



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Flying Without a Net: Reflections from an Invisible Wife,”
a sermon given by Margaret Weis
on May 5, 2013

Sixteen days. That’s how long Susan and I had ever been apart when she called me that night. She was driving home from base, after flying home from her Annual Tour in Alaska. As an Air Force Reservist, Susan has her military drill two weekends a month and two weeks of annual tour each year.

While we talked on the phone she explained that her commander wanted her to deploy earlier than we expected. It turned out that rather than deploying in October, she would need to deploy sooner. I asked how much sooner, and she replied, “in one week.”

And she did.

In the week between that phone call and her deployment there was a lot to get done. She needed more uniforms and supplies, and to get things straightened out and settled at her civilian job. She needed vaccinations and medical clearances, and we needed to get her affairs in order. There was a going-away party to plan, and she needed to see her family in New York and New Hampshire before she left. It was a pretty packed week.

Next thing I knew I was sitting in the terminal, having just watched her plane disappear into the sky.

We wouldn’t see each other again for six months.

I never imagined myself as a military spouse. I never imagined myself as part of a military family. I had this stereotypical idea of what a military spouse did, and it involved bake sales and dresses with polka dots.

While I love a good bake sale, and polka dots ... it didn’t feel like something I wanted. But when you fall in love with a person, sometimes that means things are a bit more complicated than you anticipated.

Ironically, when Susan fell in love with me I’m sure she hadn’t envisioned herself as a minister’s spouse. Somehow, she also had this idea that involved bake sales and dresses.

In a military family, every person serves. This is something I learned very quickly. It is a life that requires communication and sacrifice. It means missed birthdays and anniversaries and graduation ceremonies. But it is also an opportunity to grow closer and more tight-knit as a family. It is a life that requires great strength and resiliency that serves us well in other aspects of our lives.

When Susan and I were married at North Parish, we celebrated surrounded by family and friends. The night before the ceremony we had our rehearsal and then dinner at my parents’ house. My family purchased personalized fortune cookies made with messages about our love for one another and blessings for a long and happy marriage written on them.

We saved some to eat on our first wedding anniversary. We had no idea at that point that we would be celebrating from opposite sides of the globe.

And so, about a week before that date, I mailed some fortune cookies to Susan in Afghanistan. We made a Skype date for our anniversary, her with her dinner and me with my breakfast, and we ate our cookies together.

Well, eat is probably too generous of a term. It's better to say that we each took a bite of the cookie before making a face and swallowing unhappily. Susan said, "Umm do we have to eat the whole thing, or is this ritual done with?"

It turns out that chocolate dipped fortune cookies don't age well!

This June we will celebrate two years of marriage, and although we both feel like we lost quite a bit of time this past year, we have learned that our ability to adapt to new situations is a cornerstone of our marriage. This deployment helped us learn that.

When Susan deployed I reached out to friends of mine who were married to service members or who came from military families. It helped me feel a part of a community of other people who knew what we were going through. It helped to have people who understood the loneliness, the distance, and the worrying.

But the reality is that many of them did not understand. Our reality was, and still is, different from theirs. Our marriage took place a few months before the repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell took effect. This meant that there was some time when Susan could have been discharged for being who she is. While DADT was in place, it was as if I was invisible. We never went to military functions, and most people in Susan's unit assumed she was single. She would leave her wedding band at home for drill weekends, and her office was decorated only with pictures of our dogs.

The repeal of DADT essentially made it legal for Susan to be gay. Period. It has no impact on our family other than securing her job. Despite our status as a legally married same-sex couple in the state of Massachusetts, our marriage is not recognized by the federal government. This means that the military is unable to grant us the same rights and benefits of a heterosexual married couple. It means that we are treated differently than most military families. It means that I have no military ID card or access to her base. It means that I was not eligible for health insurance, separation pay, or morale calls. This made my experience of the deployment different from others because there was absolutely no communication with me while Susan was away. It also meant that we received thousands of dollars less than her straight counterparts for her service in a combat zone.

Perhaps the most difficult reality is that I cannot be listed as Susan's next of kin. This means that if something had happened to her, had she been injured or worse, I would not be notified, nor would I receive any survivor benefits.

Susan's position at Bagram was as the Installation Deployment Officer. This meant that her job was to manage all military personnel coming in and out of the base. She organized those who were moving on to different bases and camps after leaving Bagram, and those who were on their way home. Any service member in Afghanistan would be processed through Bagram on their way home. This was also true for those who had died. This was one of the most challenging parts of her job, to see these service members home after they had made the ultimate sacrifice.

Toward the end of Susan's tour, I read an article about an Army Sergeant named Donna Johnson. Johnson and two other soldiers were killed in October, while out on patrol, and their flag draped coffins were processed through Bagram while Susan was there.

