

Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church – Unitarian Universalist
Memorial Day Service
Rev. Dr. Morris W. Hudgins
May 24, 2009

Introduction

Our Memorial Service today has a dual purpose: to acknowledge our personal losses and honor the soldiers who defend our country—those in the past and in the present. You will notice two rituals in the service. We will begin with our personal losses, then later honor our soldiers. At the end of the service I will invite you to exit the sanctuary as we go into the Memorial Garden. I have asked Mo Paul to lead us into the garden for the wreath laying ceremony. I see this as a time of meditation and reflection as we share in the beauty of the garden, and as we reflect on the individuals who are memorialized there.

History

First, I want to give you a little history about Memorial Day, first called Decoration Day. It has a long and confusing history. There are over 20 cities across the country that lay claim to being the birthplace of Memorial Day, most of those in the north. Women's groups in the South decorated graves before the end of the Civil War. A hymn was published in 1867, titled "Kneel Where Our Loves are Sleeping" by Nella Sweet. It was dedicated "To the Ladies of the South who are Decorating the Graves of the Confederate Dead."

President Lyndon Johnson declared Waterloo, N.Y. declared Waterloo, N.Y. as the official birthplace of Memorial Day, May, 1966. As one source concludes,

It is more likely that it had many separate beginnings; each of those towns and every planned or spontaneous gathering of people to honor the war dead in the 1860's tapped into the general human need to honor our dead, each contributed honorable to the growing movement that culminated in General (John) Logan giving his official proclamation in 1868. It is not important who was the very first, what is important is that Memorial Day was established. Memorial Day is not about division. It is about reconciliation; it is about coming together to honor those who have their all. (www.usmemorialday.org).

The first state to officially recognize the holiday was New York in 1873. By 1890 it was recognized by all the northern states. There is an irony to the fact that the South refused to acknowledge the day until after WWI, when the day was changed to honor not just the civil war dead but those who died fighting in any war.

I understand why the South refused to honor the original day. Listen to the beginning of the original proclamation:

The 30th of May, 1868, is designated for the purpose of strewing with flowers, or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion. . .

Later the proclamation reads:

Let no neglect, no ravages of time, testify to the present or to the coming generations that we have forgotten as a people the cost of a free and undivided republic.

As we all know the South did not forget the reasons for "the late rebellion." If you live in Richmond you can't help but know that there are different views of that "little skirmish."

There is another debate that has gone on in more recent years. Many people feel the change from celebrating Memorial Day as one day holiday to a three-day weekend has diluted the meaning of the holiday. We will all admit that Memorial Day has become less important to many people, and some would say it is only an opportunity for businesses to increase sales through advertisements.

Conclusions

On Thursday I asked the Active Minds group their memories of Memorial Day as they were growing up and what it means to them today. To be honest, I wondered if the topic would have any interest in the group. I

had some things to say and was ready to share, but it took almost forty minutes before I could get the microphone. The discussion was fascinating as we listened to many different traditions from all over the country. The consensus of the group was a feeling that Memorial Day has become less important and we are all missing out in an important holiday.

I confess, this is my experience. What I wanted to share is that my mother has been decorating graves all her adult life. She collects flowers during the year and on Memorial Day she returns to her hometown of Flora, Illinois, about 100 miles east of St. Louis, to decorate the graves of all her relatives, then she goes to the cemetery where my father and brother are buried in St. Louis to decorate their graves. I have done this with her, and found it very meaningful.

My belief is that it is a basic human need to honor our deceased ancestors. As we look at all cultures, this is an important ritual carried out in many different ways. I have been to Newgrange in Ireland, a passage tomb built thousands of years ago, a place where people gathered from miles around on the Winter and Summer Solstice to honor their dead.

I have been to a small village in Austria where people decorate the skulls of their ancestors. I thought it would be ghoulish but found it to be very respectful and touching.

One of the most meaningful trips I have taken was to France. While there I felt a need to go to Normandy Beach. If you go to France I recommend you visit the cemetery given to the U.S. by France as a Memorial to those who died in WWII. I found it a most moving experience. My father did not die there but did fight in Patton's army in Italy. I saw my visit as a tribute to him and all those who fought or died in that war.

One of the most famous poems written out of WWI is titled, "Flanders Fields" by Lt.-Col. John McCrae. Flanders is a place in England where war casualties had been buried and thus became a symbol of Remembrance Day. McCrae wrote the poem the day after his friend, Lieut. Alexis Helmer was buried. He was not happy with the poem, but another soldier rescued it and it was published in *Punch magazine*. It goes like this:

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved, and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If we break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

Moina Michael was inspired by this poem and wrote:

We cherish too, the Poppy red
That grows on fields where valor led,
It seems to signal to the skies
That blood of heroes never dies. (1915)

May that be so.

Today, I ask you to join me in this Memorial Day service, first honoring all of our losses, then later in the service honoring the soldiers who have died in battle for their country, and also those who continue to serve. This is a time to unite in human sympathy and gratitude.

The first part of the service will be to acknowledge our losses. As you do this I want to especially mention the transition that has taken place in this church. Not only have you lost loved ones, but you also lost two beloved ministers. I encourage you to think about what you missed by their leaving this church last summer. I have placed pieces of paper and pencils in the pews today. I ask you to write down your losses. I have asked the ushers to collect them in about five minutes. If you have written something about David and Leslie Takahashi Morris, I will send these messages to David and Leslie.

I thank you for coming to the service today.