



Sermon

Given that Memorial Day has its roots in the Civil War, which tore this country in two; it's not surprising that Memorial Day has two histories. In the south, Memorial Day started before the end of the civil war when southern women began laying flowers on the graves of loved ones killed on the battlefield. In the north, Henry Welles of Waterloo NY spoke to General John Murray about establishing societies to commemorate the fallen. Murray began doing just that, and the first Memorial Day was issued by General John Logan in May 1866. Northern states unanimously accepted the holiday. The south mostly refused to follow suit, and even today there are several southern states that have a separate day, often called Confederate Day, to honor those who have died in military service.

For most Americans, though, this is old history. Memorial Day is the first long weekend of summer. Here comes the sun! Parks are filled, the smell of BBQs waft through most neighborhoods, and shoppers indulge in a slew of Memorial Day sales. It is a great time to buy an appliance! The Civil War is far away. There is almost no living memory of World War I and less and less of World War II. The Vietnam War is still so clouded with controversy it is cautiously referenced in the political sphere. And then there are our most recent wars – Desert Storm, and now the War against Terror, focused on Iraq and Afghanistan, wars that the American people, the majority of whom thirsted for war and vengeance after 9/11, now are tired of and wish would go away and stop costing so much money. And yet the deaths continue. A war which was supposed to be over in a matter of months has now lasted almost as long as World War I and II combined. And there are now families who are fresh in grief for loved ones lost, loved ones permanently disabled and for loved ones who come home haunted by what they have experienced. We have a fresh reason to recognize Memorial Day.

But just as commemorating the Civil War was no neutral thing, never could be, never will be, neither is commemorating those who are dying now, because there are deep divisions in this country about whether this war needed to be fought this way. There are questions in civilian and military circles about whether our soldiers are fighting for freedom or power, for democracy or oil, for justice or vengeance. There are some who suggest these questions should not be asked because it dishonors those who are serving, demoralizes them, but I would say that what is more demoralizing is to be misled and to have your willingness to serve and put your life on the line misused. So it is immoral not to ask the questions, and if we think those who are serving aren't already asking them, we're just not listening.

One of the reasons that Memorial Day is so seldom recognized in Unitarian Universalist congregations is because we are unsure of how to wade into this emotional and morally volatile territory. It's no secret that the majority of Unitarian Universalists deeply questioned the invasion of Iraq. It's no secret that many Unitarian Universalists protested the Vietnam War and went on to be integrally involved the peace movement, specifically focused on nuclear disarmament.



Emerson UU Chapel, Ellisville MO

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We also have an uncomfortable history with government authority. During the McCarthy era, often called the Second Red Scare, many Americans became convinced that we were being infiltrated by communism. Many Unitarian Universalists came under fire. We were artists, intellectuals, teachers, writers, free thinkers, unionists, libertarians. Our ministers preached against McCarthyism from their pulpits, our seminaries debated it, our churches clamored for freedom of expression, and so our people were watched. Some of us were accused of treason. During the 1940s and 1950s Canadian Unitarian churches experienced an influx American Unitarians who refused to sign loyalty oaths. During Vietnam many draft-dodgers filled Canadian Unitarian congregations. What did this do for UU relations with the military? It has often been seen as an arm of government intrusion into civil liberties and freedom. And many UUs still carry that sentiment, a sentiment that is often supported by the way we understand our theology.

In a religion that is non-hierarchical, non-creedal, that valorizes doubt and questioning, it is hard not to be critical of an institution that is structured along rank and lines of authority that institutionalizes obedience to a chain of command. In a religion that holds up the interdependent web of all things, it is hard not to be critical of an institution whose purpose is to be prepared at any time to engage in war, which so often seems to tear things apart rather than bring them together.

And yet, in the midst of this theological undercurrent, how many in our congregations have served in the armed services? I did a count in our congregation, and at least 15-20% if not more of the membership of this congregation has either served in the military or is the spouse of someone who has served in the military. This congregation also has a core of families in which at least one member works for Boeing or its subsidiaries, or the Department of Defense. So the ministries of this congregation depend on pledges that are paid from incomes that are military related.

So you might be wondering, how does this work? We have a religious tradition that has become institutionally anti-military, and yet has a substantial population of individuals, beloved members of our communities, who have been in active service or work in the military industrial complex. Well, one thing I do know is that it is often very difficult for those individuals to find their place in Unitarian Universalism. I have a friend, Rev. David Pyle, who is a Unitarian Universalist military chaplain, and he has been told on several occasions that he does not belong in Unitarian Universalism. Even in seminary, where you would think there would be more acceptance of ambiguity and difference, his classmates questioned him and he often found himself having to justify his life's choices.

