“PRECIOUS MEMORIES”
Memorial Day Sunday, May 27, 2012
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On Friday, I had the occasion to view the Old Burying Ground established in 1635 in Cambridge, Massachusetts and adjacent to 1st Parish Unitarian in Harvard Square. Among those buried there are presidents of Harvard University and paupers and revolutionary war soldiers. The last grave-site added was in 1927, and it was for the 1st Parish Minister Samuel McChord Crothers.

Another cemetery of almost equally old vintage remains a part of me. About twenty years ago on a beautiful spring morning, I stood in a cemetery in New Hampshire for a worship service. It was not a funeral service but morning worship during a ministers’ retreat.

I have always welcomed cemeteries as wonderful places to get some perspective on life.

The gravestones there went back more than 300 years to the 1670s and ‘80s. They included family names such as Webb, Gibbs, Stoddard and Stimson. And there were graves of many infants and young children, as well as of women who died in childbirth.

Surrounded by such witnesses from other days from long ago, I felt powerfully the generations – ashes to ashes, dust to dust, the generations come and go – and as the Psalmist witnesses, “Teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom…., that we may rejoice and be glad all our days… yea, the work of our hands establish thou it.”

All of which gives me a little more depth and perspective to my own pleasures and pains.

This particular New Hampshire cemetery was described this way by Thornton Wilder in "Our Town":

This is certainly an important part of Grover’s Corners. It’s on a hilltop – a windy hilltop – lots of sky, lots of clouds – often lots of sun and moon and stars.

You come up here, on a fine afternoon and you can see range on
range of hills – awful blue they are – up there by Lake Sunapee and Lake Winnipesaukee ... and way up, if you've got a glass, you can see the White Mountains and Mt. Washington – where North Conway and Conway is. And, of course, our favorite mountain, Mt. Monadnock. It’s right here – and all these towns that lie around it.... Yes, beautiful spot up here. Mountain laurel and li-lacks. (80)

... an awful lot of sorrow has sort of quieted down up here. People just wild with grief have brought their relatives up to this hill. We all know how it is ... and then time ... and sunny days ... and rainy days ...'n snow. We’re all glad they’re in a beautiful place and we’re coming up here ourselves when our fit's over....

You know as well as I do that the dead don't stay interested in us living people for very long. Gradually, gradually, they lose hold of the earth ... and the ambitions they had ... and the pleasures they had ... and the things they suffered ... and the people they loved. They get weaned away from earth – that's the way I put it – weaned away. (81)

Amidst the beauty of that morning, death seemed less terrible, more distant, simply part of a larger ebb and flow of mystery and creativity.

Customs vary... personalities vary. Each of us, you and me, we have our own take on cemeteries. At age 28, Ralph Waldo Emerson would walk almost every day the not far distance from Boston to Roxbury to visit the tomb of his wife, Ellen. She had died at age 20 of tuberculosis. On March 29, 1832, fourteen months after her death, Emerson “did more than commune with the spirit of the departed Ellen: he opened her coffin.” (Richardson, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, 3)

Such a thing was not unheard of, although unusual. As one biographer described it, Emerson not only opened the tomb, but also the coffin itself, and the “act was essential Emerson. He had to see for himself.”

For me, precious memories are captured by the poet Conrad Aiken this way... words that bless and grace me, in so many ways when I think of those who have died who were dear to me:

Music I heard with you was more than music,
And bread I broke with you was more than bread....

Your hands once touched this table and this silver,
And I have seen your fingers hold this glass.
These things do not remember you, beloved:
And yet your touch upon them will not pass.

For it was in my heart you moved among them,
And blessed them with your hands and with your eyes.
And in my heart they will remember always:
They knew you once, O beautiful and wise!

“In my heart…”

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... or terrifying... or curious... or “out of sight out of mind”... perhaps in different seasons of our lives, we react differently.... Perhaps we have come to peace... or perhaps only to 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, or 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....

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 – and so often we do: these too can reveal a rugged magnificence of the spirit.

For me, that morning in a New Hampshire cemetery – among other times and places – has come to illustrate for me words of Langston Hughes:

"Dear lovely Death .... Change is thy other name."

It is a radical faith rooted in Life’s process of Creativity and change, God’s way, Life’s way with death a natural adjunct to the gift we have.
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.

And 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.

Time and memories also do their healing work, and those of you who 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.

And we who have survived thus far do go on. With time, hopefully we remember why we are here and 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.

Many years ago, on a beautiful spring morning, I stood in a cemetery in Peterborough, New Hampshire for a worship service.

