

On Mortality...and Memory: The Meaning of Memorial Day

- a sermon reflection compiled and presented by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister

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What does it mean to “remember?”

James Hillman, who wrote a book on the spiritual journey of aging, *The Force of Character*, says that we “re-remember” the story of our lives again and again, reinterpreting and even revising old events in the light of new information, experiences, and insights. “Now I see what really happened.” “That’s what she meant.” “I didn’t realize until just now what that must have been like for you.”

Memory and imagination intertwine, Hillman says, with memory supplying the raw material of our experiences while imagination draws connections and conclusions about the world and about ourselves. **Our identity is a narrative we create out of those raw materials and connections over time:** What have we seen? What have we done? Who did we seek, or find? Who have we been?

If memory is the key to our identity, then **loss of memory feels like a loss of self.** Blessed and cursed with a vivid imagination, I can picture my...memories...fading like photographs in sunlight. I know this is a long way off (*well, maybe not that far off*); I even know it may never happen at all. **Still, who will I be if I’m no longer the teller of my own story?**

In his book, *Remembering Whose We Are*, pastoral counseling scholar David Keck writes about religion in the context of Alzheimer’s disease. Religion relies on memory, he says, because **religions narrate a coherent story of existence and offer us a way to find ourselves in that story.** The memory religion relies on, though, is more than what each of us remembers. Our personal memory is just as fragile and fleeting as our individual life, but our community’s memory is long and strong. Keck invites us to imagine the community gradually becoming the memory of the Alzheimer’s patient. **He calls this keeping faith with memory.** We are held in the community and in the world because the community and our loved ones know who we are. **They remember us into the world.** (David Takahashi Morris in [“Do You Remember When?”](#))

I think the holiday now known as Memorial Day asks this of us...to remember for those who can no longer speak their story.

In preparation for this morning, I stumbled upon a History Channel website article called “8 Things You May Not Know About Memorial Day” – here is a bit of what I learned there:

<http://www.history.com/news/8-things-you-may-not-know-about-memorial-day>

- One of the earliest commemorations was organized by recently freed slaves. As the Civil War neared its end, thousands of Union soldiers, held as prisoners of war, were herded into a series of hastily assembled camps in Charleston, South Carolina. Conditions at one camp, a former racetrack near the city’s Citadel, were so bad that more than 250 prisoners died from disease or exposure, and were buried in a mass grave behind the track’s grandstand. Three weeks after the Confederate surrender, an unusual procession entered the

former camp: On May 1, 1865, more than 1,000 recently freed slaves, accompanied by regiments of the U.S. Colored Troops (including the Massachusetts 54th Infantry) and a handful of white Charlestonians, gathered in the camp to consecrate a new, proper burial site for the Union dead. The group sang hymns, gave readings and distributed flowers around the cemetery, which they dedicated to the “Martyrs of the Race Course.”

- In May 1868, General John A. Logan, the commander-in-chief of the Union veterans’ group known as the Grand Army of the Republic, issued a decree that May 30 should become a nationwide day of commemoration for the more than 620,000 soldiers killed in the recently ended Civil War. On Decoration Day, as Logan dubbed it, Americans should lay flowers and decorate the graves of the war dead “whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village and hamlet churchyard in the land.” According to legend, Logan chose May 30 because it was a rare day that didn’t fall on the anniversary of a Civil War battle, though some historians believe the date was selected to ensure that flowers across the country would be in full bloom.
- Although the term Memorial Day was used beginning in the 1880s, the holiday was officially known as Decoration Day for more than a century, when it was changed by federal law. Four years later, the Uniform Monday Holiday Act of 1968 finally went into effect, moving Memorial Day from its traditional observance on May 30 (regardless of the day of the week), to a set day—**the last Monday in May**. The move has not been without controversy, though. Veterans groups, concerned that more Americans associate the holiday with first long weekend of the summer and not its intended purpose to honor the nation’s war dead, continue to lobby for a return to the May 30 observances. For more than 20 years, their cause was championed by Hawaiian Senator—and decorated World War II veteran—Daniel Inouye, who until his 2012 death reintroduced legislation in support of the change at the start of every Congressional term.
- ...since 2000, when the U.S. Congress passed legislation, all Americans are encouraged to pause for a National Moment of Remembrance at 3 p.m. local time.

