

In Service of One's Country

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Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Columbia

Sunday, May 29, 2005

Reading: “The Real World”, by Wisława Szymborska (from her Poems New and Collected 1957-1997 (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 234-235)

Sermon:

On this Memorial Day weekend we gather to remember... to honor... to thank... those who have served honorably and bravely in America's armed forces .

To remember those who have gone courageously before us, who no longer live except in our memories.

To honor those of great courage who have faced their fears and, despite them, have sacrificed their own lives in service of high ideals.

To thank those who paid a great price—the ultimate price—that we may enjoy liberty and freedom... privileges that do not come at no cost.

We Unitarian Universalists hold fast to our goal of a world community with peace, liberty and justice for all, while acknowledging those who know that such ideals must be won here, in a real, tragic world.

It is with more than a little apprehension that I chose on this Memorial Day weekend explicitly and publicly to honor those who have died in military service. It would be easier, safer, to follow the lead of a colleague who is preaching today a sermon titled, “God Wants You to Take a Vacation”—after all, this weekend marks the beginning of Summer, and therefore vacation season, right?

And we are Unitarian Universalists... Unlike the Quakers, who share a universal peace testimony and refuse to participate in war, we are not a strictly pacifist movement, though we do commit ourselves to peace- and justice-making. But we do have a long tradition of opposing various wars for various reasons, of publicly criticizing the policy makers whom we view as indiscriminate warmongers, of being truth-tellers who refuse to ignore the blatant self-centered greed that leads us *in* to some armed conflicts, and yet leads us to *ignore* others that are less beneficial to our own self-interests.

We know there must be better ways of securing liberty and justice for all. We yearn for peaceful reconciliation, for a compassionate ethic that is driven by an appreciation for the divine spark in every human being, rather than a focus on those things that separate us and make us ‘enemies of one another.

But we also are a reasonable, respectful, realistic people. Honest differences about difficult moral decisions have always been a part of our congregational life. We know that our world is one in which real threats exist. We know that we have benefited from the willingness of others to stand up and fight for the weak and the oppressed—and we know that those fights sometimes end in death and destruction. We know that our freedoms have been hard won.

And so, on this day, we honor those noble and brave ones who have sacrificed their lives in service of *our* country.

Let us consider how the tradition of Memorial Day—first called Decoration Day—began. It is likely that it had many separate beginnings in the 1860s when towns all over the North and South tapped into the general human need to honor our dead by having planned or spontaneous gatherings to honor the dead soldiers of the Civil War.

A hundred years later, President Lyndon Johnson declared Waterloo, New York, the official birthplace of Memorial Day, because it was there in 1865 that a druggist named Henry Welles mentioned at a social gathering that honor should be shown to the patriotic dead of the Civil War by decorating their graves. A year later Mr. Welles mentioned his idea to the county clerk who embraced the idea and organized the townspeople who wholeheartedly went to work making wreaths, crosses and bouquets—tangible, visible expressions of remembrance.

There are other stories of the holiday’s origins, too. It is said that in Boalsburg, Pennsylvania, a young woman named Emma Hunter visited the cemetery and placed flowers on the grave of her father, a surgeon in the Union Army, who had recently died. At the same time, Mrs. Elizabeth Meyer was visiting the same cemetery to remember her son, a private in the army’s ranks, who had died on the last day of the battle at Gettysburg. And the story says that before the two women left each other that Sunday in October 1864, they had agreed to meet again the following year to honor not only their own two loved ones, but others who now might have no one left to kneel at their lonely graves. On the appointed day, what had been planned as a little informal meeting of two women turned into a community service. All the townspeople were there, and every grave in the little cemetery was decorated with flowers and flags.

Of course it doesn’t really matter who was “first”. What matters is that the need for remembrance and gratitude is universal... That soldiers have fought and died for our rights. That despite our differences and our disapproval of current military conflicts, it is right for us to devote at least one moment to memorializing all those who have died in military service. Our nation of freedom and liberty likely would not exist without their sacrifice. Memorial Day does

not have to be about division. It can be about reconciliation; about coming together to honor those who gave their lives for the benefit of others.

Memorial Day is not a simple holiday, especially for us Unitarian Universalists, especially during the current divided, politicized climate in our nation. This holiday challenges us to recognize the complexity and costs of our freedom and liberty, and to ask ourselves some hard questions about our history of war and peace.

It's been quite a few years now since I preached my first Memorial Day sermon, and I don't often preach on Memorial Day. But that first one was memorable for me, because I was in a congregation, not unlike this one, that was full of anti-war activists. I took a safe and sentimental approach that Sunday morning, saying very little about soldiers and the military, but reading letters of loved ones whose soldiers had died at war. My sermon provoked an angry, yet very thoughtful, response from a veteran in the congregation who asked if I wasn't courageous enough to admit that my rights and my peace had been secured with the lives of brave and committed soldiers who had fought in wars past. He asked me to consider what would the world look like without those soldiers...

Without the revolutionary soldiers, or those who resisted the return of the British in 1812... Should we have submitted to British colonial rule, waiting for the future to moderate them? How about Abraham Lincoln, was he wrong? Ugly as it was, the bloodiest war in American history, should he have let the South go its way? Wouldn't the clash of slave culture have expanded west and led to another conflict, perhaps with a different outcome? And what about World War I, but especially World War II? The first was a contest between some democratic 'empires' and the Prussian and Austro-Hungarian authoritarian empires. Certainly a useless royal and traditionally European carnage, but once engaged, could Americans at that time have lived with a Europe ruled by the Kaiser and sinking their shipping, while the only two democratic countries were destroyed? Were Bertrand Russell, Aldous Huxley and Charles Lindbergh right in advocating working with Nazi Europe rather than even preparing an adequate defense in the face of their aggression? What if we had not, even with the missteps and tragic decisions, ultimately confronted and contained world communism? It is easy to forget how real was this threat if your only experience of it was from the relative luxury and security of the United States. ...

