



Neighborhood Unitarian
Universalist Church

The Peaceable Kingdom

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Have you ever had one of those moments, or perhaps a number of them - those moments where you wish you could stop time? Moments where everything seemed special, important - moments that you want to hang on to, lock up, keep in your memory so that you could revisit them from time to time. Sometimes these moments are of important things, things we all would suggest are noteworthy, are memorable as we say. I remember so vividly the birth of both of my girls; I remember my wedding, walking down the aisle [our unplanned processional piece was 'Let's Call the Whole thing Off.']

You know these moments, don't you - those moments you want to remember?

But there are other moments as well - the kind that just stick for one reason or another. I remember standing with my Uncle Harry on his farm in western Minnesota looking out over his fields and seeing a red fox appear, stop and sit and look at us. And I remember the room in the funeral home in St James, Minnesota, the sun filtering through the dust motes in the air, where my Grandmother was laid to rest in her coffin.

I remember, too, standing on a ridge in Switzerland, the air gray and cold, damp, and just looking off at the Alps marching on into the distance. Or I remember one morning on Lake Thoreau in Reston, gliding along in our canoe. Little moments that remain. Standing on a bridge on the Fox River in Appleton, Wisconsin, or walking under the ginkgo trees in Iowa City Iowa, hiking up a mountain in the Canadian Rockies with the girls and looking down on a glacial blue/green lake, eating blue crabs for a birthday dinner. Playing volleyball on a hot summer's day in Arlington, VA after a few too many gin and tonics and spaghetti carbonara. Or standing over the casket of my little sister and feeling alone in the middle of a crowd.

Funny isn't it? Our memories. Here we are together, from the very young to the very old in this room - a roomful of memories. What a story they all together would make.

What kinds of things come to mind for you? Memory is a curious thing - I am just starting to notice that my memory is not as good as it once was - names slip away from me now and then. And while that is disturbing, it would be much worse to lose the memories of my life.

It is important to remember - it helps bring us closer together. It helps us realize our place in the scheme of things; it helps us understand that our experiences are common to us all, that we are not alone, that almost always someone has had it better than us and someone has had it worse than us. Memories instruct us about life.

So tomorrow is Memorial Day, and, as you know, the day was set aside to remember those who have died in service to our country. That is a lot of memory. It was established after the Civil War in which somewhat more than 600,000 Americans died. Since then about another 6-700,000 Americans have died in wars. Over a million are remembered tomorrow.

One in my family - my Uncle George, my Dad's little brother, killed in action in World War II, a hero, dropped in behind enemy lines in the Battle of Normandy, behind Omaha Beach, his unit pinned down by a German machine gun and a tank, and George snuck up to the tank, climbed up and dropped a grenade into the tank and was killed in the explosion, but saved his unit. A hero.

He is buried above Omaha Beach in the huge American cemetery. I visited his grave one cool fall afternoon. I took the train from Paris to Bayeux and rented a bike to get to the cemetery. Another memory. In Bayeux I saw the famous tapestry celebrating another war, the Norman invasion of England. I am the only member of my family to have

visited the grave since the end of the war - my Dad went there before he was shipped home. I got a flag and gave it to my Mom - my Dad had died by then. I remember him.

It was a moving experience - all those crosses and stars - all those who had died.

I have been to other cemeteries. Arlington National in Washington DC with its rows and rows of white crosses and stars. I have led burial services there - with gun salutes, horse drawn caissons, the flag folding ceremony by men in uniform. I have walked the length of the Vietnam War memorial in Washington DC and found the names of friends who died in that war.

Remembering. A little earlier I said a little about Margaret Fuller and Theodore Parker - two early Unitarian heroes who stood up for freedom and for justice - the ideals that soldiers have given their life for.

Let me say something here about Memorial Day - we remember those who have served the cause of freedom - not exactly just those who have died in service to our country, but those who have died in service to the principles our country stands for. They died not to preserve a government, but to preserve a set of beliefs - those beliefs in freedom for all, in justice for all, in liberty for all.

