

**“Seeds of Memory”**  
**Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**Memorial Day Sunday, May 29, 2005**  
**Bruce A. Bode**

**Call to Worship**

Holy and beautiful is the custom by which we gather together on this Memorial Day Sunday.

Here we come to give our thanks, to face our ideals, to remember our loved ones, especially today those no longer physically with us.

Here we come to seek that which is permanent, and to serve goodness, beauty, and the qualities of life that make it rich and whole.

Through this hour breathes the worship of all ages, the cathedral music of all history, and blessed are the ears that hear that eternal sound.

**Lighting of Chalice** (spoken in unison)

We drink from wells we did not dig.

We have been warmed by fires we did not build.

We light this chalice in thanksgiving

for those who have passed their light to us.

(Deuteronomy 6:11, adapted)

**Responsive Reading**

MINISTER: These are our dead. Short days ago they lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow, loved, and were loved.

CONGREGATION: These are our dead. Some died in the fullness of time; they have seen and felt and known.

MINISTER: Others died abruptly before they had really begun to know the problems and sorrows, joys and delights, of mature persons.

CONGREGATION: We have had various relationships with them. Some were very dear to us; other were unknown except to a few.

MINISTER: Everyone that cares for us and for whom we care dies and tears something of the fabric of our life.

CONGREGATION: At times the loss is so great, the sadness so deep, it takes one's breath away. No matter how many deaths one has seen, it again seems unbelievable, unreal, not so.

MINISTER: So great is the sorrow, so deep is the threat, that, for the most part, we avoid thinking about it.

CONGREGATION: We hurry away from the grave; we take up again, with alacrity, the daily problems and confusions which seem so much easier to handle than the imminent specter of death.

MINISTER: But the richness of our life depends upon how we surround ourselves with those who care for us, and how much we live in the spirit that does not pass away with the passing of the body.

CONGREGATION: We need to treasure more deeply those who have loved us and died; they give greater joy and beauty, greater meaning and worth to our days, because they help us to see, to feel, to hear, and to understand more deeply.

MINISTER: Will not these qualities we have met in our departed loved ones go on to infuse all the days of our lives? Do we not owe gratitude and remembrance wherever we have met with any joy and intimacy?

CONGREGATION: And so this day we honor these, our dead, and all those whom we have known in the past no longer with us.

(Dr. Duncan E. Littlefair)

### **Call to Remembrance**

Death in itself is a simple event in nature, simply one of many events in the larger, ongoing process of the unfolding of Being. But in our human lives this simple event in nature is a factor of unspeakable importance. Death casts a mantle of significance over everything we do; it frames all the days of our lives.

Archeologists identify our human species by our gravesites. “Oh, yes,” they say upon examining a gravesite, “here is evidence of *human* beings; these are the creatures who recognize and pay attention to their dead.”

Our species is first recognized as human in the act of attending to our dead. We might even say that it is in the face of death, and when facing death, that we become human. It is before death that we ask our human questions; it is before death that we are prodded into self-conscious awareness.

Thus, today, on this Memorial Day Sunday, we would honor and remember our dead, just as humans from all generations before us have done. We would join with human beings from all times and all places on the earth in honoring and remembering those lives that have been part of our own, those from whom we have learned, those who have loved us and who we in turn have loved.

And today, in this lovely sanctuary, we will remember and honor not just those who have died in this past year within this Fellowship, but all those who have been part of this Fellowship from its beginning. Many of them were instrumental in creating this Fellowship and this sanctuary, of having a vision for it.

Please stand now as I read the names of those departed loved ones whose spirit is still alive among us.

Harry Jordan  
Richard Earhart  
Lucy Redkey  
Mary W. Erickson  
Vance Lewton  
Bernice Ruth Johanson  
Daniel Plachta  
Jonathan Conant  
Earl Willetts  
Eula Dennison  
Mary Jordan  
Louise Nomura  
William John Wynn  
Arthur David Smith  
Ruth Humphrey  
Lois Anne Overton  
Judy Allen  
Everett Whealdon  
Kathleen Bruskin  
Marjorie Willets  
James Edward Everett  
Ruth Russell  
Desiree W. Whipple  
Irene Osborne  
Lucille Watson  
Anya Kurotchkin Lincoln  
Trevor Wilson  
George Harper

We honor those who have lived and died in this religious community; we gain strength and confidence from their deeds and memories. While you are yet standing would you please turn in your hymnals to hymn number #336, "All My Memories of Love," words from the Russian poet, Anna Ahkmatova.