So, what of the people who actually had to accomplish these ends? Can we honor the stories of the soldiers on D-Day? Do we owe them nothing except to treat them like victims at the hands of the evil machine? They went through hell, in a very ugly place no matter where it was, and theirs, living or dead, was a very personal sacrifice in the knowledge of their personal likelihood of death. And you and I are, with some exceptions, direct beneficiaries of the gains in human justice, freedom and peace... Did they accomplish something? Do we owe them nothing? Can we not say 'thank you' on Memorial Day?

He was right, of course. We can believe in and work for peace on the one hand, and also acknowledge that peace and justice have been won with great sacrifice. We can oppose the current war(s) while honoring the many soldiers who have courageously and honorably

committed themselves to upholding the cause of democracy and freedom—ours and others. Many have enlisted in the military knowing that their own lives would be at risk, that they would encounter some of the most dangerous and terrifying situations humans might face. Many of them—most of them—believe deeply that their military service is the single most honorable and patriotic service they can offer to the rest of us, their fellow citizens.

As we honor them on this Memorial Day, we honor the freedoms we enjoy because of their commitment and sacrifice. When we choose to ignore the intent of this day, when we choose to dismiss as foolish those in our midst who volunteer for military service, do we not deceive ourselves? Can we honestly say that we—and others in our world—are not better off because of those who have fought bravely on our behalf? Can we admit this truth, just as we acknowledge the other, less noble aspects of the military? Are there not some ideals worth fighting for, worth dying for?

I, for one, came up short when I tried to answer for myself whether there is any ideal or purpose for which I would be willing to actually put my own life on the line. And so, I am grateful for those who have a kind of courage to do that which I don't even want to have to think about.

The veteran who wrote to me following my sentimental Memorial Day sermon closed his letter with these words, a challenge of sorts: “My goal is a more complex dialogue on the subject without the stereotyping. I say let's keep to our aspiration of promoting peace and justice, but let's not be afraid to examine history, uphold our interests and the rights and principles we have gained at great cost and to thank those who have paid the price. They, first among us, would aspire and work for peace.”

Unless and until we are actively working for change—as some of you certainly are—change in our political culture, in our societal expectations about worth and dignity and patriotism; and until better options are available for those who seek the kind of skills training and technological training offered by the military; we owe a certain respect to those who are willing to serve. And when we oppose their service and their actions, we must offer *respectful* opposition.

Let us not forget that each soldier is a human being, inherently worthy, morally grounded, loyal, devoted, true. Each one has a name. John. Beverly. Brian. Robert. Frank. Camilo. Luis. Stacey. The list is endless...

As we honor the soldiers who have died in service, we do not simply forget the other casualties of war—the deaths of civilians; the loss of innocence of individuals and nations; the destruction of the earth; the proliferation of fear and intimidation; the damaged lives that never can be recovered. And we remember what our own David Hegmann, retired career Army Sergeant Major, said in this pulpit two years ago: That “freedom was *never* free, it was bought and paid for with the *blood, sweat, and fear* of those who went before. [and] We as Americans should *never, never*, surrender those hard won freedoms to anyone, no matter how well-meaning or flag-draped they may be, without putting up the fight of our lives. Do this, and you will truly honor those who went before, and picked up the tab [for us].”

Freedom was *never* free. And so, without rhetoric, without propaganda, today, brave soldiers, dead and alive, we simply honor & thank you who have served, who have questioned, who have fought, who have sacrificed. We owe you a debt of gratitude, and are wise to honor your memories. Thank you.

We currently are a nation at war, in a world at war. Please join me now in a few moments of reverence and prayerful respect as I share this “Prayer for the Country in Crisis”, by Bruce Clary. I will then ring the bell, and allow one minute of silence for your own private remembrances.

O God of Justice and Righteousness, Goddess of Compassion and Peace, form an alliance to sustain and strengthen us in this time of our anguish and travail. Help us to understand that the horrible images we see over and over again will fade, in time, into tranquil landscapes and portraits of courage.

O God of the Eternal Tides and Goddess of the Evening Stars, bring to us assurance of the confident and reliable rhythms of life and the serenity of safe nights.

In this terrible time of testing wills and tempting vengeance, give us the words to soothe and comfort one another, to promise the children that we will always be near, to pledge to the grieving the healing balm of our sympathy and hope, and to offer those who are anxious and afraid a calm and abiding trust in love’s consecrating power.

O God of Strength, Goddess of Enfolding Care, combine your skills to steer us through the turbulent storm. Crack our hardened hearts so that we may see again the light of divinity in each human soul. Help us to reject blind retribution and despair. Focus our vision on a world cradled in peace and help us to dedicate our lives to the work of the preservation and proclamation of freedom and justice for all.

O God of Life, O Goddess of Light, we ask for your benediction upon the innocent lives lost, the families torn asunder, and upon our country in need of the resuscitation of its heart and the recuperation of its soul. Give the sustenance of peace to a world whose eyes have seen too much of terror and violence and not enough of reason and loving-kindness.

Grant us wisdom to sheathe the sword of anger, and courage to proclaim liberty to the captives of fear. Grant us wisdom. Grant us courage—for the facing of this hour.

Amen.

Closing Words – “The Young Dead Soldiers,” by Archibald MacLeish (#583, Singing the Living Tradition)

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.

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