

## THE PAST IS YET TO BE DETERMINED

First Unitarian Church of Saint Louis

May 29, 2016: Memorial Day

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STORY: "Paintings of Hiroshima."

I want to tell you about a city named Hiroshima. The President of the United States, Mr. Obama, just visited that city this week, and I want you to know a connection we have with that city.

Once there was a great war called World War 2. At the end of that war, Japan lost and the United States won the fight. About a year later, a Unitarian minister, named Reverend Davies, (who was the UU minister in Washington DC,) noticed that some Americans were celebrating the end of the war as if it was a happy thing. "No," he said, "When we remember a war we should be glad it is over, but we should also remember how bad it was. Most importantly, we should remember that people were hurt and killed."

After Reverend Davies gave his sermon about being sad, a teacher in the Japanese city of Hiroshima wrote him a letter and said something like this: "Yes people were hurt here in the war, but many people still live here. Please remember the living too. We are struggling to heal our country and our land. For example, I am a teacher in a school, but our children do not have anything to learn with because books and paper and pencils were also destroyed by the war and we can't yet make new ones."

So the Unitarian minister asked his Unitarian church if they wanted to be helpful to these people from the other side of the war. They, of course, said, "Yes!" They gathered all sorts of school supplies, thousands of pounds of school supplies, and they sent all those to Japan. The Japanese children made pictures of their lives as part of their thank you.

Here a few pictures of the American children, the Japanese children, and a few of their paintings from long ago. [show photos on iPad].

The people of the school and the people of the church have remained friends and visited each other. Even today those bright and happy pictures are a reminder that our desire to create peace and friendship and kindness is always stronger than war. As long as we are alive, we must remember that we might not be able to stop the war, but always we can build friendship and trust and hope. We can always work for Love and Justice.

READINGS:

"Be Strong in the Lord" – The Apostle Paul, *Letter to the Ephesians*, 6:10-12

*The Young Dead Soldiers do Not Speak.* -Archibald MacLeish

## SERMON

The context of Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus was an age of oppression. Many nations, many ethnic groups, different peoples had been conquered and were chafing at the repression of their power and freedom. Many were expecting a revolution, a violent uprising. But Paul decided to tell his fellow Christians not to respond to oppression and even active repression with violence. He was telling them to pick up the sword of truth, instead of actual swords, to fight not persons, but powers and structures and habits of hate and division.

Today, Memorial Day, we remember those who died, especially those who died in the war. Remember the dead young soldiers and others. Remember also, that you and I must say whether their "lives and deaths were for peace and a new hope or nothing." We decide the meaning of these past lives in our living.

As the writer, H. G. Wells noted— "We live in reference to past experience and not to future events," and the author William Faulkner noted, that "the past is not even past." That is why it is important.

It is common to think of the past as unchangeable and that only the future is full of possibility. There is much theology that encourages us to think about fate and destiny as set in the past and as something which determines our future. Of course, no one can change the past. As one wag put it, "You can't change the past; but you can *dwell* on it until it changes you, into old and bitter." But, the liberating truth is that the past endures through memory and habit, and since memory and our habits are malleable, so is the past.

The key point I am making today is that our understanding of the past can change and by that we change the present and future. The past itself is as much in flux as the present. As my friend Robert Latham put it, "The past is yet to be determined." For example, before today if I were to say the word 'Hiroshima' (or hero-sheema) would happy children playing at school with gifts from Unitarians have been an image to rise in your mind?

How we think about the past can change. More centrally, the meaning of Memorial Day, the meaning of what it means to remember war dead also changes over time, if we let it. If we are open to the unsealed revelations of time and truth, our understanding of the past is always yet to be determined.

In our church motto, we say that this is "a community of memory, hope, and reverence." My predecessor, Earl Holt, wrote, "We come to our church to remember the good of ages past, particularly the good people who by their lives of dedication and purpose made the world a better place for us today. So that we may not forget all that we owe to those who have lived before us. We light the chalice."

So, the question for today is, did those who died live by dedication and purpose to the good? Did they make the world a better place? The question is not just "do we remember", but how

do we remember? And, if we remember well, perhaps that will change how we will be remembered years from now.

I will talk about this on a national level, a personal level, and a spiritual level. But first, I will say that it can be difficult to remember anything. This is perhaps the most common complaint that patients over the age of 45 will tell their doctors: that memory is slipping. This general fact of aging can get very troublesome. For instance, two couples one gay and one heterosexual used to get together to talk about life and to have a good time. One day one of the men, Harry, started talking about this fantastic restaurant he went to the other night with his wife. "That sounds like a great place," his friend said, "what's it called? The first man said "It had a common item in its name..." and trailed off. After thinking for a few seconds the, he asked, "What are those good smelling flowers with many petals called?" "Do you mean a rose?" the friend questioned. "Yes, that's it," the first man exclaimed. Turning to his wife, he said, "Rose, what's that restaurant we went to last night?"

Memory is a tricky thing. Shared memories are powerful because we reinforce them on a regular basis. I will always be a Cardinal fan because of the Cardinals winning the pennant in 2011. But how do we share painful or difficult or unresolved memories like those of wars? How do we remember the war in Vietnam? Was it something we did to defend ourselves or was it a civil war in which we wrongly entangled ourselves?

