“IN MEMORIAM”

Memorial Day Sunday, May 25, 2014
Rev. Bruce Southworth, Senior Minister
The Community Church of New York Unitarian Universalist

Readings

(1) “Dear Lovely Death”

Dear lovely death
That taketh all things under wing—
Never to kill—
Only to change
Into some other thing
This suffering flesh,
To make it either more or less,
But not again the same.
Dear lovely Death,
Change is thy other name.
Langston Hughes

(2) “What's it going to take? That's the question. We know we need some big changes, but how are we going to get them? I think it's going to take the courage of people who refuse to stand silently by.”

Pete Seeger

(3) From time to time on this Memorial Day weekend, I return to words of a colleague Frank Schulman (1927-2006). He was Minister Emeritus of one of the Houston congregations and a scholar, as well as a preacher and pastor. He writes about his experience in the Korean War this way:

When the Korean War began, June 1950, I was recalled to active duty. I was assigned to the USS Princeton, a large aircraft carrier. We were sent to the Sea of Japan, just off Korea. We participated in many battles.

Our job was to send jets loaded with napalm to Korea. Napalm is jellied gasoline that attaches itself to people and incinerates them. We manufactured it on board the ship.
One day the pilots returned and there was great shouting and rejoicing. They said they had trapped 4,500 people in a valley and napalmed every one of them. There were men, women, and children. They had no way of knowing certainly that they were enemy troops. People in that war didn't wear uniforms.

And women and children might be enemy troops, too, for all they knew. So they napalmed them, and every one of the 4,500 people was killed.

My reaction at the time was, “Well, in a war I guess you have to kill people; but in God’s name do you have to be so happy about it?” Further reflection caused me to look on the whole episode as insanity. Nothing since has changed my mind.

“The IN MEMORIAM”
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Each year, on Memorial Day weekend, my sister in-law and others in her family tend to the graves of her parents and grandparents at the town cemetery in Southbridge, Ma.

With love, respect, and tenderness, they will set flowers in place.

They pay their respects. On a few occasions, I too have been able to visit on this weekend.

I have officiated at graveside services or visited grave sites in Tennessee – where my parents are buried – in Tecumseh, Oklahoma… and in Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, Manhattan, Westchester, the tip of Long Island, New Jersey, Connecticut, Boston and Concord, Massachusetts, and Vinton, Virginia… Like so many of you, so many occasions of Love’s memory.

For me, traditional words echo: "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust...."

So humbling… so fitting… for me so evocative and healing…

Those traditional words help me to keep things in perspective. We are composed of the ashes of decayed stars. Alive, wondrous, and curious, back to ashes and dust we shall go. A sometimes hard, yet radiant truth…

Those words are traditional religious language in our culture, very traditional. And while I find many traditions stifling, these words for me contain great power.
Perspective, a cosmic view… wisdom… humility….

They speak to me of a gracefulness and honesty… And humility. You probably know that the word humility derives from the same root as humus, the rich black, fertile soil arising from decomposing organic material.

Life is transient… fleeting… know this and be free….

In addition, I have been revisiting in my own heart some of the companions whose lives have left their mark on me, and whether now or later, today or tomorrow, or next week, I commend the exercise to you.

Along with revisiting some of the companions of my heart, I have been thinking about these basic matters of a good death and a good life.

Some of the images that come to my mind are of cemeteries. On this Sunday, each year and at other times too, but on this Sunday especially, I think of the grave where my father was buried in 1970. Time and warm memories have done their gentle, healing work, and my heart remembers. July 4, 6:30 a.m., 1970 having finished my freshman year in college, in my summer apartment in Back Bay Boston, I received my mother’s call.

A few days later, we interred my father’s body, and over the years, for many years, annually, I had occasion to visit that cemetery in Knoxville, Tennessee.

I visited for all those reasons that you may do likewise, which may also be akin to the reasons that keep some of us from ever making such visits: Love and loss, finished and unfinished business, loyalty, respect, even at times anger, and affection….

My father’s grave had a simple marker; headstones are not allowed in that modern cemetery. For eleven years now, a new flat piece of marble with bronze lettering spans two funeral plots, with my mother adjacent to her husband, my father. Names and dates, some figurative dogwood leaves etched in bronze … That is pretty much it.

Because we love, care, give ourselves to others, risk, and take down some of our defenses, we inevitably live with loss. Grief may be all consuming at times. We who are here are survivors of loss upon loss.

Quite often, a theological, poetic reflection may not help much, when your quiet presence, or a warm hug, or a firm hand to hold speaks more than any well-intentioned word.