### **Readings**

My readings on this Memorial Day Sunday are related to the memory of those who have given their lives in service to this country.

With the second Iraqi War still very much with us, and with strongly conflicting opinions about its necessity and value, it may be difficult for some here present to hear these readings that honor and praise those who have fought and died in battle. But I would have us distinguish, if possible, the politics of war from the persons who have been engaged in war, even as many of those who have protested our current war have distinguished between support for our troops and country and support for this particular political and military action.

I have three readings, the first related to World War I, the second to World War II, and the third to the Vietnam War. From World War I: "In Flanders Fields," by John McCrae, written from the point of view of the dead warriors:

In Flanders fields the poppies blow,  
Between the crosses, row on row,  
That mark our place; and in the sky  
The larks, still bravely singing, fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago  
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,  
Loved and were loved, and now we lie  
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:  
To you from failing hands we throw  
The torch; be yours to hold it high.  
If ye break faith with us who die  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow

In Flanders fields.

From World War II: "A Tribute to Those Who Fell at Iwo Jima," by Roland B. Gittelsohn:

This is perhaps the grimmest, and surely the holiest, task we have faced since D-Day. Before us lie the bodies of comrades and friends, men who until yesterday or last week laughed with us, joked with us, trained with us, men who were on the same ships with us, and went over the sides with us as we prepared to hit the beaches on this island, men who fought with us and feared with us.

Somewhere in this plot of ground there may lie the man who could have discovered the cure for cancer. Under one of these Christian crosses, or beneath a Jewish Star of David, there may rest now a man who was destined to be a great prophet... to find the way, perhaps, for all to live in plenty...

Now they lie here silently in this sacred soil, and we gather to consecrate this earth in their memory.

...To speak in memory of such men as these is not easy. Of them, too, can it be said with utter truth: "The world will little note nor long remember what we say here. It can never forget what they did here."

Finally, from The Vietnam War: "Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam," by Bernard Edelman, a more difficult tribute relating to a more questionable conflict:

If you are able,  
save for them a place  
inside of you  
and save one backward glance  
when you are leaving  
for the places they can  
no longer go.  
Be not ashamed to say  
you loved them,  
though you may  
or may not have always.  
Take what they have left  
and what they have taught you  
with their dying  
and keep it with your own.  
And in that time  
when men decide and feel safe  
to call the war insane,  
take one moment to embrace  
those gentle heroes  
you left behind.

### **Meditation**

Let each of us now in a time of silence, remember our nation and those who have died in military service for our country.

And because our world has grown so small, because we can no longer think only of those within the boundary lines of a single nation, let us not be afraid to let our minds and hearts roam from this country to other places in our world, thinking also of others who, with equal feeling, have given their lives for the land of which they were a part.

Let us be together in the silence on this Memorial Day Sunday.

## “SEEDS OF MEMORY”

### **The heart’s own seed**

What remains after the death of a loved one? What is it that is passed on from one life to another?

The sonnet printed at the top of today’s Order of Service provides one answer.

There will be something here, some part of this  
Left over past our final soft caress --  
A breeze at twilight carrying a kiss,  
The fragrance of a petaled loveliness  
That we have known, some little shining edge  
Of ecstasy on beauty's golden dart --  
And we will stand beside the jasmine hedge  
Again, and love will spring from heart to heart.

For memory will keep what it has heard  
Forever etched upon the heart's own seed,  
And time shall not erase one tender word  
That love has written down for future need.  
Oh dearest, hold this knowledge and be glad --  
Not even death destroys what love has had.

(Author unknown)

This simple, straight-forward poem suggests that the heart has its own seed upon which memory etches itself.

Like etchings written upon metals of bronze, silver, or copper; so memory etches itself upon the seed of the heart, and these seeds of the heart then are preserved for future use and need, little packets of information that at the appropriate time will germinate, sprout, take root, grow, blossom, and bear fruit.

The heart, the poem suggests, is like a storage bin, a great storehouse where seeds of memory are kept and preserved.

### **What we remember**

These seeds of memory in the storehouse of our heart, however, are not necessarily known to us at the time.

