

“Remembrance”

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Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation

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It was a small grayish gravestone, set into the earth, surrounded by grass. It shared a resting place with three other stones of the same size, in the center of a small graveyard near downtown Salem, OR not far from where we lived. This pioneer cemetery was where the missionaries were buried, Methodists who came to settle the West. A pastoral place filled with tall cedars and white oaks, ancient trees who, like the First People, were there long before the missionaries arrived. It wasn't the setting that caused me to pause. It was the carving in the gravestone. It said: Mary Gear 1867-1939.

Over time, a visit to this gravesite became a regular part of my walks. Unlike the other gravesites around hers, I never saw any indication that Mary's resting place was visited-no flowers, or balloons or wreaths on Memorial Day. I left flowers on occasion and wondered if anyone remembered that Mary Gear.

We want to be remembered. It is that longing that drives us to leave a legacy. Anyone who had been to an estate sale knows that stuff is transitory; it is memory and love that lives on, like patches sewn together into a quilt. And, perhaps that means that we have an obligation to remember others, to keep them alive in our memories and in our hearts.

Our culture tells us to pretend that we can cheat death and discourages reminders of our mortality. Because of this, we are lost when the inevitable reality of death occurs. And, we are especially lost at times like this when death is ever-present. We, the living, need rituals of mourning and remembering that we can turn to for comfort, connection and peace.

This weekend marks Memorial Day, originally a day to honor those who have died in service to our country, to remember that others have died for our freedoms, and that freedom for all remains an ideal, not yet a reality. In addition to marking the beginning of summer, it is often a time to remember all those who have died.

I've been wondering what Memorial Day means this year. There are many who have served and still serve in the armed forces, some who will not return home, even though we are not formally at war. We remember them.

Many of us have lost loved ones in the past year or years before, and we may be remembering them this weekend. The usual and traditional losses are still present.

And yet, we are now approaching 100,000 reported deaths in the US from the novel coronavirus, more Americans have died than in all the wars since 1950—Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan. Close to 350,000 people have died around the world. And, I wonder: will we remember them? The musician, the butler, the mail carrier, the doctor, the grandmother, the grocer, the pastor, the bus driver. Will we remember them through the songs and poems and art inspired by this time? Will it be the images we see on screens? What stories will we tell of this time? What meaning will we make of their lives and their deaths?

In the Jewish tradition, a community gathers together to mourn someone's death by sitting shiva. The grieving family remains at home while their community gathers around them, sitting with them to share stories and memories, tears and silence. The community sets aside time to create a safe and nurturing space, a container, for everyone to feel the loss and grieve in their own time.

Journalist David Nolpe suggests that we as a nation and as a world right now are sitting shiva. We remain in our homes, gathered as a global community, sharing images and stories. In this time of transition, thousands of people are dying, and with it, for some, the ability to deny inequity and injustice is also dying. It takes a lot of energy right now to turn away from the fact that communities of color are suffering the most from the health and economic ravages of the novel coronavirus. It takes a lot to ignore the fact that some are profiteering from disaster while others are starving. It takes a lot to deny that some are grasping for even more power while many are feeling powerless. We have the opportunity to sit together, to create a safe space to grieve the people who are dying, and to grieve the flaws in our system that allow inequity to persist. We can share stories. We could pause to acknowledge the loss and allow the grief. And, we could honor the lives of those who have died by building a just and equitable vision for the future.

When I belonged to the UU congregation in Lansing, Michigan, I led a covenant group at a local assisted living facility where several of our congregation's elders lived. We would gather every other Saturday morning for a few hours to talk about whatever was on our minds and in our hearts. Because of where we were, the topic would often turn to death and dying. One Saturday we had an especially lively discussion when a poet and a retired doctor had a bit of a disagreement about when we are dead. The poet said, "It's very simple. We're dead when our heart stops beating, when we stop breathing, when our brain shuts down. That's when we're dead." Yes, the poet said that. The doctor replied, "Oh, I disagree. I believe we are dead when the last person who remembers us passes on."

Those of us who are living have an obligation to remember those who have died.

This Memorial Day weekend will, for some, include a visit to a gravesite to honor a loved one, to remember, to grieve, to enjoy nature, to be reminded of our mortality and the gift of life, to be filled with wonder at the mystery of life and death. There are many ways to remember those who came before us. Not only the one-time rituals that mark the transition, not only on Memorial Day, but every day. We remember them with stories and photographs, with songs and poems. We remember them with our actions as we work for peace and justice in the world. We tend to their memories like we tend to gravesites, keeping their inspiration present, so that we can keep our hope for the future alive.

I invite us now to take a moment to reflect on the memories that we are tending and the future that we are called to create.

Let's settle in wherever we are. Feel all the ways that we are held in body and in spirit. Take a breath in and out. Soften your gaze or close your eyes if you are comfortable.

Infinite Web of Life, Spirit of Love, Great Mystery,

We enter into this Memorial Day surrounded by a cloud of witnesses.

We remember those who are currently serving in the armed services and we pray for their safe return.

We also pause to give thanks for all who have served in the armed services.

Those who have not served in combat cannot fully imagine the experience of war and conflict, but we do know its aftermath and the toll that it can take on the human heart.

We pause to honor their service and their sacrifice.

(Silence)

On this day we pause to remember those whom we have loved and lost. We hold their names and their faces in our mind's eye. We recall the gifts they gave to us through the strength of their being, the depth of their love, and the fullness of their living.

As you bring into your awareness those who you are remembering today, I invite you to bring them into this space by speaking their name, in a whisper or out loud. Speak the name of someone beloved to you, lost in physical being, but not lost in the love in your heart.

(Silence)

Together we hold the memories of all those we have loved and lost.

Let us pray with these words from Dr. Maya Angelou as interpreted by Rev. Dr. Terasa Cooley:

When great souls die, the air around us becomes sterile, light rare. We breathe briefly. Our eyes briefly see with a hurtful clarity. Our memory, suddenly sharpened, examines, gnaws on kind words unsaid, on promised walks not taken.

Great souls die, and our reality bound to them takes leave of us. Our souls, dependent upon them, upon their nature, upon their nurture, now shrink wizened. Our minds formed and informed by their radiance seem to fall away. We are not so much maddened as reduced to the unutterable silence of dark, cold caves.

And when great souls die, after a period, peace blooms, slowly and always irregularly. Spaces fill with a kind of soothing electric vibration. Our senses, restored, never to be the same, whisper to us. They existed. They existed. They exist in us. We can be. Be and be better. Larger, kinder, truer. For they existed.

May this be so. Blessed Be. Amen

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With gratitude:

Dr. Maya Angelou, from the collection, "I Shall Not Be Moved" adapted by Rev. Dr. Terasa G. Cooley.

Meditation adapted from the words of Rev. Wayne Arneson.