‘Do, or do not...’

By Chaplain Corey Thornton

After being stationed in Yokosuka for almost two years I finally made the trip to visit the Asakusa Kannon Temple located in the heart of Tokyo. This temple is famous for being the oldest temple site in Japan and I would venture to add that it must be one of the grandest. Although it was a rainy day, there were many people on the temple grounds. One aspect of the visit that made an impression on me was to notice a distinction between those who were visiting as tourists and those who had come for religious practice. My wife and I were apart of the former group. Along with us were countless tourists taking pictures, reading plaques and looking over the area with the wonder of a first visit. The latter group had no cameras and made their way through the crowds as if guided by a specific task at hand. It’s difficult to pinpoint exactly how, but one could tell that these were no strangers to the temple. Their eyes and body language suggested a familiarity with their surroundings and their focus revealed a working knowledge of the Buddhist practices performed there. These had come perhaps to offer prayers or veneration. Many go to the temple for funerals. The rest of us had come to observe.

The experience of being at such an awe-inspiring religious site not as a worshipper but as a tourist got me to thinking about the distinction between what many of us claim as our beliefs and the actual motivations behind our actions. On this occasion, our beliefs were accurately reflected in the motives of our visit. Being both foreigners and outside of the Buddhist religion, tourism was naturally our goal. To those claiming religious and cultural connections to the temple, religious practice was most fitting. The temple was open for all to come, but the visitors’ actions and expectations were determined by their beliefs.

Those who are fans of the Star Wars Trilogy (and honestly who isn’t a fan!) will likely recall the scene in The Empire Strikes Back when Luke Skywalker is training with Master Yoda to become a Jedi Knight. At one point Yoda instructs him to use the Force to lift his spaceship out of the swamp into which it had earlier crashed. Luke replies something to the effect of, “Okay, I’ll give it a try.” Yoda corrects him saying, “Do or do not. There is no try.” This scene can serve as a parable to reveal the difference between what we say we believe and how our actions reflect or fail to reflect those beliefs.

Some have postulated that religion in the West, likely influenced by Enlightenment thinking, evolved an emphasis on theoretical systems of belief to the neglect of expressing belief through actions and lifestyle. This, in turn, has led to the distorted understanding of many who view being religious as merely holding a set of beliefs to be true. Often times what is lost on these is the practices and lifestyle that are intended to express these beliefs, as well as involvement with the communities of religious practice that regulate and support the practicing individual members.

In my religion this might look like those who say they are Christian but do not engage in Christian practices. For example, they might not be members of a church, or perhaps they might not pray regularly or regularly partake of the sacraments (or ordinances in some denominations). These will often define being Christian as a belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. While this is a central tenant of Christian dogma, claiming to believe it does not a Christian make. More accurately, Christianity is a journey of discipleship that begins at baptism and continues throughout one’s life. It is the practice of living life in the light of the presence and teachings of Jesus Christ. It involves belief that necessitates a pattern of practice. In other words, to truly believe the tenants of Christianity requires one to act upon them—not perfect action but sincere action. As is true in so many arenas, Christian belief is not theoretical but practical. One does not only believe Christianity, one does Christianity.

This is similar to Luke when he meets Yoda. He is very enthusiastic about becoming a Jedi, but Yoda questions whether he has the patience and character to complete the training. A Jedi is what Luke believes he wants to be, but Luke’s belief does not make him a Jedi. It is faith in his beliefs and in Yoda’s ability to teach that allow him to train to become a Jedi. The moral of the parable is that beliefs take on meaning and gain substance when acted upon or practiced.

The philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein said this about religion: “If you want to know whether a man is religious, don’t ask him, observe him.” I imagine that Wittgenstein and Yoda would have understood one another perfectly in this area.

A simple way to apply this to our own self-exploration is to ask two simple questions: 1. What do I believe to be true?, and 2. How do these beliefs inform my actions? These are deceptively simple questions that can pose very big challenges. In them we might find a significant discrepancy between what we would like to believe and what our actions indicate we actually believe. In them we might find our idealistic-selves and our pragmatic-selves.

Our society appears to be becoming increasingly diverse--culturally, politically, religiously, and in other ways. In this context many ideologies are on display. An unfortunate bi-product of our diversity is that often people attempt to promote claims by identifying with ideologies that they do not truthfully represent. As a Christian, for example, it is not uncommon for me to watch someone on television seeking to influence public policy based on the convictions of their Christian faith. Too often these “representatives” are inarticulate about matters of faith and exhibit none of the regular practices of the religion whose interests they claim to be championing. Perhaps a more honest approach would be to not be so quick to proclaim what one believes but instead to exhibit lives that have integrated one’s beliefs into intentional actions and reactions. Most of us have heard the adage that actions speak louder than words. With this integration we will find an increased aptitude for truly listening to those whose beliefs differ from our own and will have meaningful content to offer in our dialogue with them. Perhaps more importantly, we will find that we will begin to know more about what our beliefs mean, and also find that we know more about ourselves and what we wish to become.

In conclusion, we can re-state, with some adaptation, the sage words of Yoda, “Do or do not, everything else is just theory.”

***Midway cont. from** pg. 1*

Yamamoto planned to quickly knock down Midway’s defenses, and follow up with an invasion of the atoll’s two small islands and establish a Japanese air base there.

He expected the U.S. carriers to come out and fight, but to arrive too late to save Midway and in insufficient strength to avoid defeat by his own well-tested carrier air power.

