

A Time For Remembering

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UUFP

May 27, 2012

From its inception, Memorial Day has been a difficult holiday. It wasn't wholly accepted when it was first proclaimed in the 1800's. Today, many people continue to have difficulty honoring war, death and the military, while others bemoan the fact that a holiday of such national import has been turned into just another three-day holiday, where people's attention has been taken away from its honorable meaning.

Even the origins of Memorial Day are unclear. More than twenty cities and towns claim being the birthplace of Memorial Day. In 1966, President Lyndon Johnson pronounced Waterloo NY as its birthplace. Another story says that newly freed slaves in Charleston NC originated the holiday. Yale historian David Blight documents this version in his book *Race and Reunion*. Newly freed slaves gathered in the first week of May, 1865, to express appreciation and honor the more than 250 Union prisoners of war, hastily buried in unmarked graves in an open air Confederate prison.

The first official Memorial Day celebration took place with flowers being placed on graves at the Arlington National Cemetery on May 30, 1868. It was called Decoration Day back then. General John Logan of the Grand Army of the Republic, an organization associated with Union Veterans, wanted to honor the Civil War dead, both Union and Confederate. He issued General Order # 11, and established May 30 as a day of celebration. He chose that day because it wasn't associated with a Civil War battle and because he reasoned, flowers would be in bloom by then throughout the country and people could place flowers on the graves.

By 1890, all the northern states recognized May 30th as Decoration Day. I understand New York was the first state to officially recognize the holiday in 1873. But unlike the northern states, the southern states weren't buying it. They honored their war dead on various days designated by the individual states. This practice continued until after WWI, when Memorial Day became a day in recognition of all war dead. It may be of interest for you to know that several southern states continue to recognize those who died in the Civil War on separate days. January 19 in Texas, April 26 in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and Mississippi; May 10 in South Carolina; and June 3 (Jefferson Davis' birthday) in Louisiana and Tennessee.

Our current, long holiday weekend is brought to you by the United States Congress. In 1971, congress passed the National Holiday Act, giving us five, three-day holidays per year. With the Act, we get five long weekends per year; a bonus day in each that you get to use however you'd like. On Memorial Day, flags are raised to half-mast at dawn and then to full staff at noon. The intended meaning being that the living raise the flag in a commitment to not let the sacrifice, of our dead warriors' fight for justice and liberty for all, be in vain. In recent years, the country has been asked to stop for a moment of silence at 3PM.

Ever since we got five, three-day weekends, in 1971, the meaning of Memorial Day seems to have gotten lost. Stores encourage us to shop. Gathered families and friends focus on beer, hamburgers and hotdogs on the grill. And those who have them, tend to head out of town to put the boat in the water and open the summer camp. These days, Memorial Day primarily signals the beginning of summer.

Perhaps there is not a lot of excitement to be generated in the celebration of Martin Luther King, old George or honest Abe's birthdays, or for that matter, Labor Day or Columbus day. But there is a legitimate argument to be made that we should stop for a moment and give consideration to the fact that well over a million soldiers have died in defense or support of this country; and more than that number have been maimed and wounded. I don't mean to imply that all those who died were valiant, or heroes. Many, if not most, were just scared kids. I don't even mean to imply that all that death and carnage was for noble or superior causes, although many fall in that category. I want simply to acknowledge this morning, that some 2 ½ million soldiers have died, been maimed or wounded in causes this country stands for, says it stands for or simply ought to stand for.

There must be something honorable about the deaths of these men and women. There must be something worth remembering. There must be something important about each and every one of them, even if only to their families. There must be something good in us taking a moment, to remember their deaths, their bodies, their souls, hearts, dreams and aspirations.

Perhaps you know some of them; grandfathers, fathers, brothers or sisters, cousins, schoolmates, sons or daughters. Perhaps you've heard their stories and seen their broken bodies. Or perhaps, those who have survived are more distant, just thoughts to us. You and I probably have both, walked right past some homeless, maybe mentally ill veteran on the streets, or driven by them in a nursing home. These are real people, not numbers, not a passage in a history book, not actors on television or in the movies. Real people.

