

Ukraine: Conflict and Courage  
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I am a first UU member and newly-ordained One Spirit Interfaith minister in UK. I have served at First on the storytelling team and on the worship-leading roster. This is my first time delivering a story and a homily from the “pulpit.”

Six months ago, my first response to Russia’s increasingly menacing sabre-rattling and the inevitable, to me, invasion of Ukraine, was horror and distress. Shortly afterwards, I had to lead a service in Cumbria, UK where I now live, and felt the need of story to help me find a way to think about the situation – a way to speak of the emotional anxiety and horror of the news images and articles and photos. I looked in vain for suitable Russian and Ukrainian traditional tales – and in the end had to come up with a story of my own. The story is a way of letting my heart respond.

At first, I saw the conflict in black and white. Russia was purely the unprovoked aggressor; then I began to feel compassion for the ordinary enlisted or conscripted men fighting a war they did not understand, or want, brother fighting brother, families torn apart and commanded to hate and destroy each other... and I began to understand Thich Nhat Hanh’s words, “When you begin to see that your enemy is suffering, that is the beginning of insight.” And I wove that into my story at the end, so it wouldn’t be a simple fairy-tale of the destruction of the enemy and the “heroes” living happily ever after. And I also wanted the ending to have hope in it and compassion. The more I worked on the story or let it work on me!, the more it seemed to resonate with my gradually-forming ordination vow:

**“With love and compassion  
I vow to serve life  
Build bridges  
Bring healing  
And honour the interconnected web of all creation”**

I began to see the invasion and war as an imposed conflict conceived and initiated by those in power, to suit their own agenda. Not as something desired by the majority of the people on the Russian side, and certainly not on the Ukrainian side, those people who would do the actual

fighting and dying and being uprooted from all the people and places and culture they had known and loved all their lives. I thought of other examples of imposed conflict, or hatred which have occurred throughout history such as Nazism - making Jews into The Other, the enemy, the scapegoat on whom all ills can be blamed, dehumanising them; citizens being ordered to hate and destroy the people who were their friends, neighbours, children, business partners, husbands and wives; I thought of the Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda being whipped up into a brutal and barbarous frenzy against each other, a blood lust that could be satisfied only with mass killing, with genocide. I thought of the Civil War in the US; And as a white person who grew up in Apartheid South Africa, I thought about how a fear and distrust of anyone whose skin was a different shade was part of the atmosphere I absorbed – but NOT absorbed in my home, but all around me. I thought of how imposed conflict does not have to be physically violent to inflict untold destruction that is passed down from generation to generation, leaving a legacy of hatred, mistrust and division. I realised how fear and greed makes those with a precarious or a strong hold on power subjugate others – minority fears majority, or majority feels invincible and unaccountable for their actions.

Six months into the Ukraine conflict, our attention isn't what it once was. There is a powerful combination of factors which has caused this – the endless information and images at first, and that one can only absorb so much, and then that other stories take over the headlines. Life goes on. It's hard to sustain attention for prolonged conflict – even some Ukrainians are going out to restaurants in Ukraine and ignoring air-raid sirens... Mention of Ukraine is on the whole fading from the national and international news in the UK – with celebrity trials, prime-ministerial wannabes in-fighting, climate change and the natural catastrophes of heat, drought, and flood, taking our already heavily-taxed attention.

The war in Ukraine seem to me to be increasingly viewed as something that is powerfully adversely affecting the economy with a noticeable and extreme impact on our daily lives in terms of cost of living, rather than something that is impacting the lives of thousands of people on the ground in Ukraine, and those hundreds of thousands and into the millions, of people who have fled the war-torn country. ... Maybe too much exposure in the early days of the invasion and war have blunted people's senses to the horrors that continue to unfold – maybe people not in the conflict zone feel complacent that what's happening “over there” can never happen “over here”? “No one wants to hear about it any more – people are tired of horror. They want peace, no price

riser, a quiet life and a nice holiday,” says Mikhail Shishkin, novelist and winner of the Russian Booker, the Russian National Bestseller, and Big Book prize....”The only true lesson we can learn from history is that history teaches nothing.”

