“Precious Memories”
Memorial Sunday, May 28, 2017
Rev. Bruce Southworth, Senior Minister
The Community Church of New York Unitarian Universalist

Opening Words

Alice Walker begins the final chapter of her novel The Color Purple with thanksgiving, humility, and reverence:

“Dear God … Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear people. Dear everything.”

Reading

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!

Conrad Aiken

“Precious Memories”
Rev. Bruce Southworth

“Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust....”

I have long had a fondness for cemeteries with a heart of precious memories and a fondness for core elements of Memorial Day, with its tragic witness to human folly of war making.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust… and sometimes, I add for variety and reality: “dirt to dirt.” Plus, there are the familiar words: “the generations come and the generations go” (from Ecclesiastes).
The Psalmist of old prayed this way, “Teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom.”

Those traditional words – dust to dust – are part of funerals and memorial services for which I officiate – this year and for 41 years now of ministry.

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

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

Death is such a natural thing… a matter of reality…. Perspective, a cosmic view… wisdom….

Langston Hughes’ openness and honesty also lure my spirit:

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.

Such a faith, ancient or modern, speaks 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.

And with grief and gladness for the precious ones who have touched our spirits, may we know how precious each moment truly is.

Approaching this Memorial Day Sunday, I recall again a teaching from Zen Buddhist wisdom that I treasure. I have shared it before, and some years ago, I included this image for an interfaith memorial service at Harvard University’s Memorial Church.

A Laotian Zen teacher is speaking with some American travelers about a drinking glass and observed:

“You see this glass?” he asked holding up a glass.
“For me this glass is already broken. I enjoy it: I drink out of it. It holds my water admirably, sometimes even reflecting the sun in beautiful patterns. If I should tap it, it has a lovely ring to it. But when I put this glass on a shelf and the wind knocks it over, or my elbow brushes it off the table and it falls to the ground and shatters, I say, ‘Of course.’ When I understand that this glass is already broken, every moment with it is precious.”

In addition, I have been revisiting in my own heart some of the now deceased beloved 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.

In that, 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. I was eighteen when he had a fatal, second heart attack. Time and warm memories have done their gentle, healing work, and my heart remembers.

Over the years, I had occasion to visit that cemetery in Knoxville, Tennessee annually, for a long, long time, although not too recently.

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, anger, affection....

My father's grave first had a simple marker; headstones are not allowed in that modern cemetery. Now a newer flat piece of marble with bronze lettering spans two funeral plots, with my mother adjacent. Names and dates, some figurative dogwood leaves etched in bronze: That is pretty much it. A single tree, six or eight feet to the side, stands as a solitary sentinel and guide

As our hearts remember those whom we have loved, this day I also honor those who have died in seeking to serve our best values as a nation.... Simple reminders, such as 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 depends upon us, the world we shape, and the freedom we honor and extend.

The heart remembers. And our hearts – our souls – may 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.

Living and dying and doing our best amid all the challenges, we carry on, sometimes with clarity, sometimes distracted…. Ernest Becker, a cultural anthropologist, 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 – perhaps a child, or a parent, or a partner, or a sibling… 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… or, 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 if we stay there.

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.

20-plus years ago now, a colleague of mine – then nearly my age – was dying from lung cancer. The Reverend Dr. Kit Howell, Minister of the Lancaster, Pennsylvania U. U. congregation 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 in the Chapel, 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
  o the time of casting off,
  o the times of passing certain landmarks like the Brooklyn Bridge or Rockaway Point, and
  o 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.”

© 2017 Rev. Bruce Southworth
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.

At such times, amid the feelings of brokenness, the wounds, the grief, the heartache, the soul-ache, and the gratitude, 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 a fog-shrouded sea 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 – precious memories – 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?