

“Names, Faces, and So Many Stories”

A Reflection by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
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Farm Hill Cemetery, First Burial 1853, No dogs allowed! Whom might we offend? On our early morning walk, Pablo and I head down the path that bisects this resting ground. Pablo sniffs. You may have guessed that he’s a dog. I pause, regarding the names and dates and the wear and tear on the markers. Some engravings are easy to make out; others have long eroded. The family plots are especially revealing. There’s an ornate headstone for the family patriarch, with his wife or wives beneath him—their names and lifespans carefully carved in the stone. Sometimes there are small stones flush with the ground and arced around the head monument. The most poignant ones reveal a life of a year or two.

In my own time travel I imagine who they were, what they looked like, how they were called—Edward, James, Anna, Martha, or simply Baby. What was a day like for the Edward or the Martha? What impressions did the infant live long enough to take in? I hold for a moment the intensity of grief when such a little one succumbed to an ailment that is likely treatable today, like my own mother’s youngest sister Violet, whom she never knew and from whose infant death my Grandmother never recovered.

Each name engraved was a name that was called, a face that was recognized, a voice that was heard, a story that was a life. Pablo pauses, completely in the moment; I pause, and the moment expands. So it did yesterday as we edged toward the exit. Just to the right of the path were three markers, relatively small; but by each marker someone had placed a red geranium plant. Suddenly my throat grew tight and the tears welled. Every Memorial Day from the year that my Father died at the age of 66 into the year that my Mother died at the age of 100, Mom made sure that one of our family in northern Iowa purchased a red geranium plant for Dad’s grave. Now their remains rest side by side in the modest cemetery surrounded by tall pines outside the hamlet of Armstrong, Iowa. I’m likely one of the few among us to have my Mother with me for so long. It’s only been eight years since her passing, and I still miss her.

When we lose someone we love dearly, a smell, an image, a strain of music, even a geranium plant at a gravesite, can resurrect that longing for their presence. Their face enters our vision once again, their voice echoes clearly, their touch is palpable, and the stories that are our stories too return like old friends.

We remember and we celebrate. A Celebration of Life is the mode in which we honor one among us who has died. For some of you, this rite is fresh, raw even, but hopefully experienced as a rite of farewell that was as comforting as it was grief-filled.

Many of us placed images of loved ones no longer with us on the altar this morning. Some of us shared their stories. Each comes to life again and again with every story told.

The tradition of this day is a ceremonial remembrance of all who have died serving their country—an honoring of war dead. Imagine Charleston, South Carolina, late April of 1865. The Confederates had turned a racetrack into a prisoners' camp. Conditions were horrific. It was the newly freed blacks, who were determined to have a suitable burial for the 357 Union soldiers who perished there. The site would be the racetrack itself. They crafted a sign at the entrance that read "Martyrs of the Race Course"

On May 1st, at nine o'clock in the morning...three thousand black school children marched around the course with flowers in their hand singing "John Brown's Body." They were followed by the women of the Patriotic Association, a group formed to distribute clothing and food to the newly freed slaves, who carried wreaths and crosses for the men.

The official dedication of the event was carried forth by the ministers of all the black churches of Charleston. They read prayers and bible passages while giving birth to an American tradition. By doing such they created meaning for the war in a very public way, which was to be followed by future generations. The grandstand saw over thirty speeches from Union officials and abolitionist missionaries, while the crowd listened to memorials for those who died under captivity.

They too told their stories of lives lived and lost.

Picnics followed the speeches, and the stories brought the dead to life in the only way possible on this spring day that we now observe as Memorial Day.

Yes, this holiday/holy day was born of the reverent and loving behavior of freed slaves, Charleston's black mothers and fathers and children who had survived the scourge of slavery and were intimate with suffering and loss. A century and a half later, I wonder at the vestiges of slavery in this still divided nation. How many young black lives have been cut down in their prime by a system of white supremacy that is as tenacious as we slow it to be. Each life taken is its own story, with a presence longed for, hopes unrealized, and grief inconsolable.

What, I wonder, is the responsibility of grief? What does placing photographs on our altar and sharing our stories call us to do differently? How does stretching Memorial Day into a time to remember all who have perished call us to be? What do we discover in the very act of remembering? How might we go forth committed to mending relationships that are scarred, even broken? How might we move into the balance of this very day committed to deeper listening, harder truth telling, and whatever it takes to heal whatever brokenness we have known?

Might we each pause for the geraniums on the side of the road, for the poppies still waving in those faroff fields, for the lilacs redolent with springs past, and for violets brave and vulnerable.

Might we heed one another's stories and see our faces and those we have loved in one another's eyes. And might we know the transformative peace and possibility that flows from simple sharing.

Amen

Sources:

“Civil War Casualties,” Civil War Trust, <https://www.civilwar.org/learn/articles/civil-war-casualties>

“The First Memorial Day,” told by documentary filmmaker Denis Mueller, who turned to David Blight’s work, *Race and Reunion*, as his source.

(<http://sci.rutgers.edu/forum/archive/index.php/t-34375.html>)