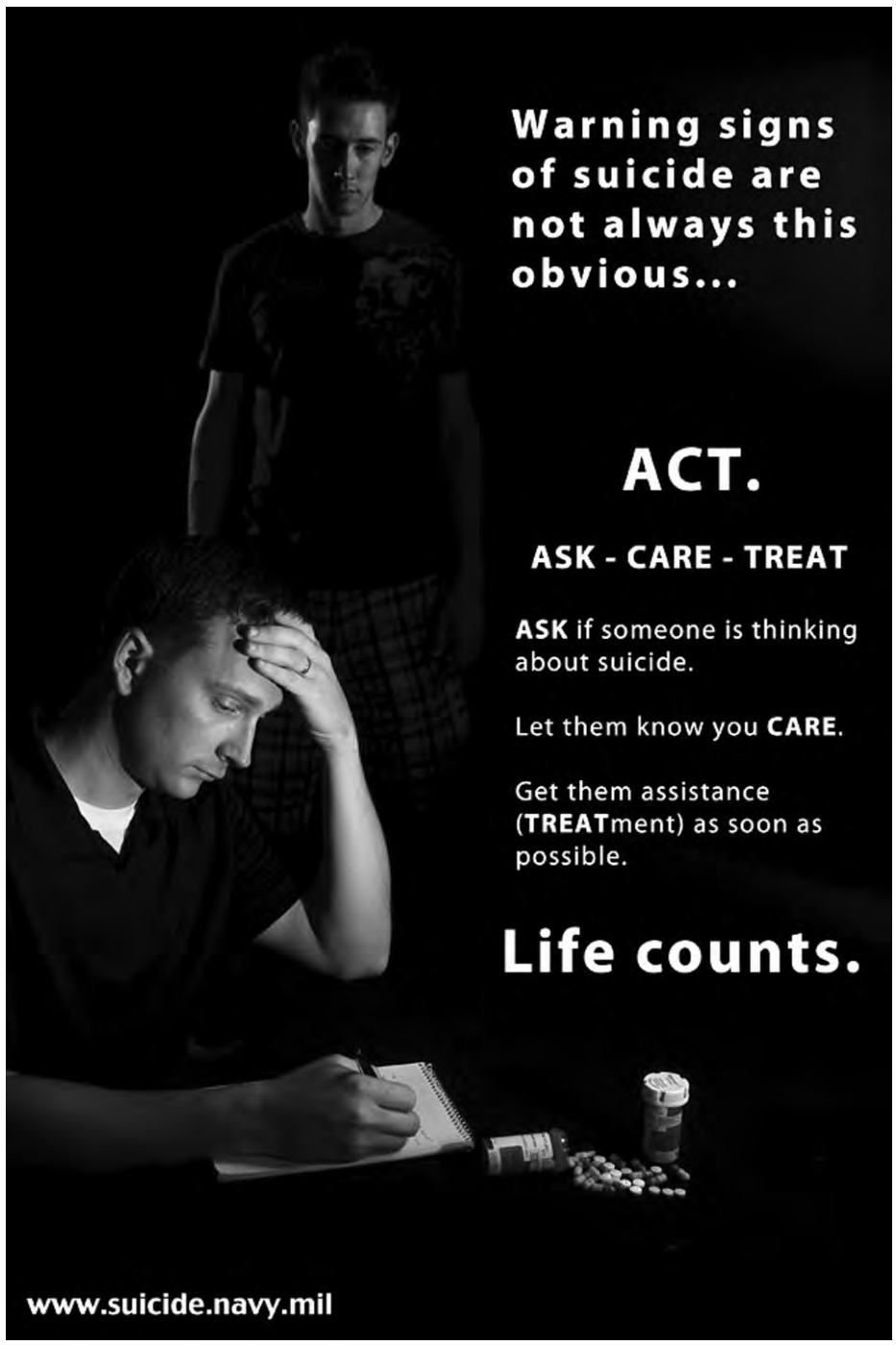
Yamamoto’s intended surprise was thwarted by superior American communications intelligence, which deduced his scheme well before battle was joined. This allowed Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, the U.S. Pacific Fleet commander, to establish an ambush by having his carriers ready and waiting for the Japanese. On 4 June 1942, in the second of the Pacific War’s great carrier battles, the trap was sprung. The perseverance, sacrifice and skill of U.S. Navy aviators, plus a great deal of good luck on the American side, cost Japan four irreplaceable fleet carriers, while only one of the three U.S. carriers present was lost. The base at Midway, though damaged by Japanese air attack, remained operational and later became a vital component in the American trans-Pacific offensive.”

At the end of the battle U.S. service members and Japanese service members had lost their lives. Every year the Navy and CFAY remember those who made the ultimate sacrifice during the battle. CFAY Sailors gather for an early morning formation run through the streets of the base.

“We did about a two mile run to commemorate those who were lost in battle all those years ago,” said Chief Master-at-Arms Anthony Gonzales, one of the leaders for the run. “It might seem small, but while you are running, you think about those who laid down their lives, it can mean a lot.”

After the run the Sailors gathered at the seawall facing out to the ocean in Miura Bay for a wreath-laying ceremony.

“That battle defined a U.S. Navy Sailor; honor, courage, commitment,” said guest speaker Lt. Asa Kim, during his address. “What drove two peace-loving nations to war is not so much as important as how those same two nations have come to be defined by a great alliance. Today we stand together with our brethren, our strongest ally in the Far East with our service members working hand in hand with a spirit of cooperation.”

Sailors then brought up two wreaths, one for each country, laid them near the ocean and rendered a salute.

“We pay tribute to patriotism, dedication, heroism and sacrifice Sailors from both sides showed towards their country,” said Kim. “Our purpose is to remember all of those who fought and died, for us to draw strength and fortitude from their lives, and for us never to repeat the same mistakes that led us to war by any future generations, that this ocean over which they struggled, and all the lands that it touches may truly be Pacific.”