Not unlike her two male comrades, Donna Johnson was survived by a wife. Tracy Johnson was not mentioned in the media at all. It was as if Tracy did not exist. She was invisible.

In the wake of her wife's death, Tracy has spoken out loud and clear about her experience and continued struggle to be seen. She is the first known widow of an out gay soldier.

As news reports came out about this, I read article after article, upset and frightened that this mourning family was not even mentioned! To make matters worse, Westboro Baptist Church had decided to protest at Donna's funeral.

It was overwhelming.

It was overwhelming to see my family in the experience of this family.

It was overwhelming to think of my wife killed and no mention of her full family in the news reports.

It was sad to think that this widow learned of her wife's death secondhand, after her mother-in-law called to tell her the news. It was even more shocking to know that she would not be taken care of the way that other Gold Star wives are.

But perhaps the most overwhelming thought was the image of any person protesting this soldier's funeral.

And yet, it seems as though, at the most frightening and disturbing times in our lives, we can be uplifted by the love and compassion of others.

I say this because on the day of Donna Johnson's funeral in North Carolina, between 1000 and 1500 people came from across the country to shield her wife and family from the protestors. These people, whether in support of marriage equality or just seeking a proper burial for a soldier, literally took a stand for this soldier and her widow.

That is the power of community. That is the power of justice and fairness.

That is the power of loving compassion. That is where hope is renewed.

We are reminded by Unitarian Universalist minister Robert Fulghum that "the line between good and evil, hope and despair, does not divide the world between "us" and "them." It runs down the middle of every one of us." He challenges us to act with intention and purpose to build a more just and equitable world.

On that day in North Carolina, those gathered likely had differing views on military service. They may have even had differing views on marriage equality, or on the civil rights of military service members and their families. Some might have even voted for the amendment in North Carolina that makes same-sex marriage illegal. But those people gathered to honor and bear witness to a life lost. They gathered because it was the right thing to do to allow a family the space and privacy to mourn a loved one's death.

Like the story Fulghum illustrates in the reading this morning, our community, and this nation, has come to a long hard hill. Those who gathered that day got out and pushed.

Those people covenanted together that day, with the understanding that it was their job to protect this family.

We know the idea of covenant because we live it in our faith every day. As Unitarian Universalists we covenant together to build a beloved community here and now that reflects our ideals of justice, equity, and compassion. We affirm that every person matters, and every person carries within them a spark of something special. As a congregation, we made the conscious effort to become a Welcoming Congregation and have held fast to that promise to love all families.

At times it is overwhelming to keep all of this straight. It's hard to fully understand our military involvement places, and even harder to determine whether we agree with it. I understand

that struggle, as does Susan and her comrades. Military service is a complicated and difficult thing. Marriage equality and justice is a complicated and difficult thing for many people too. Policies and legislation are complicated and hard to understand. But they matter.

I'm reminded of a quote from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr from his address in 1963 at Western Michigan University. He writes:

"Now the other myth that gets around is the idea that legislation cannot really solve the problem and that it has no great role to play in this period of social change because you've got to change the heart and you can't change the heart through legislation. You can't legislate morals. The job must be done through education and religion. Well, there's half-truth involved here. Certainly, if the problem is to be solved then in the final sense, hearts must be changed. Religion and education must play a great role in changing the heart. But we must go on to say that while it may be true that morality cannot be legislated, behavior can be regulated. It may be true that the law cannot change the heart but it can restrain the heartless. It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me but it can keep him from lynching me and I think that is pretty important, also. So there is a need for executive orders. There is a need for judicial decrees. There is a need for civil rights legislation on the local scale within states and on the national scale from the federal government." So ends the reading.

The law cannot change the heart but it can restrain the heartless.

I believe it is heartless not to care for any war widow. I believe that because it goes against my beliefs in justice and care and compassion, beliefs that are based in Unitarian Universalism.

To echo Dr. King, religion and education must play a role in changing the heart.

So we have a job to do. We can join the struggle for equality and tell our stories of injustice and inequitable treatment, and speak the truth of our faith that love knows no gender, and that all families matter. We can continue to stand up as shields against injustice and hatred, and say that enough is enough and we can work together to build the beloved community.

I close with a statement by Tracy Johnson after the death of her wife, Donna. Tracy says, "there are a handful of things you can't tell your heart not to do. One is to serve your country, and the other is to love who you love."

May we help to build a world where a person does not have to choose between these two heart-spaces. May we offer our hands to the work of justice, our minds to the work of understanding, and our mouths to the outpouring of words of love, and equity, and fairness. May we get out and push. Amen. Blessed be.