

“Emblazoned on My Memory”

May 28, 2017

Emblazon = to portray or inscribe on as on a heraldic shield; to embellish or decorate. Also to exclaim, celebrate, or extol.

Memory = the mental capacity of retaining and reviving impressions or recalling previous experiences.

* * *

Tomorrow is **Memorial Day**. Memorial Day—the whole Memorial Day weekend—is all about memory. About keeping alive, keeping current *in our memory* certain courageous acts. Initially, the acts commemorated were those of Union soldiers during the Civil War liberating slaves and toppling the unjust order that held them in bondage. Following Appomattox, many local customs memorializing the war dead arose spontaneously. By 1868 “Decoration Day” was born. General James A. Garfield led commemorative services at Arlington National Cemetery—beginning an annual custom. The first of these events were painful for many in attendance. Some towns had seen nearly all their young men perish in the war. The sacrifice in blood had been so great that it was already emblazoned on everyone’s memory. These commemorative events were, in fact, gestures of mourning. In the South, similar celebrations were held for fallen soldiers of the Confederacy. After World War I Decoration Day was *expanded* to honor the fallen in *all* American wars. Regional antipathy remained, however; it wasn’t until 1971 that Congress officially declared Memorial Day a *National* holiday to be annually celebrated on the last Monday in May.

When I was a boy, Memorial Day was a big deal. My Boy Scout troop—all the local troops of every type and dozens of local service organizations—marched in the annual parade. Congresswoman Frances P. Bolton addressed the crowd with well-rehearsed admonitions to patriotism, cannon were fired, bugles sounded. One year Astronaut John Glenn, recently back from orbit, joined in the festivities. While the gung-ho patriotism may have diminished, to this day veterans’ organizations adorn the graves of their comrades in cemeteries across the land. One Memorial Day weekend years ago I failed to mention it during Sunday services; a member chided me and asked that I go to the nearby national cemetery the following day to pay my respects. I have done so almost every Memorial Day since.

While there are many Unitarian Universalists who have been noteworthy pacifists, ours is not one of the historic peace churches [Quakers, Mennonites, and Church of the Brethren]. Two Secretaries of Defense under President Clinton—Bill Perry and Bill Cohen—were Unitarian Universalists, which should make it pretty clear that not all UUs are categorically opposed to war. It’s worth noting, however, that in the administration of their duties Secretaries Perry and Cohen were responsible for

thousands fewer casualties (and tens of thousands fewer foreign casualties) than were several of their more bellicose successors.

* * *

Now *memory*.... Memory is one of those aspects of life so central that we don't see it; we take it for granted; we stop registering its effects. The term covers many mental aptitudes by means of which we retain information and reconstruct past experiences. The human ability to conjure long-ago specific episodes from our earlier lives is both familiar and puzzling—and a touchstone of personal identity. We recall things that happened *earlier*, so memory is unlike perception. Moreover, we remember things that actually happened; this makes memory unlike pure imagination... though in practice the interplay between our perceptions, memories and imagination is more fluid than fixed.

Another thing about memories: they're often *infused with emotion*. Four years ago my oldest sister and I were in Cleveland together and visited our mother and grandparents' graves and the neighborhoods of our youth. All such practices have their root in memory. Indeed, our whole moral and social life is informed by memory; all our promises and commemorations are suffused with it.

Maurice Webster was a member of one of the churches I served. I learned last night that he died on May 19th—a few weeks after his 90th birthday. Maurice taught special education in suburban Chicago for over forty years. The single most important predictor of a person's success in school, he often told me, is the keenness of their memory.

- Can you remember the spelling list?
- All the state capitals?
- The formulae?
- The proof?

But there are different kinds of memory; cramming for a test is one thing.

- Remembering particular anniversaries?
- To always keep a spare key hidden away?
- To hold your tongue if you've had a couple of drinks?

How well do we remember that a loved one is still sensitive about something, still grieving a particular loss, still longing to return to a conversation that earlier you agreed to revisit...but that later...for want of a fully engaged memory...you've allowed to slip away? So there are different types, and different *levels* of memory.

Bodily memories are deep. Once you learn how to knit, or play an instrument, or ride a bicycle it becomes physically ingrained—these are *somatic* memories. Regularized movements such as those learned in military training camp and the like are buried deep into our muscles and bones. At a high school reunion a few years ago I

watched, along with many others, a 16mm movie of our class that one of our teachers had made, which included some of the old school songs in the soundtrack. The 90 year old retired Director of Athletics, Mr. Molten—a model of the good sportsmanship he labored to help us all recognize and aspire to—started quietly humming along... and in a flash all of us joined in (“...once again the old maroon and black will reign boys / Through thick and thin / We’ll never let the fighting spirit wane, boys....”) Unsung for forty-five years—not even thought of—that song had been emblazoned on all of our memories. *In our memories, actually—in our bones.*

Children have memories from their earliest hours on earth. The relational patterns that are established in a child’s early interactions become the patterns that child comes to expect. If they’re manipulative and hateful the child will come to expect that from others. And project that expectation onto subsequent situations throughout her or his life.