Seeds are often tiny, little things, so tiny that you don’t even know they’re adhering to you – as when, for example, you walk through a field of grasses and wild flowers or through a woods. The seeds from the various plants, unbeknownst to you, stick to your

clothing, attach themselves to the hair of your head, gather in the cuffs of your pants, and all without your awareness; you don't even know you are collecting them, carrying them, scattering them.

The poet Robert Bly says that each day we are asked to remember one or two things, just one or two things each day as we go through life. These are things that our parents aren't aware we are remembering, things that aren't by any means the national news of the day, and things that often we ourselves are not aware we are remembering.

(See "Four Ways of Knowledge," from The Man in the Black Coat Turns)

We don't know, and can't control, why we remember what we remember, but apparently something in us wants to, or needs to, remember.

Something in us, our heart perhaps, wants to remember. Let us call it our "heart," our deepest emotional self. Let us say that our deepest emotional self wants to collect these memories and store them for future reference and need.

Or, let us say it is our soul that collects these memories. Let us call it our "soul." Let us say that what we most essentially are wants and needs to remember.

But we, in our conscious selves, don't even know why at the time. Maybe later we will learn why these seeds of memory adhered to us. Maybe later we will learn why the heart and the soul collected, gathered, and stored the particular memories it did. But at the time we really don't know what we are gathering, or why.

### **The mystery of memory**

Do you know why you remember what you remember?

Many of you here today have had many years of gathering memories, but have you figured out why the particular seeds of memory that have adhered to you did so?

Why do the heart and the soul gather the memories that they do? – memories that are often, even usually, utterly strange, odd little things with no apparent rhyme or reason to them. It's not a rational thing, not an intellectual thing.

The things we remember are not what our parents would think we might remember (and, of course, often they'd just as soon we wouldn't remember what we remember), while the things they wanted to teach us are often completely forgotten.

Here's an example of the oddness of memory. It comes from a memorial service I officiated about four years ago. In the part of the service where there a gathering and sharing of memories, a granddaughter of the deceased woman stood to speak about her dear, departed grandmother.

"I have the oddest little memory of my grandmother," she said. "I remember that when

she was eating and nearly all the food on her plate was gone she would use her little finger to pick up the crumbs from the plate. Then she would put her little finger to her mouth and eat those crumbs. In this way she cleaned her plate.”

The granddaughter continued, “I don’t know why I remember that, but I do; and now I find myself doing the very same thing! When I am about finished eating, I pick up the crumbs from my plate with my little finger and I put them to my mouth; and when I do, I think of “grandma.””

Crumbs on the plate. Little crumbs of no apparent account. Yet these crumbs are the seeds of memory.

What is imparted to us is not usually what others have tried to impart to us. And, actually, what others try to impart to us is often remembered, if at all, only negatively.

What is most useful to us, it seems, are seeds of memory that we don’t even know we are receiving and which others don’t even know they are giving.

What is remembered by us is something that has “soul-stuff” attached to it, or “heart-stuff;” or something that wants to attach to our soul, or take root in our heart; or something that our soul notices, or that our heart is pulled by.

### **Heart, soul, and memory**

So what do the soul and heart like to remember?

The soul, that essential, unoriginated fire of which we are a part, likes the following, I believe: reality, vitality, authenticity, and spontaneity. In other words, the soul likes what it itself is.

And the heart, what does the heart like? The heart, I believe, likes these things: connection, care, concern, and courtesy. And also this: kindness, gentleness, tenderness, and modesty. The heart likes what it itself is.

And so the heart and soul, usually without our conscious knowledge, gather, collect, store, and preserve seeds of memory so that they themselves might be nourished.

### **What we give**

This may give us a clue as to how we should live our own lives and what it is we give or have given to others, for we truly give to others when we give of ourselves – naturally, spontaneously, lovingly, and without necessarily the shaping of forethought, and certainly not the shaping by manipulation. You have to let go, let the heart bubble over, let the soul have its play.

## A story of memory

Who has dropped seeds of memory into your heart or into your soul?

A few years ago, reading Bill Moyers' interviews with American poets, I was struck by an interview with a contemporary American poet of Chinese descent by the name of Li-Young Lee.

Li-Young Lee's father, as his son describes him, was a brilliant man of huge intellectual and artistic talents. Also a wild and exuberant man, a scholarly man with a command of seven languages, an entrepreneur who could make money and as easily let it go, and a man who later became a Christian evangelist and finally a Presbyterian minister.