Let me read this poem by Mary Oliver

*When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse*

*to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles pox;*

*when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,*

*I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?*

*And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,*

*and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy and as singular,*

*and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,
tending, as all music does, towards silence,*

*and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.*

*When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.*

When it's over, I don't want to wonder

*if I have made of my life something particular, and real,
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.*

I don't want to end up simply having visited the world.

Ours has never been a very otherworldly religion. By that I mean we haven't been too concerned about whether there is a heaven or there is a hell; we haven't worried too much whether there is life after death or about such notions as re-incarnation.

It's not that we don't or shouldn't think about those things, but that they are not really central. For us the question is not whether there is life after death as whether there is life before death. My colleague Forrester Church has said for years that religion is our response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die. There is something profound in this simple claim - a faith worth having must account for this miracle of our being alive and with the universality of our death. Death makes us ask the question of the meaning of our life, and that makes us think about how we live. Memories help us know that to be true.

Each day we have is precious - this is not a surprise to us. We can't re-live any moment except in memory; we know this, too. To keep ourselves stuck in the past is to rob ourselves of the possibilities of the present. To live in argument or in fear is to miss what is good. To focus on what is wrong is to forget that life is full of wonder.

Mary Oliver says, when death comes for her, she hopes that she will have lived her life well - as a bride married to amazement, as the bridegroom taking the world into her arms.

So, today, as you remember someone special, think about what they would tell you about your life, think how they would urge you to let go of your wounds and hurts and instead see the joy that is there; they would tell you to forgive and ask for forgiveness, to pray for love and wisdom.

They would tell you not to waste your life on little things, to have courage, to stand up for justice and peace. They would tell you to always be kind, to ask, 'And how are the children?'

They would tell you not to end up simply having visited the world.

So many names will be said today. When you come up and put a flower in a vase, say a name - a name of memory.

Names - they carry so much, so much. We remember each other by our names. All the names said today are a country of memory, a peaceable kingdom.

Here is a poem by Billy Collins about names:

Names

*Yesterday, I lay awake in the palm of the night.
A soft rain stole in, unhelped by any breeze,
And when I saw the silver glaze on the windows,
I started with A, with Ackerman, as it happened,
Then Baxter and Calabro,
Davis and Eberling, names falling into place
As droplets fell through the dark.
Names printed on the ceiling of the night.
Names slipping around a watery bend.
Twenty-six willows on the banks of a stream.*

*In the morning, I walked out barefoot
Among thousands of flowers
Heavy with dew like the eyes of tears,
And each had a name --
Fiori inscribed on a yellow petal
Then Gonzalez and Han, Ishikawa and Jenkins.
Names written in the air
And stitched into the cloth of the day.
A name under a photograph taped to a mailbox.
Monogram on a torn shirt,
I see you spelled out on storefront windows
And on the bright unfurled awnings of this city.
I say the syllables as I turn a corner --
Kelly and Lee,
Medina, Nardella, and O'Connor.
When I peer into the woods,
I see a thick tangle where letters are hidden
As in a puzzle concocted for children.
Parker and Quigley in the twigs of an ash,
Rizzo, Schubert, Torres, and Upton,
Secrets in the boughs of an ancient maple.
Names written in the pale sky.
Names rising in the updraft amid buildings.
Names silent in stone
Or cried out behind a door.
Names blown over the earth and out to sea.
In the evening -- weakening light, the last swallows.
A boy on a lake lifts his oars.
A woman by a window puts a match to a candle,
And the names are outlined on the rose clouds --
Vanacore and Wallace,
(let X stand, if it can, for the ones unbound)
Then Young and Ziminsky, the final jolt of Z.
Names etched on the head of a pin.
One name spanning a bridge, another undergoing a tunnel.
A blue name needled into the skin.
Names of citizens, workers, mothers and fathers,
The bright-eyed daughter, the quick son.
Alphabet of names in a green field.
Names in the small tracks of birds.
Names lifted from a hat
Or balanced on the tip of the tongue.
Names wheeled into the dim warehouse of memory.
So many names, there is barely room on the walls of the
heart.*

Please come forward - this is for Vernon Nelson.