Yet, time and memories also do their healing work, and those of you who may remember a little Latin may recall that the phrase “in memoriam” has an active sense:
“into the memory.” We carry these loved ones into our memories that bless.

We, who have survived thus far, do go on. With time, hopefully, we remember why we are here, and we go on. With time, we can go on with purpose and vision to make this small corner of the universe more honorable, more humane, imparting our spirit of justice and compassion into all that we do, despite the changes, because of the changes, as agents of Beauty, New Life and Justice.

As our hearts remember those whom we have loved, some of the older tombstones have always struck me with a special poignancy.

Tombstone words like this one: "Orrin Rice... 81st Airborne Division... Died of Wounds, Normandy... June 7, 1944." (with thanks to D. Rankin) Too many of these…

As Archibald MacLeish asks in his poem for the “Young Dead Soldiers”, "Who shall remember us?” What the lives and deaths of the young dead soldiers mean depend upon us, the world we shape, and the freedom we honor and extend.

The heart remembers. Precious memories….

And for us… I think of words from Dr. Sherwin Nuland, a physician and author of the best-seller How We Die. Among its gentle wisdom, he offered, "It is not in the last weeks or days that we compose the message that will be remembered, but in all the decades that preceded them.” Nuland died last March and many paid their respects for the life he led.

The day to day living…. Who and what our hearts love shape us, day by day, year by year….

And our hearts – our souls – carry secrets.

One thing I continually relearn is that we simply do not know the depths of other individuals very well, their demons and joys.

Unitarian poet May Sarton once wrote,

There are some griefs so loud
They could bring down the sky,
And there are griefs so still
None knows how deep they lie,
There are old griefs so proud
They never speak a word;

Other griefs, she says,

They never can be mended
And these nourish the will
And keep it iron-hard.

Such griefs may leave us bitter or angry, or stoic, prisoners within ourselves.

Ernest Becker, a psychoanalyst, years ago wrote a book about *The Denial of Death* in our society. I carry with me a brief comment when he spoke about our culture of materialism. He spoke about "shopping – and other evasions of death."

Perhaps, perhaps that is our society most of the time, but there are the tender times for all of us... each of us. Tender times when precious memories of loved ones deceased flood back to us... when we discover that a friend close at hand or whom we have not seen for a long time has died... when we enter those moments when something triggers us to take a moment to ponder our own transience in this universe... our guaranteed mortality... the certainty that we shall die....

An openness and honesty about death may arrive at least for a moment.

Unsettling... terrifying... curious... out of sight out of mind... perhaps different seasons of our lives we react differently... Perhaps we have come to peace... or perhaps only a tentative understanding in our hearts... all of which is normal indeed.

So, we arrive at a Memorial Day weekend, with precious memories, or with denial, with distant memories and little grief, or torn apart at times... For some, the war deaths reverberate.... For others the losses of family, friends... pets... too....

In my own tears of grief, I have been tempted toward self-pity, denial, self-sufficiency and stoicism, and I suspect you too have been tempted toward self-pity, denial, self-sufficiency and stoicism, none of which helps in healing.

Somehow, even if now you are in the midst of some deep grief, I hope your heart knows and remembers that joy comes again, not necessarily quickly, easily. And I hope your heart knows and remembers such love we embrace is not too high a rent for the space and time we are given.

We need each other, and it is so good to have one another....

Not quite 20 years ago now, a colleague of mine – my age – was dying from lung cancer. The Reverend Dr. Kit Howell, Minister of the Lancaster, Pennsylvania U. U. Church wrote about church, community, life and death and change, and first things and last things.

I have mixed feelings about what to do with myself these days. I know I am going to die. The hope of a vaccine solution for my cancer caved in when news came of the cancer getting back in my lungs. I will
play tag with this cancer using chemotherapy (and whatever else I can think of) for as long as I can. I know I want to live as long as I can.

But I also know that death is hard to live with. I know my family and I have hunkered down this summer to lick our wounds, and face the fact that yes, this is our life and this is happening to us. But death is not only hard on families. It can be hard on churches too.... Death is hard. Not polite at all. Scary.

But it is also the way of things. Years ago, when my children were small, we were out to eat once. Rachel ordered what she always ordered – chicken fingers. When it came, it was all fancy with some kind of weird sauce on it. Rachel was dismayed. We agonized over what to do. She scraped the sauce off. It was still yucky (to her.) I found myself saying (wisely or not) to Rachel that yes, maybe it was a bit yucky, but it was her dinner. "This is what you ordered." I said, "You may not like it that much – but it's yours. You don't have to like it, but you do need to appreciate it."

