

A Search for Meaning

My son's path to adulthood has been different from mine. One that is unfamiliar to me and unexpected from my vision of what I imagined it would be.

Elliott is an Army Infantry soldier. He is twenty-one years old. He has been in the military for just over 2 ½ years and if you are interested in rank, he is a Specialist. It is difficult for me to understand this decision at times. However, if I am being honest, he has been preparing me for this occupation since he was young.

I expected that as the child of a single mother by choice, the environment I raised him in would NOT lead to an interest in guns and military. I expected he would be a renaissance man in his varied interests and hobbies, a progressive independent thinker, a feminist, and a social justice warrior to name a few.

I don't recall what age he was when he received or asked for his first GI Joe action figure, but he was little. With every four-inch doll he received, I took the guns and ammo and tossed them into the upper kitchen cupboard of my Franklin Street home. He asked me to let him keep them so they could use their guns for hunting their food and not for killing one another. Looking into his beautiful hazel eyes one day, I realized he understood how I felt about humanity and I decided he could have his guns. Incidentally, he looked into my blue eyes and insisted that I not refer to them as dolls. To this day, I call them "Joes".

As he grew up, Elliott had several full-sized GI Joes that he spent countless hours building battleships, forts, and towers out of cardboard, tongue depressors, and popsicle sticks fortified with hot glue, duct tape, and olive drab paint. He modified a Barbie camper given to him by his aunts into an up-armored vehicle with every last bit of bright orange plastic covered with silvery grey duct tape complete with a machine gun turret at the top. He ran a string from the handles of cupboards above the countertop in the basement laundry room to a tower situated on the floor. He demonstrated how the joes had a hand shaped like a "C" to hold onto and slide down the string. He asked me to crochet sleeping bags for the square-jawed over-muscled plastic soldiers to sleep in at night.

While growing up, Elliott was fortunate to spend many weekends at his grandparents' home where the structure building continued with requests for stories of the relatives and what branches of service, rank, and details of deployments were shared by my parents. To this day, he knows much more about these facts of the ancestors' lives than I.

During these visits when Elliott was in 4th grade, I decided that he could learn how to shoot a BB gun and gun safety by my dad. At that time, the basement of my parent's home was unfinished and very long making it ideal as a shooting range. Dad hung a heavy plastic tarp from a joist above and set up a perch with cans or paper targets hung in front of it. Dad taught him how to load, hold, stand, aim, sight in the gun, pump, shoot, and even clean it. Elliott loved shooting at the various targets and objects in the basement. To this day, my mother still finds BBs on the floor in the remote recesses of the remaining unfinished portion of the basement and periodically gives them to Elliott as a keepsake.

It wasn't long before his interest grew into shooting other guns, like a .22 at a gun range that my dad paid a membership to so Elliott could practice. My son was in heaven. He still spent many weekends at Mom and Dad's following our move to the Muskegon area where we were fortunate (in Elliott's eyes) to live near a couple of neighbors during Elliott's 8th grade year who hunted deer, goose, duck, and

reduced the nuisance bird populations on nearby farms. Elliott attended a hunter safety class and was welcomed along with these men and their relatives on their hunting excursions in the area that year.

Moving back to Mt. Pleasant at the start of Elliott's 9th grade year was fraught with the frustration of not having such neighbors or friends who would take Elliott hunting. His school friends who hunted did so with their family members, but, understandably, those adults were not interested in the responsibility of bringing my son along. He asked me which of our friends in town hunted, to which I replied, "None."

"Mom, how about Alan Jackson?"

"No."

"Jim Dealing?"

"No, he loves watching wildlife."

"Guy Newland?"

"For cripe sake Son, he's a Buddhist, NO!"

During this time, Elliott's bedroom looked like a small military museum with empty brass artillery shells, combat helmets, reproductions of hand grenades, the US flag, a framed copy of the US Constitution, stars, water canteens, a gas mask, and a gold eagle adorning his walls and horizontal surfaces. Over the years, wall colors went from star spangled blue to a tolerable version of olive drab on two walls. Despite the fun we shared in walking through antique stores together, I had a sinking feeling that I was facing something much greater than a hobby and decorating choice.

It was during this period that I decided I needed to test my son's interest in the military by enrolling him in the local Sea Cadets organization. I thought he would hate it. I hoped he would hate it. They met two Saturdays/month 9-4 pm. I thought it would drive him crazy to miss travel soccer games. Sadly, he loved it. The summer after he joined, he was required to attend a 10-day basic training at the Great Lakes Naval Academy north of Chicago with hundreds of other kids. There was no phone contact. The only letter from him detailed that he missed and loved me very much, and that the three boys who attended with him cried a lot due to homesickness, so he gave them MY stamped envelopes to write to THEIR parents. By the time we picked him up, he was really proud of himself and more committed than ever to Sea Cadets.

Most Saturdays in his Sea Cadets unit were spent in Finch Fieldhouse with adult leaders who themselves had served in various branches of the armed services in their youth and they taught the kids how to stand, march in formation, learn land navigation, and participate in community service projects, holiday parades, and competition weekends with other units in Michigan. He left that group in 11th grade and was a founding member of a Young Marines group that formed locally. Elliott excelled in his leadership, commitment, and athleticism. By this time, he was talking about enlisting in the Army and NOT the ROTC program in college like his grandfather.

