

“Both Sides of the Graveyard”
by Rev. Meghan Conrad
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Memorial Day is one of those holidays that has always filled me with ambivalence. It summons up contradictory images of decorated fallen soldiers and department store sales, Arlington cemetery and poolside barbeques. Needless to say, it has proven to be a very challenging topic for me to preach on.

I wanted to do justice to honoring the men and women who have died in wars - in the past, as well as our current military conflict in the Middle East.

But there are so many opinions, and so many perspectives; it was challenging to dig deeply into something I truly could speak to.

In the process I tried to approach the subject of Memorial Day from a few different angles, each time finding I ended up with more questions than answers.

But then it occurred to me that I am probably not the only one who struggles with the meaning of Memorial Day. I hope that in sharing with you my grappling, and how I have finally come to understand and embrace this holiday, that you might use this as an opportunity to explore your thoughts.

One of the reasons I struggle with Memorial Day is that there seems to be a strange obfuscation happening, where the meaning of this holiday is being confused with support for the war.

I love my country – I believe in what it stands for – at least on paper. But I have a cringing reaction to what seems like superficial patriotism. All the mindless flag waving leaves a bad taste in my mouth.

But when I unbind “support for our soldiers” from “support for the war” I begin to feel more clarity about this holiday. I realize I can both honor the lives of the men and women lost in combat **and** condemn the choices of our president and military leaders.

I realized that to speak intelligently and thoughtfully I would need to get a broader perspective. I was frustrated that I couldn't seem to get an aerial view of the subject. Every time I thought I might be up far enough I realized that there were points of view that I had not yet considered.

One way I tried to approach the topic of Memorial Day was via the horrors of war. Pointing out the calamities, it would be easy to use this opportunity to make an anti-war sermon.

We all know that war does horrendous things to people. There are people in this room who have been in wars and can attest. Or maybe you've known people who have come home from a war and shared their stories – or by their unwillingness to ever speak of their experiences you can only guess at the awfulness.

I have never been close to war and so I realize I cannot fully comprehend all the violence that is done. My generation's impressions of war have been mostly media-driven, and glorified depictions in movies.

But beyond the recognition of the obvious dreadfulness of war, where do I go from there? It is all well and good for me to say that I am against the violence and horror of war. But who isn't?

The stone-cold reality is that human beings have not yet mastered the ability to solve our problems non-violently. Or are simply unwilling to do so. And there are times, paradoxically, when it seems the only way to keep the peace is by force.

I am idealistic and I would love to believe it were otherwise. But I have to acknowledge that in the world as it is most governments are not yet committed to solving their problems peaceably – least of all ours.

Coming at the sermon from this angle just isn't as cut and dry as I first assumed it would be.

Another approach I tried to take was to honor the principles of the soldiers – lifting up their, bravery, valor and courage – their willingness to make the “ultimate sacrifice” for what they believed in.

Principles move people to make sacrifices for many different causes – for peace as well as for war. Martin Luther King Jr., Jesus of Nazareth, Gandhi, Galileo, Norbet Capek, and James Reeb died for what they believed in with all their heart and mind. Probably many people in this room have made the hard choice to put their lives in harm's way for their beliefs – marching and protesting for civil rights or for peace or the environment.

There is honor and nobility in the willingness to put one's life on the line for a good cause. Commitment to ideals is love in action. Our lives - what we do - are the mark of how well we lived.

I have heard the question posed: “If being a Unitarian Universalist were a crime, would there be enough evidence to convict you?”

That is a great question. Another variation is, “What is so sacred to you that you would put yourself in harm's way?”

The personal model for me was the life my father led.

My Dad put not his life – but his livelihood - on the line for his beliefs. He was a United Methodist minister. Knowing full well that the pension and benefits that both my parents relied on would be in jeopardy, in 1999 he joined 85 other United Methodist ministers in a group demonstration of defiance of the United Methodist Church. All 86 ministers performed the marriage of one lesbian couple.

All 86 of those brave women and men put their careers and their livelihoods on the line for what they adamantly believed served justice. My father finished writing his defense statement just two weeks before he died.

It is right to honor those who lived and died by their principles, but noble principles are not the only reason soldiers fight and die in wars.

People join the armed forces for a huge array of reasons. Some soldiers **are** moved by their principles - fiercely believing they are defending the freedoms of their country.

