

**“THE CHALLENGE OF REMEMBERING”**

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Reading: Reading #583: “The Young Dead Soldiers” by Archibald MacLeish

The young dead soldiers do not speak.

*Nevertheless, they are heard in the still houses: who has not heard them?*

They have a silence that speaks for them at night and when the clock counts.

*They say: We were young. We have died. Remember us.*

They say: We have done what we could but until it is finished it is not done.

*They say: We have given our lives but until it is finished no one can know what our lives gave.*

They say: Our deaths are not ours; they are yours; they will mean what you make them.

*They say: Whether our lives and our deaths were for peace and a new hope or for nothing we cannot say; it is you who must say this.*

They say: We leave you our deaths. Give them their meaning.

*We were young, they say. We have died. Remember us.<sup>1</sup>*

Sermon

Pat Tillman, the NFL star who became a Ranger in the United States Army, is one of my heroes. Maybe I like him because he was a complicated non-conformist in the often black-and-white world of professional sports and the military. For example, he came to his godson’s dedication ceremony dressed as a woman because the child had two godfathers and no godmother. Tillman thought there should be a godmother, too. A consummate team player, he loved the rugged individualism of Thoreau and Emerson. He was the rare college student who excelled both on the football field and in the classroom. He wasn’t loaded with talent in either pursuit, so his excellence was mostly the result of hard work and passion. As a professional football player, he turned down a nine million dollar offer from the St. Louis Rams to ditch the Arizona Cardinals, the team that drafted him even as other teams questioned his talent. Instead of grabbing the nine million, he earned a little over half a million with the Cardinals. The reason for his decision: his sense of loyalty to the Cardinals. And then he walked away from the NFL and a three million dollar contract offer from the Cardinals in the prime of his career to join the U.S. Army. Why? Because he wanted to do something concrete to help his country in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. He became a Ranger and served in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

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<sup>1</sup> Reading #583 in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

On April 22, 2004, Pat Tillman was killed in Afghanistan. Initial military reports indicated he was killed by enemy fire. The story was that Tillman's convoy was ambushed by a Taliban attack. He bravely charged up a hill to counter-attack. He saved his fellow Rangers' lives but was himself killed in action. He was awarded a Silver Star for his "gallantry in action against an armed enemy."

It was a great story. And it was a total fabrication. As Tillman's mother, Mary Tillman, says, from the start the story had too much of the feel of a John Wayne movie. Five weeks after his death, Tillman's family found out the story was false when the Army revealed that in fact Tillman had been accidentally killed by "friendly fire."

It is now apparent that many up the chain of command knew he had been killed by friendly fire in the immediate aftermath of his death. But they chose to cover up this fact in an effort to maintain the narrative of a heroic death. The Silver Star citation is a good example of what happened: it was based on eyewitness accounts that someone in the military altered. Mary Tillman concludes that the Department of Defense was more concerned about preserving its image and the public relations bonanza it reaped from her son's enlistment and death than in providing truthful information to the family.

Given the then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's legendary micromanagement as well as his keen interest in Tillman, Mary Tillman also concludes that the trail of knowledge and cover-up goes up at least as far as Rumsfeld. Rumsfeld has denied the accusation. Thus far seven Rangers and six lower level officers have been disciplined for mistakes that contributed to Tillman's death by friendly fire and in the ensuing investigations. As with Abu Graihb and numerous other mistakes and evasions in this war, once again it is the soldiers in the ranks and low-level officers who get punished while the higher-ups avoid any accountability.<sup>2</sup>

How do we remember Pat Tillman's death? How do we make sense of it? More than four years after his death, these questions linger, no doubt particularly for his fellow soldiers involved in the tragedy, and for his family. Wading into these questions is a minefield. For me, Tillman's death and its complicated aftermath is a metaphor for the challenging nature of remembering the dead in the midst of a war—especially a war that is unpopular and, to many people, unjust and unwise.