In this nation, as early as 1865, free black men in Charleston SC held a ceremony to consecrate a mass grave of soldiers who had died in the civil war. On May 30, 1868, the first official Decoration Day was declared by General John A. Logan and observed at Arlington National Cemetery. The day, intended to bring unity into the nation, included volunteers who decorated the graves of more than 20,000 of *both* Union and Confederate soldiers. They day often included honoring of the civilian war dead as well, and this practice evolved over time until it was a general day of memory and honor of all the dead. At the end of World War II, Decoration Day was largely expanded to include all war dead and was renamed Memorial Day. Later, the Uniform Monday Holiday Act of 1971 set aside Memorial Day as a federal holiday to be celebrated each year on the last day of May. The law, however, does not specify who or what it commemorates. That's up to us to decide.

Each death is unique. Who they left behind, what dreams they left undone were different for each. The two-year-old daughter who will only remember stories, the wife who feared the worst must live with the worst, the father who was at first proud but may later begin to feel guilt. Of course, it should be noted, the overwhelming majority of people who serve in the military never see combat or die in service. That is why we also celebrate Veteran's Day.

And each year there are fewer stories of the deaths, fewer for whom the loss is personal. In WWII 12% of the US population served in the military. Today, even with all that is going on, it is less than 1% in military service. We counted American military war dead in Vietnam in thousands per year. In Afghanistan and Iraq, they were counted in hundreds per year. Worldwide the total number of war dead has been declining. On top of that Scant attention, is paid to the civilians who serve courageously in the line of fire. Diplomats and other civilians

who work for the U.S. government are often placed in dangerous and unstable locales around the world. They have participated in every war and conflict since the Revolutionary War alongside their military colleagues. In some cases, the civilians stayed behind after the troops withdrew, as in Iraq. They are also stationed in places without the benefit of U.S. military support when unrest occurred, as happened in Libya, and Syria. They too make sacrifices regarding pay, career, family life. 231 American diplomats have died in the line of duty, according to the State department's list. The first was William Palfrey was lost at sea in 1780. More recently, Brian Adkins was killed in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 2007. Christopher Stevens died in Lybia, 2012. According to the State Department, more ambassadors than U.S. generals or admirals have been killed since World War II.

Who we remember and how we remember them changes us as a nation. In wonder if we will remember all they young men and women killed in this city, one day, as war dead? The point of religion is to share certain thoughts, practices, and stories so as to change us for the better. Do we remember those who died working for peace, or only those who died in combat?

The story we tell of our nation's past, or of our past, is the way we give meaning to what we remember of yesterday's events. The meaning of past events, if kept open, allows for new possibilities and new meanings. The extent I can control the future is shaped by my understanding of the past, and thus, the future is not sealed. If we were a victim in the past, that does not mean we will always be a victim. We may become a Phoenix, risen from the flames. I learned these insights from my older UU colleague Robert Latham.

He tells the story of how he developed polio at the age of twelve. The doctors said he would likely die. His parents refused to accept this view of the future and reminded the doctors that they would pray. The doctors, and this was their medical advice, said, in that case, the family should pray for the release of death because life after polio would be one of misery or a human vegetable.

However, there was a new therapy, developed by the Australian Elizabeth Kenney. They had little trust that it would do anything, but they administered it to young Robert, assuming it would not work. Robert got better and was completely cured.

These facts are not in dispute, but what was striking to Robert was the interpretation of those events. His family was certain of God's supernatural intervention. They saw this as a signal of God's supernatural salvation and as Robert grew the conviction that he had been saved to become a great preacher of God also grew. He became a fiery preacher.

The doctors were certain that the miracle was the saving power of science and technology. They had been wrong in their certitude about death. They felt inspired by the progress of humanity and the power we had as human beings to change our conditions. They told him this.

Robert, at first took his family's interpretation as the gospel. But as he learned and studied, this other story kept pulling on his sleeve and then he began to pressure him. He feared that both

interpretations were fighting, and the victory of either would destroy him. Finally, he realized that there was a third interpretation. God saved him through science, and human care, and prayer all of these together, rather than by supernatural methods alone. Robert found that the past had changed. And this fundamental orientation – to proclaim that the past is not set in stone, led him to become a Unitarian Universalist. He understood that the future is open because the past is yet to be determined.

So, here we are on Memorial Day, 2016. What do we remember? How do we think of the past and the meaning of those who lived and died? One way to decide is to think, “How do we want to be remembered?”

The UU, Rev. Dr. John Cummins, wrote this lovely piece about our imagined Memorial:

“In Memorium for the Future”

What I would like to say to the people of the future is this: You will look back on us with astonishment at the truths which stared us in the face, and which we did not see. You will look with wonder at the bright toys we created, and used only for the rape of the planet and one another.

It will seem to you strange beyond believing that we reached for the stars, and did not know the simplest keys for living well together. But know this also, you of the future: Know that even in our slumber we dreamed. In our fumbling, shadowed search for mistaken glories, even in our clumsy cruelties, it was for you that we dreamed.

Beneath the piled up centuries, below the lost and ruined rubble of all our striving, it was you who lay safe – enfolded in the womb of our dreamings; you, the first cause of all our daring! ... One day, as for centuries foretold, in that far age, in the chrysalis of time, it shall be your glory that, born into a universe without justice or mercy, our kind thought itself of justice and mercy, and put them there!

Remember us for this: that in our wildest wanderings, never did we forsake that dream!

As we face Memorial Day, please remember the young dead soldiers. No matter for whom they fought, no matter the cause of the war, make your living give honor and meaning and hope to their living and their dying. Remember that their lives and the meaning of their lives can change because, always, the past is yet to be determined.

In this spirit let us sing our closing hymn, which proclaims, “All are architects of fate, working in these wall of time; some with massive deeds and great, some with ornaments of rhyme. For the structure that we raise, time is with materials filled; our todays and yesterdays, are the blocks with which we build.”