Traumatic experiences can be painful. People naturally suppress their memory of such things or they can become overwhelming. A related problem comes when **suppression** is so effective that one’s memories become **repressed**, that is, below consciousness. Our military is beset with just this problem. *Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)* has reached epidemic proportions among our veterans. As has become increasingly obvious in recent years, this is a dangerous cultural time bomb. There are others among us suffering from PTSD as a result of living in an abusive or unsafe home environment.

“The past isn’t dead. It isn’t even past.” wrote William Faulkner. Memory is always with us, always measuring and weighing, always shaping what and how we see in the present moment here and now. Memory can be a trap when we feel bound by it (e.g., “All the men in my family work in the mines.” “Prosperity is outside our family’s grasp.”) It can be a beacon when we remember unhealthy habits before they knock us for another loop. There’s a 12-step parable that speaks to just this situation, about a fellow who repeatedly walks down the street and falls into a big hole. Eventually, he learns to look up while walking along, until he sees the hole... and falls in. Maybe next time he remembers to look up sooner, or maybe not... but eventually he manages to gingerly walk around the big hole and *not* fall in. The point of the parable is that eventually, by remembering what’s happened to him in the past and also remembering what lies ahead if he follows this *all-too-familiar and formerly unconscious path*, the fellow learns to go a whole other way, through an entirely different neighborhood, and into a whole new section of town.

Memory is essential for all human reasoning and decision-making. It’s a guiding dimension to life and consciousness. Memory is with you whether you want it or not, a foundational aspect of our ordinary every day mind. When activated, memory always has a bearing on the present, but *it can take over*. People lamenting progress and going on and on about the “good old days” fall into that category. People with PTSD—whatever its genesis—need to reckon with it before they can go on effectively with their lives. A competent therapist can help people unlock and give

expression to repressed memories. That way they stop taking the person over. They can be put to rest. A year ago ago [4/10/16], while serving the Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Fullerton, a guest worship leader, Mary Ruth Velicki, spoke powerfully in her sermon of just such an experience.

Not all memory is accurate. Some memories are embellished. The 1950 Japanese movie “Rashomon” directed by Akira Kurosawa, involves several characters each recounting alternative memories of the same incident. My sisters and I experience this kind of thing all the time, recalling—each of us differently—incidents from our youth. Errant memory can have minor or major, tragic or humorous consequences.

Churches are *communities of memory*. Only some of us here remember Bill Main, Joyce Loranger, and Frank Paulsen as their periods of active involvement ceased before I arrived ten months ago. But some of us *do* remember them—and as we are *a community of memory* we will honor their memories in the Meditation Garden immediately following this service. Our collective identity includes Joyce, Bill, and Frank, just as it includes *all* who have joined with us over the years. Dedicating a tile following the death of one of our members—or snuffing a candle out—is a way members of UU congregations memorialize our intuitive awareness that each of us is but one cell in a larger body that is *the congregation through time*.

Re-remembering one’s integral connection to something larger, something transcending both time *and* space is what we might call *Deep Memory*. Deep Memory involves re-remembering one’s place within the larger cycles of nature, within the whole... This is what Barbara Deming is talking about in this morning’s Responsive Reading, “Prayer for the Earth.” Deming herself was a mild mannered woman living beneath the radar when the Central American foreign policy initiatives of the Reagan administration radicalized her into an out-of-the-closet, politically engaged life, calling upon others to activate their own Deep Memory of connection—and to begin emblazoning those connections onto their personal memories as well.

As mentioned earlier, there are different types, different levels, of memory. We study for a quiz and forget two-thirds of it within a week. But Deep Memory is of a more fundamental order... and never to be fully out of one’s mind again. “There is no fear lest one should forget the truth,” declares Socrates, “if once he grasps it with his soul.” (*The Dialogues of Plato, “Epistles” 344e*)

Let us resolve, then, today, to grasp two things with our souls: (1) that we are all part of one another. And (2) that we honor those who have died by living as fully and creatively as we can, and by exercising our freedom responsibly.

And finally, may our ability to love, and to meet the challenge of keeping love alive, be emblazoned on our memory ever more. Amen.