Other soldiers enlist for economic reasons. They may see no other opportunities for education and job training. Some people were drafted. The reasons people become soldiers are as varied as the people themselves.

From the conversations I've had with veterans it seems the real reason soldiers are moved to attack their enemies in the heat of the moment often has more to do with protecting their buddies in the unit than any lofty ideals of "freedom" and "democracy". It is similar to the passionate selflessness that a mother may experience as she rushes into a burning building to save her child.

And let's face it: many who die in wars are not particularly noble at all. I think of the men who flew the planes into the twin towers. They certainly sacrificed their lives for what they believed – how does that fit in?

It doesn't feel right to unequivocally honor the general human capacity to sacrifice self.

It would be so simple to say that Memorial Day is about honoring all the soldiers who died for some noble cause that they passionately believed in. But it is so much more complicated than that.

So Next, I turned to the historical roots of Memorial Day, hoping by doing so to deepen my understanding of the holiday. I learned that Memorial Day was first declared a holiday on May 30 of 1868. It was originally called "Decoration Day" - A day to decorate the graves of the civil war dead.

Many communities had already begun setting aside a day in spring to remember those who died in the civil war. One of the first of these tributes was in 1866 in Columbus, Mississippi. A group of Southern women went to the local cemetery to lay flowers on the graves of the confederate soldiers who died in the battle at Shiloh, these men were their husbands, brothers and sons.

Once there, they were moved by the sight of the bare graves of the Union soldiers on the other side of the graveyard. So they placed some of the flowers on those graves as well.

Because, they realized, it really doesn't matter anymore.

I imagine I am one of those women, standing there in the cemetery in the southern spring air carrying my basket of flowers. Grave markers are stretching in all directions and beneath each grave lies a young man's body. I look to the far side, where the other soldiers are buried, the ones who shot and killed "our men" and I see the same plain gravestones. Those men are no less dead. My heart breaks for them as well. For their wives and mothers and sisters grieving from afar. It is a simple and powerful gesture – we lay the flowers on **all** the graves.

And to me this is the heart and soul of Memorial Day.

The latest count by one source reports that 3,813 American men and women have died in either Iraq or Afghanistan in the last six years. Another source estimates that between 65 and 70 thousand Iraqi men women and children are dead due to the military intervention.¹

It is easy enough to hold these bleak numbers in mind. And it is tempting to give in to the urge to psychologically distance ourselves from the tragedy by using terms like "casualties of war"

¹ <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/>

and “collateral damage”. And the word ‘soldiers’ or ‘insurgents’ rather than ‘people’.

But Memorial Day asks us, for at least this one day, to pause and bear witness to what these numbers really stand for. Each number represents a person whose life has ended - and a family who now must grieve their loss – and struggle with the meaning of it.

The Washington Post website has a picture of every US military man and woman killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. I scrolled through page after page of pictures of mostly young faces. Many are the formal military photos, with expressions proud and rigid in their stiff new dress uniforms. Others are grinning in casual snapshots. By clicking on each face you can learn more about that soldier, their age, hometown and how they were killed.²

I could find no such website for the Iraqi dead.

I have this frustrating feeling that if I could just get up high enough to see the big picture it would all make sense. And if we all could somehow back up far enough, we would realize our interconnectedness. We would see how clearly we are all one world

² <http://projects.washingtonpost.com/fallen/>

citizenry. There is a quote by Albert Einstein that speaks to my feeling. He says:

"A human being is part of the whole called by us 'universe', a part limited in time and space. We experience ourselves, our thoughts and feelings, as something separate from the rest. A kind of optical delusion of consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from the prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."

In my struggle to make sense of Memorial Day through all the various lenses, I discovered it is both more complex and simpler than I had thought. In the end I realize that there is nothing that can make sense of all the lost lives.

But we must not stop there. Death and war are things we would probably like to shove to the backs of our minds. It would be so much nicer to think of Memorial Day just as the "official start of summer" and a three-day weekend.

But Memorial Day beckons us to continue to examine and question and bear witness to the tragedy of lives lost in military violence.

We owe those who died this much; to think of them and remember them.

And by continuing to keep our eyes and our hearts open we **will** widen the circle of our compassion.

So tomorrow, let us lay our flowers on both sides of the graveyard.

May it be so.