The words haunt me these days. This is my life. It is what I ordered. I didn't expect the weird sauce. I didn't order that, but it's what came. My life has come to me. I don't have to like everything that it came with, but by God, it's my life and I appreciate it. It's mine. And as Laura and the kids tell me, it is also our life. It is ours to love and appreciate and taste and savor every moment. This is our life...

Rev. Kit Howell died at age 44 in 1996.

The wounds – the fact that we suffer and know that we suffer, that we love and loved ones die, that we do not always live up to our nobler selves – these too can reveal a rugged magnificence of the spirit.

Echoing in my mind are words of Abraham Heschel, the great rabbi and activist. Before his death, he was asked what he wanted to advise young people: "Let them remember that there is meaning beyond absurdity. Let them be sure [they know] that every deed counts, that every word has power, and that we all can do our share to redeem the world in spite of all absurdities and all frustrations and disappointments."

And those words of Max Coots – another colleague: “Before the days are gone... I have, yet, a while and things to be, and much to do.”

Many, many years ago, I conducted a Memorial Service for a young man who had no family in New York, yet had a wide circle of friends. Among them was a church member who took it upon himself to plan the service and notify those who might be interested in coming. Friends gathered, memories shared, tears shed and abundant laughter....

Part of my working, daily religion and spiritual life is that we live with losses all the time, but the price for having lived and loved is not too high a price. The pain of loss
is deep, truly, and love – that possibility, that mysterious, creative sacred thing – endures.

The gifts of intimate shared experience… In my heart… In your heart…

During that Memorial Service, which consisted largely of his friends sharing their memories, I could see this same faith conviction at work. Love endures – transcending the particular religious affiliation or non-affiliation of those present.

I mention this Memorial Service because there was a coda, one more piece of the story that I only learned about a year or so later. The young man’s body was cremated, and the ashes were scattered at sea by the captain of a tugboat who had been a friend of the young man.

The spreading of the ashes occurred on a foggy morning with almost zero visibility. Having received a copy of the captain’s log, I have conjured this image and harbored his report in my mind. The form is for a sludge vessel for waste being hauled under license by the City of New York Department of Environmental Protection Water Resources. The report form requires listing the times of casting off, the time of passing certain landmarks like the Brooklyn Bridge or Rockaway Point, and as a sludge vessel, the time the vessel “stopped to dump” and the time of “dumping.”

However, on this form, the words on the log about “dumping” have been crossed out; it says “stopped” at 10:23 a.m. and “finished” at 11:05 a.m. Then under General Notes are these comments:

“Crew secured vessel for sea. At 10:23 in latitude 40 degrees 26.33 minutes north and longitude 73 degrees 47.28 minutes west the vessel was stopped, the crew mustered on the stern. The Reverend _____ officiated as the earthly remains of my friend _____ were scattered into the fog-shrouded ocean. Vessel underway at 11:05.”

I have tried to imagine those 42 minutes when the engines became quiet, to imagine the fog-shrouded silence, the voices of the captain and minister and other friends as they spoke of life and death, loss and love, this one, wild and precious life -- the earthly remains then being scattered in the quiet fog, the rocking of the boat, and finally again the roar of engines. Vessel underway once again.

Amidst the feelings of brokenness, the wounds, the grief, the heartache and the soul-ache, my faith is that there is a larger sacred Creativity, by many names, at work. It is in me and it is in you, a part of me and you. Thus, we are sacred vessels, and somehow, oddly, strangely, amazingly, joy comes again in the morning for those who keep faith with the possibility of Love.
Ashes, to ashes, dust to dust, dirt to dirt, the generations come and the generations go, and there is mystery. And there is the miracle of Life and its intensity, its seasons and transformations. As the Psalmist invokes, “yea, the work of our hands establish Thou it.”

That image of the tugboat in fog-shrouded seas has stayed with me these many years. A few friends had gathered with final words of love – a love that lingers in their hearts and will linger…

That day on quiet sea earthly remains were scattered, elemental things at work, amidst the mystery of the sea, the sea out of which we have arisen to life, to sing, to love.

Shared experiences of Love’s enduring power bequeathed to the living, and once again the vessel is underway with the roar of engines and the churning of the sea. The love, the mystery, the memories, the heartache and the graciousness...

Don’t all of us die too young and “too soon”? (Mary Oliver) And we are each day left with the question about what to do with our “one, wild and precious” lives. All these accompany us on the return journey to solid ground.

Once again, the vessel is underway. Our sacred vessels are underway.

How could it be anything else?

How can we not give thanks for these – these who with us for a short while journeyed toward the sun and whose presence blessed us on our way?