

## **They Are With Us Still**

### **A sermon for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation**

**Delivered on May 28, 2017**

**By The Rev. CJ McGregor**

Beginning as a ritual of remembrance and reconciliation after the civil war for those lost in the war, Memorial Day became an occasion for more general expressions of memory by the early twentieth century. Ordinary people began visiting the graves of their deceased relatives whether they had served in the military or not. In my case my birthday usually falls on Memorial Day weekend and my family told me that all the fuss and parade down Main Street each year was for me. That was until, in older brother fashion, my brother elbowed me in the ribs and said, "This isn't for you, stupid. It's Memorial Day." In a state of disbelief, knowing in my heart that I deserved a parade, I ran home, pulled the encyclopedia labeled M, rushed through the pages to Memorial Day, and there it was. Memorial Day. Just as my brother revealed. That's ok because he wet himself as a cub scout marching in the parade. The joke was on him.

I might have shared with you that I was raised by my paternal grandmother as my mother had an untreated mental illness and could not, or should not, have raised me. My grandmother and I spent lots of time together. Time that I am grateful for and cherish. She died nearly eleven years ago. My grandmother was creative and came up with all kinds of activities for us to do together. She taught me how to cook, we created scrapbooks with homemade paste and Montgomery Ward catalogs. We had several scrapbooks: one for birds, one for flowers, and one for cakes. A cakes scrapbook was my idea. It's interesting that today I love birding, gardening and plants, and of unfortunately cakes. We would play records on what she called a "Victrola" and I would read the stories printed on the inside of the record jackets to her. She listened even though I had read many to her a dozen times. She collected scented soap, and would you believe that she had a steamer trunk full of it? The soap was shaped like fruit, animals, cars, flowers, insects, and vegetables. A few times each year we would drag the trunk to the living room, open it and smell the soap and handle the shapes. We used her old aprons and made braided rugs, we hung up her laundry on a clothesline together, washed the dogs, and worked in the vegetable garden for hours, with breaks of course.

One of the most interesting activities we did together was our annual pilgrimage to the cemetery to visit those we had loved and lost. This activity was an undertaking. Pun intended. Before we could visit our 631 deceased relatives we would first need to gather the simple gifts we would lay at each grave. I don't know if it was a fad of the nineteen-seventies or that my grandmother gave up on real bouquets just as she gave up on the Catholic church and my grandfather in the seventies, but we would always buy the artificial and plastic flowers that had been fashioned into crosses or wreaths, maybe even Elvis! I was old enough then to choose those we would buy. Then I thought I was special and privileged to be given this task, now I wonder if she was pushing it on me because she had been choosing for far too long. Once we gathered all our synthetic offerings my grandmother made a call to her best friend Elsie. My grandmother was divorced and Elsie was widowed. When my grandmother died she and Elsie had known one another for over 70 years. Elsie arrived with her green Volkswagen Beetle and we loaded our treasures in the trunk, which was in the front of the car. I will always remember riding in the backseat of Elsie's Volkswagen with my grandmother's chihuahua, Tina, who constantly lapped at my

ears as we both stuck our heads out of the window. The car had plaid interior and always smelled like one of the boxes of soap my grandmother and I would pass back and forth from her trunk. It smelled of lavender. To this day I love the smell of lavender.

Elsie drove us from cemetery to cemetery every year on Memorial Day. Every year we would go through the same ritual. Tina, however, had to stay in the car. She didn't understand the part of the protocol where it's not considerate to relieve yourself in the cemetery. I learned that long before Tina did. We placed our faux flowers at each site where a loved one was buried. Of course, it would have been to convenient for my relatives to be buried in the same cemetery. No, we visited every Catholic cemetery in the area. This was an all-day event. When I was thirteen I asked my grandmother why we did this? Wasn't she getting tired? I remember what she said almost word for word. I could see the outline of her face as the sun was behind her and I was looking up as I was on my knees stabbing a plastic cross into the ground. She said that the annual road trip was a time to remember. It was a day to remember these people, their names, and their stories. She said it is a way to keep their names on our lips and their memory in our hearts. As a minister when someone in a congregation I am serving dies, I always say, "May their memory remain in our hearts and their name on our lips." I didn't realize the connection until a few years ago.

Essayist Thomas Lynch tells us, "Finding what is lost is really important. It's essential. It's fundamental. Remembering and memorializing those we have lost is a basic part of living a life of meaning." It is easy for us to sometimes escape this task. We associate pain, grief, and fear with remembering and memorializing." These associations are very good reasons to escape and we can live perfectly well in avoidance, at least that is what we tell ourselves. If we are to be honest we would agree that avoidance is perfectly fine in the short term, but if we live there it is dangerous and soul draining. Think about whether you, we, live a life where we avoid people, places, and things because it will be uncomfortable otherwise. Is this really living? When we lose someone we love we can still be in relationship with them. Donalie Benyak reminded me on Facebook this week that our dear ones live forever in our hearts. Yes, The relationship changes, but it remains a relationship nonetheless. Let us make sense of this using the words of poet Henry Scott: *"Death is nothing at all. I have only slipped into the next room. I am I and you are you. Whatever we were to each other that we are still. Call me by my old familiar name. Speak to me in the easy way you always used. Do not change your tone or have sorrow in your voice. Laugh as we always laughed. Play, smile, think of me, pray for me. Let my name be ever the household word it always was. Let it be spoken without effort, without the ghost of shadow in it. Life means all that it ever meant. It's the same as it ever was. What is death, but an accident. Why should I be out of mind? Because I am out of sight? I am waiting for you somewhere very near, just around the corner. All is well. Nothing is past; nothing is lost. One brief moment and all will be as it was before. How we shall laugh at the trouble of parting when we meet again."* Sit with these words. Let us not apply theology, but simply sit with the idea. Scott implies that we continue to be in relationship. If this is the case then remembering is not only maintaining relationship, but is fundamental to finding what was lost.

