

There is More Love Somewhere

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The following was written by the British poet, Richard Aldington, who as a young man served in the military during WWI.

“We pass and leave you lying. No need for rhetoric, for funeral music, for melancholy bugle-calls. No need for tears now, no need for regret. We took our risk with you; you died and we live. We take your noble gift, salute for the last time those lines of pitiable crosses, those solitary mounds, those unknown graves, and turn to live our lives out as we may. Which of us were fortunate — who can tell? For you there is silence and cold twilight drooping in awful desolation over those motionless lands. For us sunlight and the sound of women’s voices, song and hope and laughter, despair, gaiety, love — life. Lost terrible silent comrades, we, who might have died, salute you.”

Tomorrow is the day set aside for all to salute the noble gift of every soldier who went off to war and never returned.

Once known as Decoration Day, we have been reminded on our Facebook feeds, by the television, perhaps by our association with family or friends... that tomorrow is about more than outdoor grilling. Real people have been affected by the kind of loss that war inevitably brings. The sacrifices of life and limb that comes with military service deserves to be acknowledged, remembered.

Yet, it has not been routine for me, and perhaps not for many of us who call or would call ourselves UU, to pay much more than passing tribute to Memorial Day. Perhaps, it is time to really ponder what it means to salute those who serve.

It seems to me that those of us of a certain age and of a certain political persuasion have been in a kind of stupor when it comes to whether or not, or how, to honor military service. It is as if we all metaphorically chose to move to Canada to escape the need to deal with it!

For years, I have walked around, rather than through, this opportunity to look at the sacrifice of those who choose military service, to think of those who willingly risk dying as noble.



Perhaps that is why the photo on the front of your order of service caught the attention of peace-loving-liberals, like me. Perhaps we wish to be like hopeful children...

Too often we adults pretend to be immune to the cost of our privileges, all those freedoms that we all enjoy, be it in varying degrees.

Maybe, for some of us it is just too much of a puzzle to figure out why women and gay men and UU's choose to serve what in our minds we still think of as "the killing machine"? Not being able to figure that out, we distance ourselves...

It is a choice we think we would never make... never understand... never respect.

Yet, here is a picture and a story that many of us find appealing...

Perhaps it can cause our eyes to tell our hearts to tell our brains to think again, to reconsider...

That photo was taken less than a month after the Civil War ended. It is of school children in Charleston. Maybe if you saw it on Facebook, you read the claim that this is the depiction of the first Memorial Day. That may or may not be quite true, as this occasion may have not been the first and certainly wasn't the only commemoration of war dead. Nor was it likely the one that led to a declaration that called a national Memorial Day into being.

Nevertheless, this is a real photo (not a photo-shopped one) depicting three thousand Afro-American children. As the Charleston newspaper reported at the time, a group of just 27 Afro-American men from a local church, had re-buried some 257 Union soldiers, all who had been heaped together in mass graves. During the course of 2 weeks those 27 men, created a proper gravesite for the Union soldiers. After they finished their task, a day of remembrance was called for. These three thousand children began the procession to the new gravesite,

followed by three hundred black women, then all the men of the black Benevolent Society, then many of both the black and white ordinary citizens of Charleston, all coming to gather at nine o'clock in the morning on May 1, 1865 to hear speeches and to cover the new graves in flowers.

The Charleston newspaper detailed how: "when all had left, the holy mounds — the tops, the sides, and the spaces between them — were one mass of flowers, not a speck of earth could be seen; and as the breeze wafted the sweet perfumes from them, outside and beyond ... there were few eyes among those who knew the meaning of the ceremony that were not dim with tears of joy."

The meaning of the ceremony; known in the tears of joy.

Perhaps they knew that a dream fulfilled meant there had to be those willing to risk not returning home.

That their very being, meant there were those who saw a wrong and were read to right that wrong.

The children in the photo are said to have been those who had just entered the Freedom Schools, set up for their education by abolitionists, Afro-American churches, by Unitarian and Universalists, too.

We know now that the dreams for a much better life, that they must have had that day, would not all be fulfilled in their lifetimes. That it would take more struggle, more pain, more sacrifice...and although significant change came and keeps coming, we also in so many ways continue to plod forward to a dream not yet realized.

But oh what a day that must have been! When the air was so sweet with flowers!

We are all heirs to that sweet smell of pure hope. The sweet smell of hope still lives in this universe...

It still beckons us...

It is not only those willing to sacrifice returning home that brings transformation, but those who cover the dead with a carpet of flowers...move past grief and live their lives with dignity.

Sometimes we get caught up in longing for the good ole days when war and sacrifice meant the battle between good and evil had been waged and good won.

We know now, it is not so simple any more. (If it ever was.)

The world is way more complex than it used to be.

I can't afford to continue to be stuck in a state of puzzlement about why good women and gay people and UU's would choose to be in the military.

Good doesn't line up over here, and bad over there. I know now that is a child's way of thinking.

Sacrifice is not a choice we make. It is part of life, as is suffering and loss, death and hope.

We can't escape by moving to Canada or anywhere else that offers gets fixed in the mind or heart as a place to escape. The complex interconnectedness of all that is, we need to learn to live within, if we are to live and continue to make this world the place of home for all.

It is naïve to think that we can escape what is inside a Pollyanna-minded bubble of privilege...

Let this faith go everywhere... may its light shine.

Some of you may also know from Facebook that one of our UU ministers, Jake Morrill from the UU Church in Oak Ridge, TN, is just beginning his military service as a chaplain. He's blogging about his experiences. This is what he posted last:

Today at Army Chaplain School, we were released after morning training. I went out to lunch with a Burmese man, who's an American Baptist; an African-American woman from New Jersey who's a Pentecostal; a Filipino woman from Hawaii who's Anglican; a Japanese-American man from Southern California who's Russian Orthodox. And me, a European-American man from East Tennessee who's a Unitarian Universalist. The South Korean man who's a Presbyterian bowed out at the last minute. (And, of course, we ate at a Greek restaurant) I've heard that a multi-cultural organization is one with less than 80% of any single racial/ethnic/cultural group. So far, every Army setting I've seen meets that standard easily. It was another minister who first told me that military ministry was really multi-generational, multi-cultural ministry. And it is. At lunch today, for my cultural contribution, I told everyone about the Dolly Parton diet and then about my recent visit to Dollywood. I said, where I'm from, we all pretty much worship Dolly. Only later did I realize that I probably confused them even further about Unitarian Universalism.

Jake always has a sense of humor, a kind of standing on the outside looking in way of perceiving the irony of the situation. Yet, at the very same time, he's in. He's present. He's warm and he's curious and he is able to bring this wide – eyed faith that we call Unitarian Universalism into places many of us don't routinely go.

I don't know that much about military life, but I do know about the Dolly Diet. Her approach is to give oneself no restrictions, to taste everything. Order it all. Go to the buffet and take some of everything. Chew it, savor it! The trick is to only swallow very small amounts!

Taste it all! Yet be in control of who you are. Know yourself and know who you want to be and be that person. Let yourself be in sweet relationship with the entire buffet, but don't swallow everything!

Let the image of UUs in places you never imagined we would be change your heart and then your mind.

We can live fully in this new world. We are, if we let ourselves, able to salute those who risked not going home, on our journeys to be at home in this new world, where all are at the table.

Enjoy the picnic.