

THE FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF MILWAUKEE

MEMORIAL DAY:

**“We Honor Them All,
Ask Why,
and Look
to a Brighter Day”**

By

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MEMORIAL DAY READING “Memory” by Victoria Safford

Today being Memorial Day Sunday, I invite you to join me in honoring those who have died for our country.

I'd like to begin with a Reading called “Memory” by my colleague Victoria Safford, who writes:

I taught once at a farm school in Vermont, where it was the custom on Memorial Day to visit all the little cemeteries in the countryside nearby. There were many of these – some in churchyards or next to open fields where churches used to be, some on windy hillsides, some hidden far back in the woods, overgrown with brush and brambles... These expeditions were led by the teacher at the school, a native of the town who remembered where all these forgotten places were. Children and teachers together piled into several cars and went to maybe six or seven graveyards in a day. At the entrance to each one, the teacher had us join hands in two rows of ten or twelve and then slowly walk the grounds, looking out for graves of veterans, many marked by little metal signposts but some so old we had to bend and squint and read the wind-smooth stones. They dated to the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, the Civil War, the two World wars, and the Korean War; there were a few more recent monuments to men who died in Vietnam. All of these were interspersed, at peace again, with all the town's civilians.

It was a very solemn kind of game. On finding the grave of a veteran, someone would call out, “here's one, here's one!” and we'd clear the leaves and branches off, replace last year's little faded American flag with a fresh one, and then read out the name and dates. In some of these graveyards there was a little area set off to the side, with smaller stones with no inscriptions – this would be the “colored section,” where in the last century African and Native Americans were buried, or Jews sometimes, or unmarried women who died in childbirth, anyone cast out or unwanted. The teacher always put a flag or two in here, and we cleared all the graves because, he said, “Chances are, someone in here was a soldier; and all of them were people.” Before leaving every cemetery, we'd gather in a circle and some child would play “taps” on the recorder, and someone would read a verse from “[In] Flanders Fields,” and then we'd stand in silence (the loud silence of birdsong and spring wind), till the teacher would say so quietly that you could barely hear him (he was very shy), “Let us not forget,” and we'd move on down the road.

The youngest children with us on those days were remembering things they had not yet even learned, names of people dead in wars they'd never heard of, vast sadnesses their minds could not yet imagine. But even they could grasp it: we were honoring these fallen dead so that someday there would be no more. Together, two dozen souls of mixed age and experience were remembering the future. It was a prayer, though none was spoken.

This concludes our Reading.

MEMORIAL DAY OBSERVANCE

Now, at this time, I'd like to invite you — following that simple, rural Vermont school-house model of yesteryear — to join me in our own Memorial Day observance.

Let me begin by reading one of the simplest, yet most celebrated war poems ever published. It's called "In Flanders Fields" by Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae of the Canadian Army.

McCrae, you may be interested to know, was a physician and a surgeon in the First World War. He hurriedly scribbled this short poem after a dear friend, and former student, Alexis Helmer of Ottawa, was killed on May 2, 1915 at Ypres Salient in northwestern Belgium.

Although McCrae had been a doctor for years and had served in the South African War, the suffering, the screams, and the blood at Ypres Salient were particularly trying. McCrae wrote this poem a few yards away from his dressing station as a way of expressing his anguish after burying his younger friend and student.

READING

"In Flanders Fields"

By Lt Colonel John McCrae, MD (1872-1918)

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 ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

Now if you are a veteran of any of America's wars, or if you are a Conscientious Objector to any of America's wars, I invite you to please stand (and to remain standing, if you would, please).

Additionally, if any of the rest you have (or have had) a veteran or a Conscientious Objector in your family (including your extended family of aunts and uncles, and so forth) from any of America's wars whom you'd like to honor, then I invite you to please stand, as well (and to remain standing, if you will).

We thank you – and yours – for your devoted service to this country.

And now let me invite everyone to please stand (and to remain standing) for "Taps."

MUSIC "Taps" composed by Daniel Butterfield, 1862

And now let us remain standing, please, for a moment of silence.

SILENCE

Friends, let us not forget.

Thank you. Please be seated.