And a cemetery is a wonderful place to visit in order to shed some illusions, to forgo petty irritations and preoccupations; at least it is for me. To read tombstones arouses my curiosity about others, their hopes, dreams and losses. To sense the generations that come and go. To take a somewhat longer view.

The cemetery where I stood, as I mentioned, was the model for Thornton Wilder for his play, "Our Town." His characters take their names from tombstones there. The play had actually been performed there in that cemetery once; Wilder had written it while at the MacDowell Colony nearby.

Perhaps you know the play, which is in three acts. The first act is called Daily Life. The second is called Love and Marriage, and it is about Emily Webb and George Gibbs, how they met and their decision to marry. The third act includes the cemetery; Emily Webb who had married George Gibbs right after high school has had one son, but now has died in childbirth. She is speaking with Mother Gibbs, her mother-in-law, and others who have also died as they watch her funeral.

Emily wants to go back for just one day. She is counseled not to, but Emily insists.

Ms. Soames says: “Emily, don't (do it). It's not what you think it'd be.”

Emily: “But I won’t live over a sad day. I'll choose a happy one - I'll choose the day I first knew that I loved George. Why should that be painful?”

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Against all arguments, Emily insists, "It's a thing I must know for myself. I'll choose a happy day, anyway." (91)

Mrs. Gibbs: “No, at least, choose an unimportant day. Choose the least important day in your life. It will be important enough.” (92)

And so she chooses not her wedding day, nor the day she gave birth to her son, but her twelfth birthday. And it appears before her. As she watches her mother and her father, she can hardly believe her eyes as they go about their morning routine.

Emily: “I can't bear it. They're so young and beautiful. Why did they ever have to get old? Mama, I'm here. I'm grown up. I love you all, everything - I can't look at everything hard enough.” (97)

Her mother gives her a special gift from her grandmother's belongings and something she had bought her as well. Her father comes into the kitchen with a present too. And then the scene fades.

Emily: “I can't. I can't go on. It goes so fast. We don't have time to look at one another.

“I didn't realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed. Take me back - up the hill - to my grave. But first: Wait! One more look.

“Good-by, Good-by, world. Good-by Grover's Corners.... Mama and Papa. Good-by to clocks ticking.... and Mama's sunflowers. And food and coffee. And new-ironed dresses and hot baths ... and sleeping and waking up. Oh earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you.”

Turning to the stage manager: "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it? Every, every minute?"

And he replies: “No... Some. The saints and poets, maybe – they do some.”

Emily: “I’m ready to go back....” (100)

“Were you happy?” asks Mother Gibbs.

“No, I should have listened to you. That’s all human beings are! Blind people (missing everything)."

Mrs. Gibbs responds, “Look. It’s clearing up. The stars are coming out.”

Emily: “Oh, Mr. Stimson, I should have listened to them.”

And Mr. Stimson answers: “Yes, now you know. Now you know! That’s what it
was to be alive. To move about in a cloud of ignorance; to go up and down trampling on
the feelings of those… of those about you. To spend and waste time as though you had
a million years. To be always at the mercy of one self-centered passion, or another.
Now you know – that’s the happy existence you wanted to go back to. Ignorance and
blindness.”

Mrs. Gibbs: “Simon Stimson, that ain’t the whole truth and you know it. Emily,
look at the star. I forgot its name.”

… And one man among the dead says: “A star’s mighty good company.” (101)

A woman among the dead says: “Yes. Yes, ‘tis.”

And a man among the dead says: “And my boy Joel, who knew the stars – he
used to say it took millions of years for that speck of light to git to earth. Don’t seem like
a body could believe it, but that’s what he used to say, millions of years.” (102)

Emily: “Mother Gibbs?”

Mrs. Gibbs: “Yes, Emily?”

“They don’t understand, do they?

“No dear, they don’t understand.”…

Stage Manager: “Most everybody’s asleep in Grover’s Corners. There are a few
lights on: Shorty Hawkins, down at the depot, has just watched the Albany train go by.
And at the livery stable somebody’s setting up late and talking. Yes, it’s clearing up.
There are the stars – doing their old, old crisscross journeys in the sky. Scholars
haven’t settled the matter yet, but they seem to think there are no living beings up there.
Just chalk… or fire. Only this one is straining away all the time to make something of
itself. The strain’s so bad that every sixteen hours everybody lies down and gets a rest.

“Hmmm…. Eleven o’clock in Grover’s Corners. – You get a good rest, too. Good
night.” (103)

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Precious memories… Shared experiences of Love’s enduring power bequeathed
to the living….

How could we want 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?