And he was a forbidding presence of a man, a person who felt he needed to give an appearance of strength, an individual who could not allow doubt into his public or even his private conversation, a demanding man to his children, with very high standards, the template by which his sons and daughters were to measure their lives.

But what was remembered of this man? No doubt all of this has gone into his children in some way, but what his son, Li-Young Lee, remembers and appreciates was the opportunity to read his father's Bible after his father's death.

And what did he find in his father's Bible? He found notations in the margins of his father's Bible ... notations related to questions and doubts his father had ... questions and doubts his son had not known his father entertained because his father had never expressed them to his son, or perhaps to anyone else.

In his father's Bible, in the *margins* of his father's Bible, at the *edge* of his father's outward life and character, Li-Young Lee saw a father in conversation with the sacred writings. And he saw, for the first time, a father in search, in doubt, and in need. For the first time, in other words, he saw a *human* father.

And what a gift that was for his searching son! And how thankful the son was for this gift, these seeds of memory his father didn't even know he was passing on to his son, these seeds of memory dropped in the margins of the sacred writings, these seeds that were planted in the margins, off to the side, not in the sacred text itself, not in what was standard and expected, not in the holy words, but off to the side, in the margins, at the edge, scribbled, some, no doubt, illegible; these were the seeds: tiny, apparently insignificant, scattered seeds, not expected to be seen or found or used; these were the seeds that his son valued the most and found most useful.

Li-Young Lee's father was human in other ways as well, and he planted other seeds of memory, gave his son other gifts that the poet didn't know he was receiving at the time, nor did his father know that these were the seeds he was planting or the gifts he was giving.

One day in his adulthood, Li-Young Lee, now married, was carefully and tenderly removing a splinter from under the thumbnail of his wife's right hand when it dawned on him where his capacity to so tenderly attend to her in this way had come from. Li-Young Lee wrote about his discovery in a poem titled, "The Gift."

Let me introduce this poem to you with the poet's own comment about the precipitating event and experience that lay behind this poem. In his interview with Bill Moyers, Li-Young Lee said:

I was with my wife in a hotel and I woke up and heard her sobbing. I looked for her and she was sitting on the edge of the bathtub, sobbing and holding her hand. I noticed that her hand was bleeding, and when I looked there was a splinter under her thumbnail. My father was dead at the time, but when I bent down to remove the splinter I realized that I had learned that tenderness from my father.

*(The Language of Life, p. 262)*

Here's the poem titled, "The Gift":

To pull the metal splinter from my palm  
my father recited a story in a low voice.  
I watched his lovely face and not the blade.  
Before the story ended, he'd removed  
the iron sliver I thought I'd die from.

I can't remember the tale,  
but hear his voice still, a well  
of dark water, a prayer.  
And I recall his hands,  
two measures of tenderness  
he laid against my face,  
the flames of discipline  
he raised above my head.

Had you entered that afternoon  
you would have thought you saw a man  
planting something in a boy's palm,  
a silver tear, a tiny flame.  
Had you followed that boy  
you would have arrived here,  
where I bend over my wife's right hand.

Look how I shave her thumbnail down  
so carefully she feels no pain.  
Watch as I lift the splinter out.  
I was seven when my father  
took my hand like this,

and I did not hold that shard  
between my fingers and think,  
*Metal that will bury me,*  
christen it Little Assassin,  
Ore Going Deep for My heart.  
And I did not lift up my wound and cry,  
*Death visited here!*  
I did what a child does  
when he's given something to keep,  
I kissed my father.  
(“The Gift,” Li-Young Lee, The Language of Life, Bill Moyers, pp. 261-62)

### **Benediction**

And now may the Love which overcomes all differences,  
Which heals all wounds,  
Which puts to flight all fears,  
And which reconciles all who are separated,  
Be in us and among us,  
Now and always. Amen.  
(Frederick E. Gillis)

### **Extinguishing of the Chalice**

We extinguish this chalice,  
but not the light of truth,  
the warmth of community,  
or the fire of commitment.  
These we carry in our hearts  
until we are together again. Amen.

(NOTE: This is a manuscript version of the sermon preached by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on Memorial Day Sunday, May 29, 2005. The spoken sermon, available on audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)