There is not likely a person present here today who cannot cite a remembrance of someone they know, someone in their family who died during a war or was forever wholly affected by the horrors of war. My father, **Charles Elliott**, was on the front lines of Korea. When we were children, the only stories he ever told of the war were the funny ones he could remember – enhanced I’m sure by his creatively wicked sense of humor. His memories of war were relegated to his subconscious dream life and he suffered the remainder of his life from night terrors. We were not allowed to touch our father while he was sleeping for fear he would harm us unwittingly. Ironically, we only began to hear him speak aloud of the horrors of his experiences in Korea when he was in the late stages of the Parkinson’s Disease that ended his life in 2008 – I say ironic because his late stages of the disease included the onset of a dementia that caused him to forget much of who he was but unleashed the memories of all the suffering he had experienced. He was reliving the war over and over and over again.

In closing, I can think of nothing more appropriate than to share with you a letter written by UU minister David Pyle, Chaplain, U.S. Army Reserve, on the meaning of Memorial Day:

I thought I understood the meaning of Memorial Day. I thought the military uniform hanging in my closet taught me the meaning of Memorial Day. I thought that growing up the child of a soldier, and the grandchild of a sailor taught me the meaning of Memorial Day. But I was wrong.

I sensed the meaning of Memorial Day. A few years ago I preached a sermon about standing at the Vietnam Wall with my father, watching him trace names of friends across the wall. It was the only time I ever saw tears in his eyes. I saw my grandfather visit the Punchbowl WWII memorial in Hawaii, and I saw those same silent tears.

I thought I knew the meaning of Memorial Day... but I did not. Not until my wife came and told me that the television news had just reported the death of my friend, military partner, and former roommate in the Al Anbar province of Iraq on December 6th, 2006. It was not until I realized that I, too, would one day have a name to trace across a memorial somewhere, the name of Travis Patriquin, that I learned the meaning of Memorial Day.

While I do not believe in a spiritual place called hell, I think General William Tecumseh Sherman was right when he said that "War is Hell". It is a hell that exists in this time, in this world, not in some metaphysical afterlife. I wish with all my heart we could rid ourselves of it... I wish for the day to come when we no longer send our young men and women off to walk through that hell. I wish for the day when our problems are solved by meeting, not by killing. It is rarely those who should be meeting that instead face the killing. I wish with all my heart for what military forces we have to become a tool of peace, not a weapon of war.

Clinton Lee Scott once said "**Always it is easier to pay homage (*ha-mudge*) to our prophets than to heed the direction of their vision**". The true meaning of Memorial Day is not homage... it is not to honor those who have served, those who have died for our nation. Oh, that is what the media will tell us, what the President will say when he lays a wreath at Arlington National Cemetery in a few days. I expect him to strike a tone of "honor our dead, and standing resolute." No, it is not honor that our war dead ask of us. **Honor is the easy way out of the vision they call us to.**

The true meaning of Memorial Day is to remember. It is to remember that the cost of war is almost always too high. The true meaning of Memorial Day is not to honor our dead, but to remember the price they paid. To remember the price their families pay. To remember the physical and psychic wounds that the survivors of war, on all sides, carry with them till the end of their days. To remember the lives never lived. To remember the horrors unleashed upon civilian populations by the tools of modern warfare. To remember...

I want to cease thinking of Memorial Day as if it were a holiday, for it is not. I want to end the Memorial Day sales and the picnics, the trips to the lake and the hamburgers and hotdogs with stars and stripes napkins. We should never "celebrate" Memorial Day. I want Memorial Day not to be a holiday, but rather a **National Day of Mourning.**

It began as “Decoration Day”, a day when families and friends would go to cemeteries and place flowers and flags upon the graves of those who had died in the Civil War. From those graves they heard, and they remembered the cost of war. I want to return to that spirit, so that the memory of the true costs of war is fresh in our minds, renewed annually... so that perhaps we can honor our dead by sending no more to join them.

Keep your Memorial Day plans, if you have them, but remember the “**reason for the season**”. We do not honor the casualties of war with flowers and speeches, but by truly and deeply remembering the cost of war when we contemplate sending our service members of today into harm’s way. We honor them by remembering that war is a hell that should rarely, if ever, be unleashed.

Remember.

Shalom and Salaam, Blessed Be and Amen.