

I would like to earnestly thank the School of Social Work for this award—I'm completely humbled by it.

Also, thanks to Dr. Scott for the important work she is doing. In my experience, Michelle was one of the more difficult professors here at Monmouth and also one of the most brilliant. It is very rare to find someone who can couple a passion for doing good with a uncompromising rationalism and scientific mind. Her instance on the rigorous interrogation of ideas, concepts, and findings, on understanding the philosophical underpinnings of social research and expanding them, but most importantly, her availability and ability to break the lofty research process down both simply and understandably to often flummoxed students, mark her as one of the best educators not only here at Monmouth, but in the whole of social work education.

The practice application of her team's work will save and enrich future lives, which, in my opinion, is the highest point our work can reach. The endpoint there is freedom. Freedom, as a concept and experience, falls into the domain of, what I think, is the most central and core concept of social work practice—namely, the dignity and worth of the individual.

Now, as is my custom, I'm going to preface what follows by telling you that I may make some of you uncomfortable by what I have to say. I had a bad habit in grad school—in fact, I still struggle with it—of making peers, especially upper middle class folks, uncomfortable by insisting on a practice of relentless self-reflection and critical engagement with social and moral realities.

Some folks in the crowd might be expecting me to talk about my work with veterans, which I will do briefly, but the crux of what I will say has to do with that elusive concept stated above—freedom and how to achieve it. Freedom not in the grandiose and banal Trumpian sense, but real, local, tangible freedom. The kind that lets you choose your profession, because there a job to be had; the kind that lets you live where you want live, because you make a living wage; the kind of freedom that lets you choose whether or not to have children, because you have access to birth control and can engage in family planning.

Over the past seven years of working with veterans, approaching three as a credentialed professional, I have found that this idea of freedom is what terrifies my fellow veterans the most. After living in the regimented, highly traumatic system of the military for so long, one that has re-imprinted the darkest recesses of their minds with psychological traits and aspects of personality that polite society in the United States often find either repugnant or pitiful, being suddenly released back into society (and, note, that those that draw a corollary here to the release of a prisoner from incarceration are correct) often plummets the separating veteran into, at best, a mild, and, at worst, a catastrophic and very real existential crisis.

An overly simplistic way to understand this experience is through Plato's Allegory of the Cave. The veteran, who once thought that the world was the way it was and that his or her place in it was proper and true, leaves his or her seat in front of the propaganda box (TV) or tablet device (Facebook, Twitter, the Web, etc.) to join the military. Everything the military now shows him or her is a *new* reality—one that is viscerally experienced and lived; one that is not narrated by Pinterest-perfect, airbrushed people in suits and mediated by a sub-species of human called "experts"; it is a reality, that, ontologically and otherwise, is profoundly ugly and terrifying. Immanuel Kant called this concept the *sublime*.

When the veteran is released from the service, he or she returns home to their family that, as a rule, is often still enthralled by the same propaganda box that initiated their son or daughter's adventure but now the false narrative streams in HD through FIOS. He or she and tries to relate this weighty revelation of everything they have seen and experienced to them; they try to express all of the acts they did or did not commit; they come to question what is more real: the now at home which they know to be false or at least partly untrue, or the past of war which they thought was true but whose characteristic unreality can never be wholly expressed.

As was presented in Michelle's lecture, once you add in the variables of PTSD, traumatic brain injury, substance abuse, domestic violence, homelessness, and unemployment, then you get a most perfect picture of the risk and disaster waiting to happen upon re-integrating into our hollow society.

Weekly, I get calls from community members, professionals, and other interested folks who, knowing the above is the case with veteran reintegration, and, that these outcomes, from mild to severe, are unavoidable unless intervened with, want to do something about it. Many of my fellow social workers, often working with different and difficult populations of their own, volunteer their services pro-bono to support my fellows. To those that do so, I thank you—what you do is often tireless, difficult work, and I want to let you know that it is appreciated and very much needed. One of my biggest criticisms of the Veterans Health Administration, as an institution, is that it has monopolized care of veterans, when, often times, they *are not* the best provider to address many of the maladies affecting a veteran.

Now, what I just said isn't meant to shame or goad those of you who are not doing this volunteer service into doing so. There is a much more important task that you can complete, and, in the parlance of development folks, it's a bigger ask and comes in two parts.

Part One: now this is going to sound like a truism, but I guarantee you it's not. Are you ready?

OK...if you want to fix veteran issues, you have to stop **creating** veterans.

I'm deadly serious about this.

If you want to fix veteran issues, you have to stop **creating** veterans.

Now, I'll expound on what I just said in a second, but I want to give you Part Two, which is as follows:

Part two: If you want Americans to have the freedom to do all of the things, as we outlined above, then you have to stop **creating** veterans.

Again...

