

Building memorials Building Peace

“We leave you our deaths. Give them meaning.” According to the official history, the holiday we celebrate tomorrow is 147 years old; Young as holidays go but rich with meaning. On May fifth 1866 flags at half-mast adorned with evergreens and black mourning drapes lined the parade route in Waterloo, New York, the official site of the first Memorial Day celebration. I can easily imagine it as a bright day that drew the townspeople out of doors, out of their individual, private grief and into community with their neighbors who shared memories of loved ones lost in the Civil War. I want to say that the sun was warm and the breeze was cool and fragrant; that people could at last count on spending time outside in the company of friends where shared memories were a tonic to the “silence that speaks ...at night and when the clock counts.”

The village repeated the celebration on May 5, 1867, but the following year they joined other communities in commemorating the fallen Civil War soldiers on May 30, 1868, the day set aside by General John Logan for a national memorial day. By his order the graves of Union and Confederate soldiers at Arlington Cemetery were decorated that day.

By 1890 all of the northern states observed the holiday. The southern states continued with independent memorial days for the Confederate dead until after World War I when the holiday became a day for honoring all fallen soldiers. It was celebrated on May 30 until the Uniform Monday Holiday act went into effect in 1971 giving us a three day weekend the last Monday in May.

Memorial Day has evolved from local days of speeches and parades in towns and villages like Waterloo to a national holiday. Some criticize its further transformation into a general memorial for all who have died and worse, the beginning of the outdoor social season.

There are two reasons we back away from this holiday. First we have difficulty honoring those who offer their lives for the protection of others without seeming to glorify the element of our nature that too often calls for that sacrifice. It is hard work to give meaning when the young dead soldiers leave us their deaths. But it is work we can do and are indeed doing.

The second reason is that the percentage of people who die in war is dwindling. One blog I read predicts that Memorial Day will become a memorial for the practice of warfare. I expect that the blogger is someone who grew up sheltered from the realities of war, someone like me. These days even those of us who have been to a number of funerals and memorial services may never have been to a military one. The founders of this holiday may have hoped for, but could not have conceived of a nation where military conflict did not end with an empty chair at every table. We should be grateful and humble that we have become such a nation.

When I asked to do this service I was not thinking about military memorials. I was thinking about Unitarian Universalist Memorials. I've been to three at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Silver Spring, first for my father, then five years ago for my brother Sam and most recently for my mother. All of these services were organized around our words and our wishes. That church which my parents joined in the 1960s has, through all its changes stood ready to minister to us in more ways than I can recount.

The Monday before Thanksgiving, I received word that my mother was in hospice. I caught a flight to Maryland that night. The next morning while I waited for my brother to drive in from northern Virginia to pick me up at our family home and take me to the assisted living center, I began to write. I did it to help myself focus on what I might say and do in the time I had with my mother, especially what I would say if she paused on her journey toward death and woke up to talk to me. With traffic in the Washington area being what it is I had a good start on a biography when my brother arrived.

I wrote about the stories she told of growing up in Kansas, about the sense of adventure and love of the outdoors those stories inspired. I wrote about her education and early working years. Her college education was financed by her oldest sister and brother-in-law. Uncle John asked her what she wanted to do. She said she wanted to join the Foreign Service. He said, "I meant do you want to be a nurse or a teacher?" She chose teacher.

I wrote about her life as a housewife and community instigator; about her role in founding CSAAC, Community Services for Autistic Adults and Children. My brother Sam had autism and it became clear as he grew up that he was not going to be able to manage true independence. There were no group homes for adults with autism at that time. My mother called the parents of Sam's classmates and reached out to other parents of young adults with autism to establish a community of support

I remember her explaining to people that it was important to have quality supported housing because she did not want to be like a woman she had read about

who prayed to live one day longer than her disabled child. When Sam sickened and died of an undiagnosed wasting disease, she despaired that all that she had done for him did not save him. As I wrote I began to appreciate that as bitter as the loss was for her, she had grieved and reclaimed her life in the intervening years.

I sat with my mother for two days. I read her the cards her friends had sent or dropped off. They contained thanks for her gardening advice and memories of bird watching adventures. I found a video of a choir singing “The Lone Wild Bird” on U-tube and sang along with it for her. She remained in a restless sleep. She did smile when I held my phone up to her ear so my son could talk to her. Thursday morning I flew back to St. Louis. At noon my brother called to say she had slipped away.

While my brothers set about the work of moving her belongings out of her room at the assisted living home and closing her affairs, I began correspondence with her church as I had five years ago when my brother Sam died. The church administrator put me in touch with the choir director. My mother loved the choir and they could easily have told me that they wanted to do songs that they knew and she loved. But the director was interested in my choices and they found and learned “Homeward Bound” for me and found a new arrangement of “Wild Mountain Thyme”, the song my mother had selected for my father’s memorial in 1990.

I sent the biography I had started to her minister. Reverend Liz Lerner Maclay did what I love that Unitarians do. She said, “You write so beautifully, would it be OK if I use this for the eulogy?”

It is a gifted leader who knows when to get out of the way of the work. But don't think this was an easy way out for Reverend Liz. We talked about how my mother was a true transcendentalist and that the hymns I associated with her were the ones about birds. "The Lone Wild Bird" is easy enough to include in a memorial service, but the other hymn I associated with my mother who always woke early to hear the birds' first song was "Morning Has Broken". I told her that it was OK to skip it though because it probably couldn't work for an evening memorial service. But she said, "I think it will."

Here's what she did. She ended her remarks with a prayer, saying, "The earth is charged with new life." We then sang "Morning has Broken" as our closing hymn. And so it is. The earth is charged even as the plants wither, even as we die. Then morning breaks and we take inspiration from those who have gone before and commit ourselves to our community. Sometimes it takes a lifetime of work sometimes it cruelly takes a life or many lives.

This weekend you have many opportunities to watch movies about war heroism. I recommend "Saving Private Ryan". An early scene shows waves of allied soldiers coming to shore at Normandy. As I watched boatload after boatload open to a hail of bullets I understood that the strategy of the invasion was to send more troops than the enemy could shoot. I could not calculate how many soldiers were there to give their lives so that their comrades could go forward. How many in any battle sacrifice their lives for the sake of their unit, the military objective and ultimately, the protection of the community. The point of the movie is to extract Private Ryan from the dangerous battle field because his brothers were all recent casualties of the war and his widowed mother is not to be left childless. The movie begins and ends with the old James Ryan returning to the cemetery in France to give thanks

and to reconcile himself to the men who gave their lives and left him to give memorial testimony.

“My family is with me today. They wanted to come with me. To be honest with you, I wasn't sure how I'd feel coming back here. Every day I think about what you said to me that day on the bridge. I tried to live my life the best that I could. I hope that was enough. I hope that, at least in your eyes, I've earned what all of you have done for me.”

And so we make memorial. We live our best lives and give testimony to the work of those who have died. We are grateful for the peace in our lives and helpful to those who suffer in war. We follow the guidance found in the UU Peacemaking Statement of Conscience “For those among us who make a formal commitment to military service, we will honor their commitment, welcome them home, and offer pastoral support.” It continues with peacemaking strategies, which include, “supporting veterans, military service members, conscientious objectors, and their families, and providing them with opportunities to share what they have learned;” In memorial we tell the stories of how our loved ones lived, how they gave service and comfort to their communities. We as a church, as a denomination, stand ready to care for the mourners and honor the dead. We are here for civilians and soldiers, waiting for those who must mourn, ready to affirm that the lives lost were, “for peace and a new hope”.