As you might imagine, my anxiety was skyrocketing and "putting my faith in God and his plan for Elliott" was not a comfort nor in my wheelhouse of belief. How could this be? I have a truly compassionate bright son who wants to pay forward his gratitude for our freedoms by serving his country. Holy crap! I flung questions and situations at him that I heard from other men for him to consider and answer. I couldn't believe that this young man who until a couple of years ago hated the aggressive physicality of playing soccer was now on the high school football team and planning to join a branch of the military! However, he answered my questions and concerns honestly and thoughtfully.

So, how could I, a Unitarian Universalist woman who abhors war and violence, fears the possibility of my son's death or a seriously altered life from an IED explosion or gun battle support my son's dream and goals for military service? I have always hoped that there are those exalted leaders among us whose thinking and leadership help us move from actual bombing, gun battles and war to diplomacy and **lasting** peacekeeping. Unfortunately, some of our foes are stuck in thinking and acts of tribalism and force that seems to elicit the same from us. I recognize this is a simplistic summation of complex issues and, clearly, I am not the leader for change in this arena.

Ultimately, Elliott's decision to join was made over years of soul-searching and reflection. I tried to dissuade him and redirect him to other alternatives and safer choices. It was heartbreaking. I thought I had him convinced as he was planning to attend college in the fall after his high school graduation. As we were getting ready to sign for student loans to pay his freshman year and we discussed the debt associated with it, he commented, "Well, it's only one year."

"What do you mean it's only one year?"

"I'm enlisting a year from now."

He was willing to attend college for me, but not because he was ready for it yet. He was willing to delay his entry to appease me. That's when I realized that he needed to pursue his search for meaning in his life, which meant, like it or not, Elliott joining the Army. We stopped discussing college and we went to the recruiting office in town where he had already been on his own a couple of times. We prepared for his leaving in September.

Finally, I confronted the realities of being a part of supporting his plan or risk alienating our relationship. I decided to support his plan. That decision brought clarity and a sense of unexpected strength.

This may surprise you, but the military doesn't offer classes to parents on how to deal with separation, powerlessness, and the changes in your offspring. They don't. I was fortunate to have a colleague whose son was 8 years into his Army career and in the Special Forces and she mentored me. She told me to get a notebook to write down details from phone visits during basic training and infantry school so I could share information with family because I would be overwhelmed to hear his voice and forget some news. She gave me a list of acronyms and definitions so I could research the terms he would use such as ARM and STX. She told me that when I return to work after delivering him to the processing station in Lansing, she would not ask me how I was and she didn't. I didn't cry either.

Theresa was my person. She comforted me and dis comforted me and that helped me to be a better mother of a soldier. She was often the first person I contacted to share news of Elliott. Meanwhile, her son, Joe, was deployed on missions in Africa for a few months at a time that when he returned home left him very withdrawn, angry, and moody for a period of time. I watched and listened to how she dealt with it.

I love the Italian movie "Life is Beautiful." It came out in October of 1998 and Elliott was 16 months old. A central theme of this movie is that while a Jewish family during the Nazi occupation of Italy is taken to a concentration camp, the father transforms the experience into a game to keep his young son alive and protected from the horrors occurring in the camp. The courage, ingenuity, and focus the father possessed to do this for his son staggered me. Despite all the hormones and maternal fierceness coursing through my body in those early days of motherhood, I wondered, "Could I perform such an act for my son?"

As many of you know, Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal rather than creedal religion. Every Sunday, we enter into a promise of how we will behave in our community. We understand that each of us has our own way of looking at the world, and vary widely in our personal, political, social, economic, and religious beliefs. A covenant is a promise we make to each other that even if you hear opposing views, music you don't care for, or a worship service is different from your liking, we will treat each other well. Who knew that some of the words of our very own congregation's covenant would guide me in this adventure with my son and the military?

You should know that Elliott was raised with some yelling in our home that probably benefitted him during his basic training, however, I work harder than ever to be mindful when speaking to him now through phone calls and letters. His life is so different from his childhood and his worldview has been altered by increased vigilance and caution in his everyday life at the fort.

When I finally heard from Elliott during basic training, I truly understood my new role and threw myself into it. I shared news with my family from him, but more importantly, I quickly realized how important it was for home to continue to be as predictable and comforting as it always was when he was here. I thoughtfully consider how I share information with him when he is so far from home. We have engaged in candid talks about the timing of heartbreaking news that may occur when he gets deployed. I coach my family on ways to share news of health concerns or housing decisions so that my son isn't at loose ends when he gets off the phone with them. Keeping home as he remembers it and the people he loves is a challenge to maintaining his long distance security blanket.

In closing, here are the words of our congregation's covenant that serve me in my daily life, too: "Granting each other freedom of mind and spirit, we commit to this community of mutual care. In that spirit of caring, we pledge to be mindful when speaking of and to one another. We will walk in the ways of truth and loving-kindness that we and our children may always be fulfilled. So that the world may be fulfilled, we dedicate ourselves to the work of justice and peace, seeking always to soothe sorrow and to inspire joy."

May it be so, so be it, and amen.