

"Memorial Day—When Will We Ever Learn?"

A Sermon by Rev. Dick Weston-Jones, May 27, 2007

For The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

For "The Child in Each of Us" when our children were present in the service I asked the congregation to stand in memory of ancestors who had fought or been in military service for each major American war going back to the Revolutionary War, and then to sit before I asked them to stand for ancestors or relatives who served in the next major war in our nation's history. There were eleven wars. Then I asked all who had stood for one or another war to stand at the same time. Only one person remained seated, Jean-Michel Margot who was born and reared Swiss. He said the last war involving the Swiss in military service was over 200 years ago. I also asked all to stand who had resisted or protested wars or stood in silent vigil at times of some American wars. About half the congregation stood. Finally I asked all who were veterans of military service to stand and several people stood. I thanked all for their service.

When will we ever learn?

Wars and Memorials and memories are stern taskmasters. They recreate our past so that those who lived through experiences in common as we did, would hardly recognize one another if we could play our memories upon a movie screen and watch them, together. We could as well make up our past.

Ronald Reagan, campaigning for the Presidency in 1980, often told as an historic event the patriotic and soul-stirring story of a brave American bomber pilot shot down in World War II. Reagan said the pilot told his crew to bail out and then rode the plane to his own death as he stayed with his young belly gunner who was too seriously wounded to bail out himself.

It's an appropriate story to remember for Memorial Day, except for one thing. It didn't happen. It was a scene in a 1944 film, "On a Wing and a Prayer," that Reagan admired and told about so many times that he forgot that the source of his memory was that movie and not history at all.

He also told Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir his memory of his own experience filming the Nazi death camps with the First Motion Picture Unit of the US Army Air Corps. His first-hand experience with Nazi brutality touched him deeply, he told Shamir. It was a powerful experience, but it too was only on film. All Reagan's Army film work was done in Hollywood.

Wars, held in our communal memory, are usually times of glory and heroism, courage and fortitude. The boredom and agony, cruelty and degradation go by quickly if they're told about at all.

Our other memories too! If we, the real persons we were, could step out of our private movies and look at the stories we tell—we might balk and say this wasn't how it really was with us at that time at all. Our memories often are dishonest. They keep us dealing with pasts that never were, in order to justify a present that isn't free of contamination. Too often we keep our sense of the present enslaved to our memories.

Clara Barton, our Universalist forebear who founded the Red Cross after her experience in the Civil War and the Franco-Prussian War, was said never to bear grudges. Once a friend reminded her of a wrong that had been done to her years earlier. "Don't you remember?" asked her friend. "No," Clara Barton replied firmly. "I distinctly remember forgetting that."

Maybe that's how it has to be done. Maybe that's the only way to take the power to control our present away from our false memories. Take the power back! Our memories don't always play fair. We want them to tell us what we know, and so frequently what we know will not come to us, even though we know full well what we are trying to remember.

Another of our spiritual forebears, Ralph Waldo Emerson, had awful difficulty with memory as he grew old. He called it his “naughty memory” when it let him down. He would forget the names of things and use strange phrases to refer to them when he forgot their names; when he forgot the word “plow” he called it “the implement that cultivates the soil,” and when the word “umbrella” escaped, he called it “the thing that strangers take way.”

Worse, he could not remember people’s names. At the funeral of his friend, fellow Unitarian Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, he remarked to a friend, “That gentleman has a sweet, beautiful soul, but I have entirely forgotten his name.” I find that failure of memory too familiar myself.

When I read my father’s autobiography I found that he had forgotten my birth entirely. It didn’t bother him that the year 1935 came and went as a rather undistinguished year. It was only when his tale got to 1950 that he started mentioning me, at that time a high school student. He went back in his memory then to remark that I had been born in 1934. Not even the year was right. Where was I all that time? Oh well, I forgive him.

Maybe 1935 wasn’t memorable. Having lived there less than a month I don’t remember it well myself. Still I would have thought he would have remembered. It was important to me.

This Memorial Day, like all others, will be filled with patriotic false memories, with preaching about our brave men, our boys, and in a few places now our women who died in the defense of our beloved country. We forget their names. Worse, we seldom think of the agony of those who died opposed to us, or those who died simply because they were in the way.