There are many new stories about how the initial outpouring of sympathy, empathy, welcome and willingness to help Ukrainian refugees with food and shelter and money and creating new lives, are beginning to fade, not out of not caring, but sometimes just from the sheer financial burden of doing so with the rise in the cost of living forcing people to choose between supporting their families and supporting strangers.

Why does the conflict in Ukraine still matter? The most basic reason is the Interconnected Web of all beings – what affects the life of one of us affects us all - we’re seeing this most dramatically in the unprecedented rise in the cost of living, especially fuel, and basics such as electricity and flour for cooking and baking.

But it’s also still matters because we are in effect fighting a war by proxy. We’re not just sending humanitarian aid in the form of food and medical supplies to Ukraine, but also lethal weapons to kill Russian soldiers, and the inevitable so-called “Collateral damage” of killing civilians and people on your own side, with those weapons. Abraham Heschel, the great Jewish thinker and scholar said, “few are guilty but all are responsible.”

And it matters because we share a great fear with all the rest of the world, about how wide the conflict will spread and how devastating its effect might be on each and every one of us.

As well as speaking of conflict, the hostilities and atrocities in Ukraine perpetrated by the Russians have led me to think about courage and the many forms it takes. The courage that manifests in times of conflict. It is the reverse side of the coin of war.

In the Ukrainian context, it means putting your life on the line for your family, to protect your homeland, and the life and rights of others; participating in or leading peaceful protests which might be answered with guns or tanks - Ukrainian civilians walking peacefully towards Russian tanks, Russian people protesting the invasion of Ukraine, at risk of attack and imprisonment by the authorities; Ukrainian adults and children building home-made explosive devices and barricades to

defend themselves; people staying to face the horrors; people somehow maintaining hope; the courage to take each day, each moment, as a gift. The courage to believe that right not might will prevail.

There's the courage of women in war-torn countries and situations all over the world, particularly in the Ukraine, who, having the courage of love and of desperation, are grabbing their own children and grandchildren and those of others whose cannot flee the horrors of the war; the women leaving the family life they knew, with no certainty that it will ever be possible to have that again; knowing that they, and they alone, are responsible for keeping the children safe, for comforting and reassuring them, and shielding them as best they can from the hardships and the horror; and what about the heartbreaking courage of mothers who can't leave the war zone? What about the Russian women living in doubt, fear and ignorance about what is happening to their sons and brothers and husbands? Let us praise their courage and pray for their safety and that of their children and families

And there is the courage of responding to aggression with art - Ukrainian art, women artists, recording sights, creating images, - the naked woman's torso, smeared in blood or red dye with a crown of thorns; three photos of a young girl, - in a birthday hat, in her first communion white dress, and then in uniform with a rifle in her hands; a rear view of a couple in army fatigues, holding hands, she with a wedding crown on her head... the deep and intense love for their country that is expressed verbally, in visual images, and in decisions to stay till the end whatever form that takes.

Those of us who live beyond the actual theatre of war are fortunate that we CAN turn away from the conflict; we do not have to live with the danger, horrors and unpredictability of war every moment, every hour every day of our lives; the people of Ukraine, who have stayed by choice or necessity in the war zone, do not have that choice. All those who have fled Ukraine or have loved ones in Ukraine cannot turn away from the conflict.

Here in England, below-the-radar fighter planes are going out on manoeuvres more often, shattering the quiet of the lakes' country and the farming community where I live – I am grateful that the only threat from those planes is to my eardrums and not to my life...

“Ukraine will prevail,” said Dmytro Pletenchuk, a navy captain and public affairs officer in the destroyed city of Mykolaiv in Ukraine, “Ukrainians have always resisted Russian imperialism...We have motivation. They don’t. We are defending our homeland. They are fighting for a washing machine.”

My focus today has been on Ukraine. I am also bearing much in mind and heart that there are wars, horrors and hardships, man-made- and natural, in so many countries around the world. May they find peace and hope.

I would like to leave you with these questions: Are we in some way complicit, whether actively or passively in events in Ukraine? ? How does this apply to our attitude and actions regarding the conflict in Ukraine?