming elections. Although many of us are worn out and feel that Peace Activism is futile, we must continue to act. The answer to the question Who pays the price? is that we are all paying the price and that price is too dear.

What are the costs of this war? The financial costs are enormous. We will pay a total of three trillion dollars, and we are in debt to China for most of this. We are talking about a debt that will span generations. We are spending \$750 million a day in Iraq while our needs at home are unmet. We are not taking care of our people's health care, education, housing, culture, or infrastructure. The economic health of our families is threatened. New Orleans, the Gulf Coast, and now the Mid West are lacking in the resources to rebuild. We are paying the price also with the loss of our creative and beautiful patriot dreams and hopes for what this country could be. We are told there is no money for this. Our hopes and dreams are now unaffordable as we scramble to survive. Those alabaster cities' gleams are a long way off now, my friends.

Our military families are paying the greatest price. We have sacrificed 4,100 people and wounded so many others with permanent neurological damage. Those families have paid dearly. Stop loss orders mean that our soldiers serve many tours of duty under harsh conditions and away from their families. The economic draft means the burdens of war are not shared fairly.

I know that each precious life snuffed out leaves a great emptiness for years to come. My brother-in-law John Martin Bell, whose picture you see here today, was killed in Vietnam in 1968. He was a reluctant soldier who did his duty. We are a small family and he is greatly missed. I often wonder what it would have been like to have him with us to grow old together, to have him visit on a birthday or for our daughter to have an uncle. And so it is with many of our families in the U.S. and Iraq.

We are paying a great diplomatic price. Reliance on violent solutions to our fears has led us to a cycle of retribution. We no longer have diplomatic carrots that other countries may want. We are shunned by the family of nations. We have squandered treasure on war that could have been spent on aid, and done so much good and made us many friends.

War and senseless revenge are failed strategies that leave us less secure. We are paying the price in our lost prestige and going deeper into a lonely isolationism. It will not be easy to clean our good name after needless civilian deaths, revelations about Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo and our prisons in Afghanistan.

Many of us have allowed this to happen, and it has kept us subjugated and divided as Americans. The heated rhetoric that divides Americans is hurting our country. Hate and division keeps us from acting. Those of us who have been less directly affected have paid the heaviest price in our moral selves. As Martin Luther King, Jr., said in that same speech,

A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.

You can see that spiritual death in many places. For me it happened on a holiday outing.

One Fourth of July I went down to a waterfront park to watch the fireworks. As the sparkling shapes appeared and the explosions went off, I was reminded of the night of Shock and Awe. I imagined the palm trees shaking and mosques of Baghdad lit up from the bombs that we dropped. I remember laying in bed that night crying in grief and anger.

The night of Shock and Awe was presented to television viewers as some obscene fireworks spectacle. Growing up in the bomb-shelter 1950s I always hated those words of the Star Spangled Banner, "The rocket's red glare, the bombs bursting in air." That Fourth of July I fled from the park and the fireworks, which had seemed so breathtakingly lovely to me in the past had become symbolic of our might, power and evil destruction. The fireworks were no longer fun. No matter what, I could never get away from this war.

Indeed, we are each carrying unconsciously or not, a grievous burden for the massive deaths. We are paying a spiritual price that eats at our very souls.

Many times when I am just going about my daily life, I look at these paintings of Iraqi women and I wonder what are their lives like now? What is she thinking as she goes to the market? Will she be safe? Who in her family has been killed? Who is she missing? What is it like to send your husband off to work and wonder if he will be back that night? Can her children go to school?

What were her favorite places in the architectural treasure that was Old Baghdad? Did she have a special place where she went with her grandmother? Is it only a blown-out ruin now? Is her world destroyed?

I think of her, holding her child, like a Madonna, knowing that she can't protect him from the war out there. She holds him close as he looks fearfully out at us from the painting. When I look at this painting Anxiety, Guilt and Shame come flooding in with feelings of despair.

These images and thoughts have been kept away from us by the media. Powerful interests did not want us to see and feel these things. We were told to go shopping after 9/11, and now we are told to go shopping again with our tax rebates. Indeed, there has been an increase in attention to holidays, sports and special events and a frenzy of distractions are offered up by the media. We have been running away from something. But sometimes there is no escape. That little voice of our better selves clamors for expression.

After six years as a Peace Activist, my work is still there. And tiring as it might be, I take up the cause again. I urge you to join me in renewing this work. With the leadership of UUSC we must act to end this war together. We cannot wait to see what elected officials will do. We have already seen that they will do little unless we pressure them.

This can repair the damage to our better selves. No one said that building that "glorious golden city" was going to be easy.

Yet, we must build it. I urge you to go to the [www.UUSC.org](http://www.UUSC.org) website and use the tools to hold our leaders accountable. Join UUSC and do what you can to support and work with our human rights partners, such as Military Families Speak Out, Veterans for Peace, Iraq Veterans Against the War, and Appeal for Redress. You can support soldiers who bravely step forward and refuse to fight. Work against the demonization of Muslims by supporting interfaith events and local civil liberties organizations that are UUSC partners. We can move toward wholeness together as we listen to that little voice inside that calls us to our better selves.

As you go forth today, we ask the blessings of that Great Font of Love on our souls, our better selves and the healing work of our hands. Amen.