I’ve always had trouble with Memorial Day. I think it should be used to remember first the ineptitude of the elders who got their children into the wars that cost the young their lives. Instead it’s often accompanied by fiery declarations of our legacy of courage and the right we had to kill others. We remember them as wrong, committed to wrong ideas and hateful intentions.

Memorial Day was accompanied by misappropriation from the start. Commander-in-Chief John A. Logan of the Grand Army of the Republic, was in Richmond when he saw southern families decorating the battlefield graves of their loved ones. He designated May 30, 1868 as Decoration Day and said it should henceforth be observed throughout the nation as a memorial to the war dead as a day “for the purpose of strewing with flowers or otherwise decorating, the graves of comrades.” Of course the comrades he wanted to remember were the ones, as he said, who “died in defense of their country during the late rebellion.” Not all the war dead!

General Logan said he did so “with the hope that it will be kept up from year to year.” The state of Virginia then declared May 30 to be Confederate Memorial Day, an act that could only be considered continued defiance. Decoration Day began to be celebrated in one state after another until in 1971 Congress changed the name to Memorial Day.

By the 1950’s Decoration Day wasn’t recognized in Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina and Texas even though the Civil War had been over almost 100 years. Those states and a few others celebrated Confederate Memorial Day, in its place. When Logan took May 30 for Decoration Day, southern whites claimed as Confederate Memorial Day, June 3 (Jeff Davis’s birthday) or May 10 (the anniversary of Davis’s capture by Union troops) or April 26 (the day Georgia surrendered to Sherman).

The celebration only partially honored the memories of loved ones. It was even more a re-dedication of the South standing against “The War of Northern Aggression,” as some still call it. There was a celebration last week in Alabama when they got back the long-missing banner of Alabama’s first Confederate infantry regiment. The “Nebraska Grand Army of the Republic” returned the flag they had taken in battle 145 years ago. Confederate Memorial Day is still celebrated today in 14 states including North Carolina.

It's been pretty quiet here this year, but last year the Rebel flag was raised over the Capitol in Raleigh on May 10. The Rev. Herman White, a High Point minister and chaplain of a North Carolina Confederate heritage group prayed in invocation there "Eternal God, God of our Confederate ancestors...I ask you to give us the strength to go against all who would destroy our Confederate heritage." Old memories of war glories die hard.

Clara Barton's wisdom is still needed. Her knowledge of the agony of war was more real than the memory of others who kept Memorial or Confederate Memorial Days. She and her Universalist colleague Mary A. Livermore had roamed the battlefields of the Civil War dispensing aid to the wounded on all sides, Union and Confederate soldiers alike. I honor them.

This Memorial Day I want to remember all those who suffered in the wars of our heritage, and lamentably the wars of our present. I want to remember foot soldiers and officers who died fighting for us and against us, no matter which side they were on.

I want to remember the people who were sent to war and cooperated even when they disapproved of the decision to make war, even though they may have been betrayed by the arrogance and incompetence of their leaders.

I want to remember my father who as a Navy chaplain was in the first ranks of American servicemen to enter Hiroshima after we dropped the atomic bomb on that city, my father who came back unscathed except in consciousness and memory. "Never again," he said to me. "We must never do that to anyone again."

I want to remember the unnamed mother of my grandson Bobby, a young Japanese woman who lived all her life in Hiroshima with unknown damage to her genes before she bore the child who now is part of our family, named for his great grandfather who had walked in the ashes of Bobby's birth city. My grandson now is a living reminder to our family of the horror of war and what we Americans have done and have had done to us.

I want to remember all these, and more, the people who stayed behind in prison, refusing to be part of the slaughter, and the people who stayed behind working to support the war that killed others.

I want to be honest to my memory and flesh it out with the truth of what war has done to us and to all people around the globe. I want to thank people who have stood for freedom and who have spoken truthfully about freedom betrayed, whoever they were, no matter which side they stood on.

Each of us has people to remember. Let us take a moment of silence to think of those we loved and now have lost who were ever scarred in any way by war. I think that may be all the people of the earth who have ever lived.

If you pray, do that. If you go inside in meditation, in thought, do that.

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Amen and blessed be. Let us take another moment of silence to think on those left out, those who opposed us, those we never knew but who were loved by other people, and lost or scarred by wars our loved ones took part in as we supported them.

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Amen and blessed be. I wish that I could say, and know it would be possible, "Never Again." When will we ever learn?

Rev. Dick Weston-Jones