

“Parades, Poppies and Pathos”

A sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
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Brumm brum brum...brumm brum brum...brumm brum brum brum brum, brum brum brum... And so we marched around the bend and back again through the streets of our town under the unforgiving intensity of the Iowa sun. I was one among our high school band, dutifully marching in the Memorial Day parade, from the high school all the way to the cemetery—just a few miles, though it felt marathon-like as we sweat through our wool band uniforms. It was the least we could do for the honored dead, primarily the war dead. There were many in that not so small cemetery, so many graves that bore the flag and many more adorned by flowers from the yards and gardens of my neighbors.

Poppy sales were high, as they always were. As a Girl Scout, I participated in selling them, then just 10 cents a poppy to honor our heroes. I hadn't yet heard the strains of John McCrae's grief turned to poetry.

“In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,

...We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow...

Nor had I yet heard the strains of the hymn inspired by the horrific losses of the Civil War:

“Shall we gather at the river, where bright angel feet have trod,
with its crystal tide forever flowing by the throne of God?”

on into

“Soon we'll reach the shining river, soon our pilgrimage will cease,
soon our happy hearts will quiver with the melody of peace.”

As for “the melody of peace,” it would be a brief fifty years before the shot rang out that signaled the beginning of “the war to end all wars.” Miles to go. Miles to go.

I had learned a white girl’s privileged fraction of the history of my neighbors of color and the shameful history of my ancestors not of color. Surely I had not known about the origin of that day on which I was marching and complaining about the heat and the tedium and the boring speeches in the cemetery. I had not known that the first Memorial Day was born of newly freed blacks demanding dignified burial of the war dead—black and white alike. I hadn’t known that on that day in May of 1865 the long free and the newly freed picked up shovel and rake together

to prepare a suitable burying ground. I hadn't known my bond with the 3,000 black school children who "marched around the course with flowers in their hands singing 'John Brown's Body,'" most assuredly without the complaining that came from me in that northern state that bore its own share of contemporary racism. I hadn't known that just 103 years after the young procession of three thousand marched and sang in honor of the war dead, I would become a war widow, whose mate had fallen in a war that never should have been, as so many never should have been. And I'm not a pacifist—perhaps a pacifist minus one, but not a creedal pacifist.

Once I knew, what then? Once we know, what then?

Once we know the grief of loss not just from war, but the deep grief that swells in our hearts from any loss of a loved one, what then?

We become vulnerable, consciously vulnerable if we allow ourselves to digest what is and what has been. With every death of a loved one, the reality of the bargain that comes with birth arrives through our doors whether or not we choose to open those doors. For all who live, death is inevitable. That doesn't mean we should hasten it along, for ourselves or any other creature. Most especially it doesn't mean that we should not revel in the miracle in which we find ourselves. We speak of the Spirit of Life, not the Spirit of Death. On Memorial Day, however, our own spirits lean toward those who have gone before us. Young people across this nation continue to rat-a-tat-tat their way through the streets of towns small and cities tall in parades that feel hyper-celebratory for the outcomes of humanity's most wretched folly. The mere image of poppies continue for some of us to call forth those paper poppies we sold as children and those soft-petaled poppies of the fields of Flanders, red as "the color of" waving audaciously above grave after grave between cross after cross.

There is pathos at the core of Memorial Day, a swelling of sorrow in the heart if we allow ourselves to enter this vale of vulnerability. There is also a tendency to push the pathos underground amid the marching bands, the flowers for sale cemetery-ready, and the Memorial Day specials at malls paving expanses of this nation for which the honored dead presumably died. To remember a loved one, to honor one fallen to war or illness or the tragedy of suicide or the passage of time, is to be vulnerable.

Listen, the night rain has filled the cupped tulip,

writes my friend and colleague Stephen Schick.

...every drop a gift—people, purposes, pains, and promises,
knowledge, wisdom, and compassion.

In the night the brimming cup has spilled
every drop, an offering—
friends, fellowship, futures, and fulfillment,
insights, visions, and commitment,
loves felt and lives lived.

The rich, dark earth soaks up
every drop, a tearful blessing,...

Life and death are like two strands braided and un-braided, braided and un-braided. On this day of memory and remembering, they are intimately woven. We're here and alive in this time and space. Let us remember those who are not. Let us remember also those whose names are long forgotten, buried in graves unmarked or strewn with weeds and wildflowers. Let us remember in the swelling of our hearts the thread on which we are strewn like beads with every creature living and dead.

And through the grace of caring community, may we who still know the miracle of life light candles of sadness and joy, grief and gratitude, as we share in silence or in the spoken word that which fills our hearts here and now this morning. I invite you to come forth as you will and light a candle.

[Lighting candles in silent or spoken sharing of what fills our hearts today.]

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