Here I need to digress a moment to make a confession: in previous Memorial Day weekend sermons I have found a convenient way to evade this challenge of remembering. I have gone far back in history—namely to the Civil War—to focus Memorial Day sermons. I had some good reasons for this: the Civil War after all was a watershed event in our nation's history, and certainly it continues to reverberate in our national narrative, particularly in the area of race. As the once very distant possibility of electing an African American to the presidency becomes more likely just months before the bicentennial of Lincoln's birth, the legacy of the Civil War is coming into even sharper focus. But I have

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<sup>2</sup> I used the following sources for information on Pat Tillman's life and death:

<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/05/01/60minutes/main4061656.shtml>.

<http://www.wpr.org/kathleendunn/index.cfm?strDirection=Prev&dteShowDate=2008%2D05%2D23%2009%3A00%3A00>.

<http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2004/magazine/04/23/tillman.flashback2002/index.html>.

[http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2004/writers/tim\\_layden/04/23/remembering.tillman/index.html](http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2004/writers/tim_layden/04/23/remembering.tillman/index.html).

<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2004/05/04/SPG5K6FD091.DTL>.

See also Mary Tillman, *Boots on the Ground by Dusk: My Tribute to Pat Tillman* (New York: Rodale Press, 2008).

to admit that going back to the Civil War was also convenient for me. In some ways it was a cop-out. The distant past is both fuzzier in its details but also sharper in the delineation between right and wrong. It is a lot easier to talk about the Civil War and its legacy of the soldiers who died in it than the current wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

This year I have decided to keep my focus squarely on the now more than 4500 Americans service men and women who have died while serving their country in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. As I do so, I want to acknowledge as well the vastly larger number of Iraqis and Afghans who have died in the wars. I do not mean in any way to deny the significance of these deaths. But my focus today is on Memorial Day and its central task of remembering those who have lost their lives in service to this nation.

The task of remembering fallen soldiers has two critical aspects. The first is honoring their sacrifice. For me it is a no-brainer to honor soldiers for losing their lives in service to this nation regardless of the justice or wisdom of the war in which they served. Whether a soldier died in the line of duty on the beaches of Iwo Jima or Normandy or on the Mekong River in Vietnam or in a road-side bombing in Baghdad makes no difference: I honor all of these sacrifices. If anything, the ambiguity of the wars in Iraq or Vietnam makes me give even more honor to the soldiers who died there. We asked so much of them.

The second aspect of remembering fallen soldiers is giving meaning to their sacrifice. This is the task lifted up in the Reading today. The young dead soldiers in Archibald MacLeish's poem say: "We leave you our deaths. Give them their meaning." This aspect of remembering can be significantly more challenging than honoring their sacrifice, especially when the justice and wisdom of the war is highly questionable. It is not such a challenge to give meaning to a soldier's death on Iwo Jima or at Normandy: they died fighting heinous regimes that surely threatened not only our country but the welfare of hundreds of millions of people in many nations throughout the world. I think it's harder to give meaning to a soldier's death on the Mekong River in Vietnam. The hindsight offered by forty years of historical perspective has in my view persuasively shown that American intervention in the Vietnam was unjust, unwise, and poorly executed by our civilian and military leaders. The whole premise of the war—that if we let communism triumph in Vietnam, other neighboring nations would fall like dominoes—turned out to be completely false. The communists did take over Vietnam; in spite of that, the Cold War ended in communism's demise less than fifteen years later. So it's hard to give meaning to the Vietnam soldier's death by lifting up the justice or wisdom of the cause.

Of course there are other ways that loved ones of the more than 58,000 Americans killed in Vietnam have given meaning to these tragic deaths. One way has been to continue believing that the cause was just. Another has been to let go of the question of the war's justice and instead focus on their loved one's fulfilling his or her duty. It wasn't the sailors on the patrol boats or the pilots in the bombers or the soldiers on the delta who decided to intervene in the war. It wasn't they who planned the execution of the war. They were not the decision makers. But they either volunteered, or showed up when asked by their country to report for duty. We asked a great deal of them, and they responded. And they gave the last full measure of their devotion for their country. In doing so, they are no different from the American soldiers who died at Gettysburg or Iwo Jima or Normandy. Yet another way to give meaning to the Vietnam soldier's death was

to work for the end of the war and, after the war's conclusion, to work against future wars that appear to replicate the mistakes of Vietnam.