It was no easier inside the service, where the majority of military chaplains are conservative Christians. Many UUs in the military find themselves questioned and judged because there is an assumption that to be religious is to be Christian. There is also the assumption that true



patriotism is only the kind where God and country are one and the military is an arm of that alliance. Most UUs in the service simply don't see it that way. For them patriotism is a dynamic process of both pride and questioning, loyalty and free thought. And so for our women and men who have made the choice to serve, they are often caught in a double bind – between the culture of Unitarian Universalism and the culture of the military, neither of which can fully affirm them.

David Pyle believes that Unitarian Universalism needs to refresh its affirmation of diversity. We need to reaffirm the diversity of the moralities within our movement. If we cannot fully affirm the men and women who have committed their lives to military service, we should see that as a canary in a mine, a sign that we are failing our faith as a whole. This doesn't mean retreating into silence and not talking about the differences. It means being willing to be uncomfortable and to have all our truths on the table.

So let me put a little of my truth on the table. I am Mennonite, which means I was raised in the peace church tradition of pacifism. I was taught that military violence of any kind is against the will of God and one of the deepest forms of sinfulness. And when I found out that I had scheduled myself on Memorial Day, I got really nervous. I've always managed to take this Sunday off, and here I was. What was I doing to do? So, a few weeks ago I got in touch with Claudia Hall, a member of this congregation who has an active ministry with Iraqi vets and their families, and asked her to help me, and last week she sent me a great file full of material she had written. Opening words, chalice lighting, stewardship moment, even my prayer. And I opened it up, and read it, and went, oh my, I can't say these words. I am a pacifist and am morally opposed to the paradigm that violence creates or protects freedom. What am I doing to do about this? How can I talk to Claudia about this?" I decided to tell her how I was feeling, and thanks to Claudia's openness, we had a very respectful exchange. She didn't judge me and I didn't judge her and I decided that even though I may disagree with some of her words, they have a right to be spoken, because we have an obligation to honor our moral diversities, and thereby honor those who choose to serve, and may sacrifice their lives in doing so.

This, I think, is what David Pyle is asking for. For the right to be respected for his life choices and to have that choice reflected in his faith tradition.

David Pyle also says that the military needs Unitarian Universalism with its central commitment to affirming the interdependent web of all existence. Listen to what he wrote in a sermon he called "Embedded War": "Our Unitarian Universalist Vision of the world is radically different from the culture of war we are currently living in. The culture of war depends on the ability to see others as inherently different, and often less than yourself. The culture of war depends upon the ability to separate your own path in life from the lives of others. The culture of war depends upon the ability to see the web of human relationships as distinctly individualistic, not interconnected with all of existence.



I believe that, as Unitarian Universalists, our mission is not to expend our energies, our vision, or even our political capital opposing any particular war... but rather in helping to heal our world, from the largest nation to the smallest heart in a newborn baby, from the culture, the hell of war that infects us all." <http://celestiallands.org/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?t=103>

When David goes to work, he strives to embody that vision of radical interconnectedness in every engagement with the people he serves, planting a vision he trust to heal hearts and minds and ultimately, whole institutions and nations. David waits for the day when military intervention is no longer needed but doesn't expect to see it in his lifetime. While angered by the way he believes the military has been misused, they are his people. They are him and he is them because ultimately we are all one.

This morning we are going to celebrate a uniquely Unitarian Universalist tradition, the Flower Communion. Its history is a simple and yet not simple one, not unlike the history of Memorial Day. In the 1930s and 1940s, Norbert Capek, a Unitarian minister in Czechoslovakia, along with his wife Maya grew the largest Unitarian congregation in the world. This was a brave act. Czechoslovakia was politically unstable. The Catholic Church was interwoven with state power and to be a dissident church was risky. Even within his congregation, there was trouble. Some members wanted nothing traditional in their new church. Others wanted to reclaim the traditional and make it meaningful in their new faith. The factions were so divided they measured everything Capek said as to whether it supported their position. Capek was frustrated and demoralized. He believed in the saving power of this free faith, and yet its moral imperative of respect and acceptance of was eluding his congregation. One morning, while walking to church, he saw fields of flowers and had an idea. He picked armfuls of them and placed them in a vase at the door of the sanctuary and said something like this: This vase of flowers is this church. All of you are beautiful, unique, and in possession of truth and wisdom. We need all of you to fill this vase. And you need everyone here, so when you leave, take a flower with you and think on the truth and every person here is a gift to be valued and treasured and we must find a way to leave together in peace, for we are one.

We celebrate the Flower Communion to remind ourselves of that truth. In our congregations we argue and we laugh, we disagree and we agree. Sometimes our choices are strong, other times they are weak. Sometimes we act out of love, other times out of fear and anger. Sometimes we feel close, other times more far apart. Sometimes it is easy to be a member of this congregation, sometimes it is not. Sometimes our moral values seem to fit together like a glove. Other times we have to work harder to feel our oneness so that the larger truths that we seek to manifest become real within and among us.

Let us offer this gift to one another and to our world, which so needs the healing message of our radical interconnectedness. Amen and blessed be.