

## **A Creative Memorial Day**

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When we love others, when we care for beings with whom we have close personal contact, we grieve when they leave us. Sometimes those loved one simply move to a different and far-off place, where we do not see them as often as we once had. Sometimes they move away from us emotionally instead of physically, but the result is the same: we grieve. Sometimes they lose their sense of self and the knowledge of their lives, through disease or old age or accident, and we grieve for those losses even as we see them daily. And, of course, we grieve when our loved ones die.

Memorial Day, it is said, began in the United States after the Civil War when women who grieved for their lost fathers, sons and husbands went to cemeteries at the end of May to place flowers on their graves to honor their loved ones. In Boalsburg, near State College, where I grew up, a plaque claims the village originated Memorial Day, and the rites celebrated there on that day are solemn and dignified.

In the United States, the last Monday of May - Memorial Day - is an official holiday, mostly viewed as the start of the summer vacation season, the end of the school year, the beginning of the summer movie blockbuster season, a day for stupendous commercial sales events. Compared to many other parts of the world, in America, we do not spend undue time and energy on those who are no longer with us in body.

Last year's big Pixar movie was "Coco," in which creative animators imagined a complex, beautiful parallel Earth where those who had died continued their existence – but only for as long as living people remembered them. It was not a heaven, in the traditional Christian sense of heaven – there were bureaucrats and jealousies and conspiracies. The filmmakers were praised for their accurate rendition of traditional day of the dead ideas and activities, and the movie greatly improved the world's knowledge and understanding of this important Latin American holiday.

It says something about the human spirit that people across the world, in many different cultures, find ways to remember and celebrate the lives of those we have loved and lost to death. In countries with a strong Catholic tradition, All-Saints Day is the equivalent of the Day of the Dead; people visit cemeteries, cook special foods and bake special breads. In Asian countries, in

Japan and Vietnam, people burn incense and build shrines. The day of the dead itself has pre-Columbian roots, that is to say, the native peoples of Central America undertook rituals honoring and remembering their dead ancestors long before Europeans set foot on these shores.

There's a long human history of people changing their own traditions to fit with new ones, either those imposed upon them by conquerors, or those brought by merchants and traders. What we now know as Easter was once the Mediterranean rite of spring, in which the gods and goddesses brought new life to the earth after the resting time of winter. Christmas was the winter solstice ritual, in which the natives of northern European lands implored the sun to return to them after the steady lessening of light over the months of the solar year in the northern hemisphere. Any number of feast-days in various religious traditions have roots in far older rituals.

All these familiar holidays are the result of humans creatively weaving new ideas into existing traditions. We have done this ourselves in the United States quite recently; who would have thought that a holiday originally established in the mid-1800s to give thanks for the bounty of nature would transform itself a celebration of consumerism and corporate profitability? I refer, of course, to thanksgiving – and black Friday, the date upon which U.S. retailers determine whether they will make a profit for the year. This, perhaps, is a creative transformation that may have been best missed – at least in my opinion.

How do we remember our loved ones? Do we have special times to sit with family and friends and reminisce about their lives and deeds? When do we pull out those old photos, or DVDs, or look deep into our cloud storage to see and remember times past?

Many of us have a shrine somewhere around the house. It may not look like a traditional shrine, with flowers and candles, but it is a shrine, nonetheless. It is pictures, or an urn, or a musical instrument, or physical things once beloved of those who have passed on. Sometimes, when we pass by this shrine, we pause and think back to a time when our loved one was here with us. It is a truly amazing thing: in a split second our minds can cross hundreds of miles of space and many years, returning us to a day where we heard their laughter or felt their soft caress, before we come back to the present.

In my family, we had a tradition at Thanksgiving of watching the old 35-millimeter films that my dad had made of family gatherings over the years. My sister and I writhed internally as we viewed ourselves as darling pre-schoolers, covered in chocolate cake or paint. I think my sister and I, while my mom is still with us, should run those home movies – now saved on DVDs –

past our significant others, just to share with them those moments of family history, so that we may *all* share those memories, not just me and my sister.

Memorial Day in this country is also called Decoration Day, and we decorate the resting places of those who have served in the military of our country. The American Legion or the Foreign Legion comes to the cemetery where my dad is buried and places small flags at his resting place and at the resting places of all other veterans. I thank them for honoring his service in World War Two, in which he served as a machinist's mate in the Pacific naval forces. I'm not sure whether the Legion also decorates the grave of my Uncle Bob, who served as a radar officer in the Pacific during World War Two, but I would like to think he gets a flag too, to honor his service.

Soldiers, sailors and aviators are not the only ones who have died serving our country. They are those who were brave enough to stand up and take an oath to defend the United States *by means of arms* against all enemies.

Members of the Foreign Service of the U.S. state department have been killed by terrorists and extremists. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was serving this country's constitutional ideals of a just society when he was assassinated by an extremist. The passengers on Flight 93, which crashed before the terrorists who hijacked it could crash into its final destination, served our country, and in the most meaningful way, sacrificed their lives to save others.

That was not a job they had signed up for. They were travelers, who got on their plane just to get somewhere, and they transformed themselves in the air into servants of our nation – servants willing to make the ultimate sacrifice a person can be asked to make.

When we say "thank you for your service," I think we mean, "thank you for being brave, for volunteering to stand between me and those who would do me harm in order to harm our country, for protecting the ideals set forth in our constitution." Thank you for being part of our government, working to maintain our freedom of speech, our freedom to assemble peaceably, our freedom to make decisions through elections. For working to protect our rights to disagree civilly, to yell at our television sets, to seek election to positions where we make policy affecting hundreds or thousands or millions or billions of people.

We honor the dead this day, and on this day I think I would also honor the living people who work every day for our country's ideals of justice and equity and freedom to choose our own

paths in life. They will, of course, die in time, as we all die, and I would like to thank them for their service today, while they can still hear me.

Here are three specific people I will hold in my thoughts on Memorial Day:

John McCain, for his military service and for speaking truth to power

Robert Mueller, for his service in law enforcement, and for seeking truth in the face of power,  
and

Ruth Bader Ginsberg, for paving the way for me in the practice of law, and for speaking and acting for the rights of all Americans.

I also think of others who did not die in military service but also have served our country bravely and tirelessly. Just a few of those who have passed from this life who I will hold in my thoughts are Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks, Dovey Johnson Roundtree, Bella Abzug, Mary Harris “Mother” Jones, and Emma Goldman.

If you would care to do so, please speak the names aloud of those who you honor on this day – those who have served our country in a way you believe is consistent with our American and our UU values.

May we hold these honored names in our memories on this day and on every day of the year.