Giving meaning to the deaths of soldiers killed in Iraq is challenging in a way similar to Vietnam. As I've shared before, I don't believe our invasion of Iraq is either justified or wise. On the other hand, as I've also shared before, I can be persuaded that our attacking Afghanistan holds up better to a just war critique. But arguing these points is not my purpose here today. And anyway, my judgments on these wars may be wrong. It is much too early to come to a definitive understanding of whether these wars are just. That takes the hindsight of decades of historical reflection.

In any case, it seems to me that the families and friends and comrades of soldiers killed in Iraq and Afghanistan have given meaning to their loved one's death in ways similar to Vietnam. Some have affirmed the justice of the war. They assert that the cause itself has meaning. It is easy to understand the dedication such people have to this premise—the justice and wisdom of the war is what gives their fallen soldier's death meaning. Others have taken comfort in their loved one's fulfilling their duty. They don't dwell on whether the war is wise or just. It was not their loved one who made the decision to attack Iraq. And still others—Cindy Sheehan comes to mind—have given meaning by trying to bring an end to a war that they have judged to be unjust and unwise.

Mary Tillman has found another avenue for giving meaning to her son's death. It is in finding out the truth about Pat's death and the cover-up that followed. In my work as a minister, I have been repeatedly struck by how important it is to families to find out the truth of a loved one's death. In such situations it must be tempting to let the details remain vague; it's so painful to listen to the story of how a loved one died. Yet over and over I have seen families ask for these details even as they brace themselves to hear them. Hearing the story of what actually happened is important. It's part of the grief journey. It's part of giving meaning to the death. Ultimately, it's part of healing.

And this is why the decision to make up a story about Pat Tillman's death is so reprehensible. It robbed his family of the truth about his death. It stole from the meaning of his death. It dishonored Pat Tillman. Katie Couric asked Mary Tillman during an interview on "60 Minutes" why she is fighting so hard to get the truth. "Pat was a pretty honest guy," Mary Tillman replied. "Not a perfect person, by any stretch. But he was very honest. He tried to tell the truth and he would want us to do this."<sup>3</sup> Some of her critics have discounted her concerns because they say she's stuck in her grief. She says, and I believe her, that this isn't the case at all. She just needs the truth. If she had gotten the truth from the beginning, she would have worked through the tragedy and irony of friendly fire killing this ultimate team player. It's the lying that has made this infinitely harder. This is why the cover-up is a far greater concern to her than the mistakes that led to Pat's death. She wants the truth. And she wants accountability for those who attempted to steal the meaning of Pat's death by lying about what happened.

The cover-up of the true story of Pat Tillman's death highlights the importance of truth in the sacred act of remembering. Re-membering brings together; it heals. Those who lied about Pat's death engaged in dis-membering: pulling apart. Maybe this suggests an important part of remembering the dead in Afghanistan and Iraq: discerning the truth about the wars. I believe the work of uncovering the truth is a necessary part of how we remember the fallen soldiers in these wars. It's part of how we give their deaths

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/05/01/60minutes/main4061656.shtml>.

meaning. So the insistent work of Mary Tillman (who is as much of a hero to me as her son), the work of journalists and scholars and documentary film makers studying the events that led to the war's beginning and how the war has been executed and what happened at Abu Ghraib—all of this work to learn the truth honors the sacrifice of soldiers. Remembering, finding the truth, history—all of these are part of how we honor the dead and give meaning to their sacrifice. Asking hard questions, sifting through what has happened and why—all of this in my view is patriotic. It does not dishonor the dead.

Ultimately this sort of remembering can successfully remove the fallen from the political football fields they increasingly occupy. Pat Tillman is a case in point: do a Google search about his death and you will find him trashed by some on the radical right, and some on the radical left. On the right critics have engaged in character assassination in an effort to diminish his mother's indictment against the military for covering up the facts of his death. And on the left some critics have diminished him by asserting that the act of joining the military is inherently immoral. Mary Tillman knows what's needed about her son: facts and the truth, not character assassination and partisan spin. It seems to me the truth is the least we owe our dead.

“The young dead soldiers say: We leave you our deaths. Give them their meaning. We were young, they say. We have died. Remember us.”

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