If you want *real, local, tangible* freedom for all Americans, including those who would be veterans—the kind that lets Americans choose their profession, because there a job to be had; the kind of freedom that makes going into the Army or the Marines a choice and not a default, because the local economy has been deliberately and systematically destroyed by neo-liberal economics; the kind that lets Americans, all of them, live where they want live, because they make a living wage; the kind of freedom that lets an American woman choose whether or not to have children, because she has access to health care, birth control, and can engage in family

planning; if you want to achieve all of this, much through the work you already do, **then you have to stop creating veterans and fighting wars of choice**.

This is, everyone in this room, is where you come in.

The cost of waging America's sixteen-year conflict was, of yesterday at 2:30 p.m. when I wrote this speech, an astonishing One Trillion, Seven hundred and ninety-five billion, five hundred and sixty one million, five-hundred forty-two thousand, eight hundred and nineteen dollars. (*Note to the reader*: Current estimates through Brown University place this number astoundingly higher at more than 4.5 trillion dollars).

I do not have to tell you that that is a lot of cheddar. Interestingly enough, if you spent \$1 million a day since 0 A.D., you would have not spent \$1 trillion by now but ~\$700 billion dollars.

If you want to know where all the money for our Great Society has gone to, now you know: **to war, that's where**; into the pockets and offshore back accounts of some, and, for others, inflating the domestic stock bubble that lets us middle class folks delude ourselves into thinking our 403b and annuity accounts will get us through retirement.

Just for the sake of illustration, if we took this year's Federal Appropriation for the Global War on Terror, \$52.85 billion dollars, and spent it on the American people, we could get the following:

- We could full cover an additional 14,845,910 adults on Medicaid
- We could provide year-round electricity assistance to 59,532,584 people
- We could enroll 22,292,581 American children in CHiP (NJ FamilyCare)
- We could expand Pell Grant availability to 2,272,098 additional college students
- We could provide funding for an additional 5,930,981 Head Start seats
- We could create 528,490 additional jobs through employer subsidies to hire people living in high concentrations of poverty paying a wage of at least \$15.00 an hour.
- We could subsidize 951,281 infrastructure jobs paying a journeyman trade wage of \$30.00 an hour.
- We could create 713,461 new clean energy jobs at a starting salary of 45,000 a year.
- And, my favorite, we could hire an additional 653,893 social workers to staff federally funded programs at a starting salary of \$46,000 a year.

On top of this, the displacement of over 8 million refugees would end; the extra-judicial slaughter (some, including myself, would say genocide) of over one million brown people who speak a different language and hold different religious belief—would end.

And, if that's not enough for you, then I hope this is: we wouldn't create any more veterans by not fighting wars of choice.

We could rebuild this country, brick by brick, neighborhood by neighborhood, and reverse the conditions that allowed that misogynistic charlatan in the White House to take office.

Now, this isn't some uptopic fantasy. It can be a reality but it requires your participation. Too often, even as social workers, we rely on these messianic political figures to save all of us—it has to stop.

I want **you** to get politically involved if you aren't already. I want **you** to write to your town councilor up to the President of the United States and ask them why killing people abroad (who are, most often not terrorists, by the way) and waging a soon-to-be twenty year long war takes priority over **the freedom and well-being of the American people.**

In response to your phone calls and letters and emails, a low-paid, probably sexually harassed staffer is going to reply to you with a stamped form letter and say that we are fighting for freedom, and that, although it is a hard choice, money spent on preserving freedom abroad is better than, to paraphrase, money spent on "**free stuff**" at home.

But, as my friend Shant Misrobian says, "what the political classes miss is that "free stuff" is about more than just money — it is about freedom and liberty for ordinary people. Lack of health insurance (and college debt, and middling disability benefits — the list goes on) severely limits a person's ability to choose which career to pursue, where to live, when to start a family, how many children to have, and what types of hobbies to take up. In short, it's not about free stuff — it's about a free life.

I know it is a big ask, and how many of us loathe politics, but this madness has to end. I'm not the first social worker to talk about ending the War on Terror, but I will continue to do so until it happens. We have to stop fighting for things and **start winning our battles.**

To close, and perhaps wrap everything up, these were the prophetic words of President Dwight Eisenhower in 1953:

"Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.

This world in arms is not spending money alone.

It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children.

The cost of one modern heavy bomber is this: a modern brick school in more than 30 cities.

It is two electric power plants, each serving a town of 60,000 population.

It is two fine, fully equipped hospitals. It is some 50 miles of concrete highway.

We pay for a single fighter plane with a half million bushels of wheat.

We pay for a single destroyer with new homes that could have housed more than 8,000 people.

This, I repeat, is the best way of life to be found on the road the world has been taking. **This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense.** Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity, hanging from a cross of iron.

Again, thank you for this award and for listening—it is more appreciated than you know.