**MEMORIAL DAY:
“We Honor Them All, Ask Why,
and Look to a Brighter Day”
The Rev. Dr. Andrew C. Kennedy**

At daybreak, April 19, 1775, British soldiers shot and killed seven colonial militiamen on the Lexington Common. A patriot handbill declared,

The public most sincerely sympathizes with the friends and relations of our deceased brethren, who gloriously sacrificed their lives in fighting for the liberties of their country. By their noble. . . conduct . . . they have endeared their memories to the present generation who will transmit their names to posterity with the highest honor.¹

News of the bloodshed spread by express riders throughout the colonies. The *Virginia Gazette*, in Williamsburg, Virginia, declared, “The sword is now drawn, and God knows when it will be sheathed.”² It was not sheathed until eight years later when our independence was finally won.

Indeed, in 1783, on the anniversary of that fateful morning on the Lexington Common, George Washington finally ordered a cessation of hostilities between the United States of America and the King of Great Britain. Ending the war, Washington declared, “stops the effusion of human blood, opens the prospect to a more splendid scene, and like another morning star, promises the approach of a brighter day. . . .”³

In the past week, here in May of 2006, morning newspapers reported Pentagon confirmation of seven more American soldiers dead in the field.⁴ That makes about 1,102,000 soldiers – each with a compelling personal story cut short – who have now joined the ranks of those seven who fell on the Lexington Common 231 years ago.

Indeed, sadly, each generation looks back to its own war – the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Mexican War, the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam war, the Persian Gulf War, and now Afghanistan and the war in Iraq.

On Memorial Day we honor every one of those 1,102,000 soldiers who died for their country. We may ask why, and we may look to a brighter day, but we honor every single one.

¹ Taken from a Colonial Williamsburg Foundation ad in *The New York Times*, May 31, 2004, p. A21.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ As of this writing, May 26, 2006, the Pentagon has confirmed seven deaths since May 19 – seven days ago. This includes one soldier who died in Afghanistan. The other six died in Iraq.

II

Why do we honor every single one? Because, as I've discussed before on such occasions, implicitly when our country goes to war there is, I believe, a solemn, unspoken, unwritten covenant that our soldiers make with us. It is deceptively simple. As my colleague (and a Vietnam vet) Davidson Loehr articulates it, the soldiers say, in effect,

I'll risk my life, maybe even lose it, in a cause I can't fully grasp, in a battle that is part of a larger war I'll never [fully] understand. [But] I'll do it for you because I am one of you and you have asked me to do it.

In return, you must promise me two things.

First, you must promise that you will do everything in your power to make sure it is a war that is *worth* my life.

Second, you must promise never to forget. You must promise never to forget me, us, and what we did, because we did it for you. You must promise never to forget."⁵

So, again, why do I suggest that we honor every one of those 1,102,000 soldiers who have died for their country? Because, as Americans, even if we did not — and do not — support the wars of our time — like Vietnam and the war in Iraq — nevertheless, as Americans, we all have a vote. As Americans, we are all citizens of this country. So, those are *our* wars, those are *our* soldiers, and they have fought — and 130,000 of them are *still* fighting -- for me and for you and for all of us.

Now, as many of you know, in an act of civil disobedience, with some other clergy, I was arrested on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday two months before the Iraq invasion a little over three years ago. I was protesting the tragic imminence of the war we have come to inherit. That said, nevertheless, again, those are *my* soldiers over there in Iraq, those are *your* soldiers over there in Iraq, those are *our* soldiers with whom, implicitly, we have made that solemn, unspoken, unwritten, deceptively simple covenant.

And one of the promises we make in that covenant is that we shall not forget. Memorial Day is one of our annually scheduled times to remember, to try not to forget, to keep up our part of this unspoken covenant. And, thus, today, we seek to fulfill this solemn promise by honoring every one of those who have died for our country — whether we have supported the wars in which they have fought or not.

⁵ Loehr, Davidson, "Remembering Those Who Fought For Us," November 11, 2001, First Unitarian Universalist Church of Austin, Texas, www.austinuu.org, pp. 2-3.