These are people who knowingly or not, willingly or not, correctly or not, gave their lives—no, the truth is, they had their lives taken, in service to this country. That is honorable behavior. That is behavior worthy of being honored. Now you may not agree with the decisions made by their commanders or the commander-in-chief, to put them in a position where their lives were lost, but that is a different conversation; its an important distinction to be made. We do not need to honor war or death or winning in order to honor those who died in service to this country.

War and death is hard stuff. It's real world. While war and military action may or may not be noble, it's guaranteed to always be ugly and leave pain and anguish in its wake. No matter how noble the battle, war always dehumanizes the enemy... and us. We do well to never forget that. Whatever our political persuasions, whatever our motivations may be, however good our intensions, whether we agree or disagree with our government at any point in time, we do well to remember. And God knows, I hope those who make life and death decisions always remember.

War is not the only way to support and defend the form of government we have and its inherent rights and privileges. No matter how exuberant we may be about our interpretation of current reality, or how disenchanting, we need to stay engaged in our governmental process. We must know what the politicians are up to. We must stay vigilant in looking over their shoulders. We must work hard to make sure they truly represent us, the people. And we must live within the constitution and the bill of rights. And endeavor to live out our beliefs in justice and liberty for all.

War, death and destruction are not the only ways we lose contact with people who are important in our lives. It seems Memorial Day is a fitting time for us to also remember relationships that we have lost, or are in danger of losing; old friends that we're no longer in contact with, teachers and mentors we've not thought about for a long time, family members with whom we are estranged.

There are a lot of ways we lose contact with people. There are numerous ways for us to become engaged in battles that seem to have no end. Many of us are engaged in long-term battles with members of our families, once dear friends, ex-spouses, business associates. These types of relationships take a toll on us. These battles are often ugly and leave pain and anguish in their wake. We learn to numb ourselves to what seem to be irreconcilable differences, deep-seated wounds. We all too often dehumanize the “other” and like in war, lose some of our humanity in the process.

Inevitably, one party feels harmed or slighted by the other. Typically, the other party either feels the exact same way or simply aggrieved by the first party’s reaction or behavior. Each is convinced of the veracity of their perspective and justified in their actions. Each looks to the other to make amends. Each defends oneself against the wrongs of the other. And another brick is placed in the wall.

These things tend to take on a life of their own. We all know the story of the Hatfields and the McCoys, an intergenerational family feud. Even if we don’t remember exactly how it all began, we believe in the rightness of our position. Even if we disagree about what started it all, we continue to believe that the onus is on the other to take the first step. And each party tends to believe that such a first step is more than we can reasonably be expected to do. And the wall gets a little bigger.

There are hundreds of things we find to fight about. Who gets what from Mom and Dad’s estate; the way a parent treated a spouse or a child; the way a sibling, child or friend doesn’t behave the way we believe they should; the neighbor’s tree hangs over the fence. When our viewpoint is not supported, our feelings may get hurt; we may retaliate, or simply go quiet and withdraw. We start building a self-defensive wall. We build physical and emotional walls that not only keep others out, but also keep us locked in. The really sad thing is that we may really want to reconnect, but we can’t find a way out from behind our wall.

This is a time for remembering. This is as good a time as any, to contemplate our personal wars, battles and feuds. This is a good time to see if we can find ways to begin to take down the walls we’ve built. This is a good time to remember the humanness of those with whom we are entangled. They too are human, with thoughts, beliefs, hopes and aspirations; faults, fears, and concerns. They too may be trying to find a way back to being connected to us. I’m not suggesting that we go off and try to fix all the problem relationships in our lives. Not all relationships can be healed. But, I’m willing to bet far too many relationships are incorrectly labeled, irreconcilable.

Sometimes the distance between people is caused simply by circumstances. Friends or neighbors move away to take a new job. Our siblings or other relatives are scattered all over the country. We're overloaded with day to day responsibilities. These things too can place distance between us. We find we're just too busy to stay connected with people important to us. How many people are on your list that you want to stay in close touch with but just haven't found the time?

This is a good time for remembering. My wish for us, is that we take the time to remember. Perhaps we might remember the good old days, when we enjoyed each other's company. Perhaps we might remember why these people were important to us in the first place. Maybe the best we can bring ourselves to do at this point in time, is to simply remember that it's possible that things can be different. I hope that we take the time to think about the people who are important to us. I hope we find the time to be able to say what Stevie Wonder says in one of his songs: "I just called to say I love you. I just called to say I care."

Let it be.

Amen