

“Taking Our Souls With Us”
A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
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On yesterday’s sunny Saturday, I stepped into our yard to clip a few blossoms of bright coral azalea for our dining room table. As I did so, I found myself filled with the unanticipated feeling that I was going to lay them down on a piece of earth in memory of...I’m not sure whom. Was it the fragility of flowers that I was rendering even more fragile by taking the blossoms prematurely from their stems?

My thoughts reverted to earlier Memorial Days of my life—family visits to the cemetery where my grandparents on my mother’s side were buried, 100 miles distant from our home. Paper poppies had been strewn on the graves of the veterans—veterans of the Korean War, World War II, World War I even. The wars in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and those clandestine conflicts in which our country has engaged hadn’t yet become part of our history. Small pots of native flowers and modest clusters of wildflowers graced the graves of fellow creatures who had enjoyed long lives and of women and men and yes, children, whose lives had been cut short, not so unlike the lives of those glorious azaleas that I had snipped from their stems.

Graveyards hold layered histories. Most of the souls whose remains are interred in the millions of graveyards dotting this earth were never known to us, and so many who were even marginally known to us—as passers-by or casual friends or even early playmates—are lost to our memory. Then there are the graves that will always be unmarked.

Yet Memorial Day marks us.

With a few sprigs of coral azalea in hand, I stopped to chat with our neighbor. He’s a retired Air Force officer and works now at a Veterans Affairs site. “Could you believe, Jan, how many people came up to me yesterday and said, ‘Happy Memorial Day?’”

“I suppose I can believe it,” I replied. “But it’s a clueless greeting.”

“Yeah,” he continued. “*Happy Memorial Day* doesn’t quite cut it!”

“Where have all the flowers gone,” echo those lyrics of the now late Pete Seeger, who was quite alive just a year ago, just a few months ago. Where has Pete gone? We miss him. Pete helped us weave precious pieces of our souls around and through each another in song, as our youngsters wove their ribbons around and through one another and tied them in “a complex, tangled web to the earth,” then reminded us how those that remain are “tangled messily *about* the earth.”

Our songs and our souls are permeable. We are not closed systems. Nor is this earth of which we are a part—soil, air, fire, and water—a closed entity, but so permeable that some say from dust we emerge and to dust we return and others say we are the stuff of stars and it is stardust we shall become.

Life is a miracle, perhaps the most ordinary miracle we know. Death is a mystery, perhaps the most ordinary mystery we know. Is death final? I don't know. Decades ago, in the aftermath of the loss of a dear friend, another friend spoke to me about what he did know. Treading as if into the back rooms of his memory, he spoke: "Years ago I lost my best friend.... I don't know where he is, if he is. All I know is that I haven't seen him since then."

For those of us who are quite alive and live far apart from someone we love, we speak of missing them, sometimes yearning for them. Eulogies aren't yet in order, though it doesn't mean that we can't speak kindly and lovingly of them to others. But for those who belong to a former us depleted by loved ones, who are no longer living life as we know it, there is a yearning, at anniversaries of births and deaths and on such a day as today, to speak of them. There is a palpable longing to in some way bring them to life again by describing a fragment or telling a story of who they were, through lifting up "a piece of their souls" and inviting the rest of us to wrap ourselves in and around that tender strand.

This morning I invite you, as you are so inspired, to consider in silence for a moment a friend, a parent, a grandparent, a cousin, a spouse perhaps, or even a son or daughter, whom you have loved and lost. Hold that person's image in your mind. Recall a time when you were with him, with her, a time when you perhaps had no hint that your prospects for being together were so limited, a time that finds its way into the light of today in the form of a brief description or story, a precious moment, that you would then be willing to share with the rest of us, so that we too may be wrapped for awhile in a piece of their soul and yours.

[Silence for a while]

As you come forward, please take a ribbon and hold it as if it were a soul-strand of the person you are recalling, now threading through your life and ours as you speak.

[Individuals come forward, take a fragment of ribbon, and tell the story of one they have loved and lost.]

[After each person shares, invite the congregation as follows:]

Let us wrap the soul of [name] around our own souls, for death is a mystery, life is fleeting, but love is forever.

[Continue until all have shared.]

Can you hear the echo of the words with which began this morning's worship? Perhaps it is the wisdom of Wendell Berry coming full circle.

We clasp the hands of those that go before us,
and the hands of those who come after us.
We enter the little circle of each other's arms
and the larger circle of lovers,
whose hands are joined in a dance,
and the larger circle of all creatures,
passing in and out of life, who move also in a dance
to a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it
except in fragments.

I wish you a soulful Memorial Day.

Amen.

Sources:

Wendell Berry, "The Larger Circle," in *Singing the Living Tradition*, Beacon Press, The Unitarian Universalist Association, Boston, 646.

Steven F. Smith, "A Little Piece of our Souls," in *How We Are Called: A Meditation Anthology*, Skinner House Books, Boston, 2003.