On Memorial Day a door opens. We have the opportunity not only to remember the dead, but to reconcile relationships, deeds, and unfinished business with those who we have loved and lost in both the dead and the living. We can reconcile missed opportunities to be in right relationship with those we love. As a hospice chaplain, I was in the reconciliation business. It was one of my goals to encourage the dying and their family and friends to engage reconciliation before the loved one is lost. There is inevitably issues, feelings, and situations, that have not been reconciled in our lives. If we shrug away or have missed the opportunity to work through these stressful and spirit draining situations in the past

then Memorial Day can be a day of reconciliation for us. Let me tell you how this has been true in my life. I've told you that my mother was unable to parent a lot of the time. Because she was unavailable I pinned feelings of judgement to our relationship. I loved her, but didn't like her. When I was twenty-one she died and I had missed the opportunity to clear the air; to reconcile our relationship. A decade later I realized I could still reconcile our relationship even if my mother wasn't alive. I didn't need to carry those toxic feelings around. I simply needed to understand my mother's perspective. It wasn't easy and it took time. She didn't want to be sick. She didn't want to be absent. She didn't want someone else parenting her child. Recognizing that her illness prevented her from being in my life as a child and that it was not her will allowed me to become healthier emotionally and spiritually. Just as Memorial Day can be for remembrance, it can also be a starting point for reconciliation.

Let us not forget the original meaning of Memorial Day. Sadly, these days Memorial Day holds the promise of an extra day off work or school. It marks the opening of swimming pools and gatherings around the grill for parties with family and friends. There are requisite parades of scout troops and baseball or softball teams, local politicians and old-fashioned cars, marching bands, and in some towns, the reciting of long-ago written words that may or may not mean anything to the sixth graders who memorized them. Memorial Day has come to represent the beginning of summer with a dutiful, but nominal nod to its original purpose. Since its official inception in 1868 the day was originally called Decoration Day for the practice of decorating the graves of soldiers with flowers in honor of their sacrifice. Today this day is less about those who died in battle and more about the fun and mayhem of the summer months which are waiting just around the corner. The day off has become focused on the logistics of food and fun and our parades have become about determining who walks in what order. For many, Memorial Day has lost much of its seriousness and its magnitude. I'm not saying to boycott the picnic that awaits us. I am saying that it is right to celebrate as well as remember the sacrifices many have made.

The Rev. David Takahashi Morris writes, "Growing up on military bases I remember Memorial Day as a time when we went over to the fort for a parade and a picnic, and we kids got to climb around on tanks and little jets. A few years later, I remember playing 'Taps' on my trumpet, wearing my Boy Scout uniform, standing on a railing above Punchbowl Crater in Honolulu while a few hundred people listened in the military cemetery on the crater floor. It was a powerful experience, and the solemnity of it resonates for me all these years later." "Things have become complicated since then," he continues, "Vietnam taught me to look critically at war, and later as I learned about the way in which even the 'great' wars were open to question, this holiday lost a lot of its luster for me, as it has for many in liberal circles. For many Americans Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf invasions, and for some even the world wars, don't represent our country's best values." Maybe Takahashi Morris is right, that things have become too complicated to celebrate Memorial Day with a clear vision and a clear conscience. Maybe we've become ambivalent about military service and war in general. Maybe we've grown skeptical and uneasy around the idea of young adults, barely adults really, dying in foreign lands for reasons not quite clear to us. Maybe we distract ourselves with sales on grills and wading pools, 2 for 1 deals at the grocery and 0% down at the big car dealership because war itself seems so far away and unreal. Maybe it's that avoidance I mentioned. What we have lost in the demilitarization of Memorial Day are the soldiers. We have been diverted into behaving as though this day of memory is more about hot dogs and salad than about remembering. Remember we must, for to do any less is a disservice not only to those who gave their lives but to what they gave their lives to protect and to support. Memorial Day requires us to take a moment and pause to honor and remember all those, no matter which side of battle they fought on, who gave what Abraham Lincoln called, "the last full measure of devotion."

Let us stop for a moment. Let us honor those who have served and sacrificed and let us honor all we have lost, some of their names spoken here this morning. I pray that you will take the journey in the backseat of a 1970 Volkswagen with plaid interior and a lapping chihuahua. Take the journey to remember those you have lost and find a continuing relationship. Take hold of this opportunity for reconciliation and return to harmony.

May it be so,