III

This brings us, then, to the second part of that deceptively simple, unspoken covenant. First, we are honor-bound to remember them, but, secondly, we are called to do everything in our power to make sure that the wars to which we send them off to fight are truly *worth* their lives. They are willing to fight – and possibly even die on our behalf – but *only* – only if it is a fight worth dying for, only if it is a fight worth killing for, only if it is a fight worth being seriously maimed in body or in mind or in spirit or in all three.

And, here, I fear, is the rub. For in my judgment, our war in Iraq simply does not meet this critically important standard and, thus, it grieves me to suggest that we have broken the unspoken covenant with our soldiers in Iraq.

Senator John McCain, himself a Vietnam vet and former prisoner of war, writes:

It [is] a shameful thing to ask men to suffer and die, to persevere through god-awful afflictions and heartache, to endure the dehumanizing experiences that are unavoidable in combat, for a cause that the country [won't]⁶ support . . . and that our leaders so wrongly believed could be achieved at a smaller cost than our enemy was prepared to make us pay.⁷

Now, McCain is talking, here, about Vietnam in David Halberstam's classic book about Vietnam, *The Best and the Brightest*, but the point is no less relevant today. As Bob Herbert writes in *The New York Times*, "Ask a thousand different suits in Washington why we're in Iraq and you'll get a thousand different answers. Ask how we plan to win the war, and you'll get a blank stare."⁸

In my judgment, and in the judgment of a growing number of Americans along with millions of people all around the world, the pre-emptive, unilateral war in Iraq has been a colossal mistake from the very beginning. Moreover, it has been compounded by unintentional, surely, but nevertheless unbelievable incompetence, on the one hand, and by stunningly international, jingoistic arrogance, on the other hand. Al Gore was right, in my assessment, when he called for the resignations of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, CIA Director George Tenet (who is gone now of course), and then-national Security adviser Condoleezza Rice for, in Gore's words, "having shamed America."

As we knew all along, Saddam Hussein in Iraq had nothing to do with the tragedy of 9/11, although, shamelessly, we were told repeatedly that he did. And there *were* no weapons

⁶ McCain says "wouldn't" here.

⁷ McCain, John, cited by Herbert, Bob, "No End in Sight in Iraq," *The New York Times*, August 11, 2005.

⁸ Ibid.

of mass destruction in Iraq, even though Vice President Dick Cheney famously declared that they knew exactly where they were.

Moreover, I believe history will clearly show that this unprecedented pre-emptive war has done inestimable harm to the United States of America. It has likely created far more terrorists than we faced to start with. It has sullied our international reputation among both our allies and our antagonists. It has killed almost 2,500 Americans so far, and wounded over 17,000 more. And it has killed more Iraqis than the Pentagon cares to either count or estimate, although a responsible estimate suggests that about 40,000 Iraqis have died so far.

In short, I believe we have grievously broken the unspoken covenant with our soldiers by allowing them to die and be maimed, and to kill others, in a war that ultimately has not — and is not — worth dying for.

Thus, it is time, I would suggest, to end this war as soon as possible.

IV

On a more personal note, I confess to you that on three different occasions while working on this sermon, I found myself breaking down and weeping. I wept, I think, for the irreplaceable dead and their loved ones. I wept, as a patriot, for our beloved country gone so tragically far astray. And I wept, I think, for my own helplessness in the face of what I regard as a grievous and foolish travesty. I can only hope that I am profoundly mistaken.

Now, I realize that some of you may vehemently disagree with the views I have expressed here today, but, as always, I thank you for the privilege of allowing me to express them. And I jealously support *your* right to *your* views. For in this church there *is* no one correct view on such matters.

And, finally, as *The New York Times* has suggested, some of America's wars have truly been fought for the very principles that underpin this nation's existence. Others, unfortunately, have not. But let us remember that nothing can dishonor our dead veterans, not even the follies and the failures of the living.⁹

So, indeed, on this Memorial Day Sunday, even as some of us try our best to bring about an end to this war, let us remember those who died for us, "giving," as Lincoln said at Gettysburg, "the last full measure of their devotion." And let us be grateful.

⁹ *The New York Times*, "By the Light of Other Wars," 5/31/04, p. A20, paraphrased.