

“Words for Memorial Day”
Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
“Memorial Day Sunday,” May 27, 2007
Guest Speaker: Mr. Dan Gerber
Assisting: Rev. Bruce Bode

Call to Worship

This is a new day that has been given unto us.
Let us then rejoice in it and be glad.
And let us count our many, many blessings:
Let us be grateful for the incredible gift of life,
And for the capacity to see, to feel, to hear, and to understand.
Let us be grateful for this time of fellowship, for work to do, and service to render.
And let us then be especially grateful on this Memorial Day Sunday for the ties of
love which bind us together, giving dignity, meaning, worth, and joy to all our days.

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

Our Responsive Reading this morning is related to the Call to Remembrance that will take place immediately following this reading. The words are written by Dr. Duncan E. Littlefair, who gave me my own start in the ministry, and who I would remember this Memorial Day Sunday.

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; others 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

Please stand now, as you are able, and honor with your silence those individuals connected with this congregation who have died, not only in this past year, but all those who have been part of this Fellowship from its beginning.

Harry Jordan
Richard Earhart
Lucy Redkey
Mary W. Erickson
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
Vance Lewton
Marjorie Willets
James Edward Everett
Ruth Russell
Desiree W. Whipple
Irene Osborne
Lucille Watson
Anya Kurotchkin Lincoln
Gwyneth Pederson
Trevor Wilson
George Harper
Dick Shipley
Josh Stewart
Craig Stout
John Butler
Henry Redkey

Conclusion

We honor those who have lived and died in this religious community. Many were instrumental in creating this Fellowship, having a vision for this sanctuary, and actually physically building this special place. Their spirit is alive among us. We gain strength and confidence from their deeds and memories.

While you are yet standing, would you please turn in your hymnals to number #336, “All My Memories of Love,” words from the Russian poet, Anna Ahkmatova.

Reading

Memorial Day had its origin at the end of the Civil War when on May 30, 1868 General John A. Logan, commander-in-chief of the Grand Army of the Republic, honored the soldiers and sailors who had given their lives in that horrific civil conflict. But he honored the war dead not only of the victors, he honored both Union and Confederate soldiers who were buried at the Arlington National Cemetery by decorating their graves with flowers. Thus, this day was first known as Decoration Day, a name that still echoes in my memory from my youth.

Later Decoration Day become Memorial Day, a day set aside by our country to memorialize and pay tribute to all those who have given their lives in military service for our country. And now, of course, the Memorial Day remembrance has expanded beyond that, becoming a general remembrance of our loved ones who have died.

Here, in our religious community, as in our “Call to Remembrance” earlier, we use this Memorial Day Sunday for remembering loved ones from this Fellowship.

My reading this morning, remembering those loved ones no longer with us, is a poem by Conrad Aiken, titled “Music I Heard.”

Music I heard with you was more than music,
And bread I broke with you was more than bread;
Now that I am without you, all is desolate;
All that was once so beautiful is dead.

Your hands once touched this table and this silver,
And I have seen your fingers hold this glass.
These things do not remember you, beloved, –
And yet your touch upon them will not pass.

For it was in my heart you moved among them,
And blessed them with your hands and with your eyes;
And in my heart they will remember always, –
They knew you once, O beautiful and wise.

(Conrad Aiken , “Music I Heard”)

**“WORDS FOR MEMORIAL DAY”
by Dan Gerber**

1. It probably won’t come as any surprise to you that the lion’s share of my talk this morning will come to you in the form of poetry.

If one defines religion as the way one lives one’s life, then I would say that my religion is poetry, which Ezra Pound defined as a way of saying what can’t be said. He also said that the function of literature—and by extension of all art—is to nurture our impulse to go on living and that *poetry* is a kind of inspired mathematics in which the poet must find equations for the emotions. In other words, metaphors, which are the only way we can talk about life and death and all the other things we can’t talk about.

If T.S. Eliot told us that his life seemed devoid of purpose and joy and was filled with despair, our response would most likely be, “Oh.” But when, instead, he writes,

I should have been a pair for ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

we're more likely to say "Ah!" Rather than taking information in from outside, we're feeling it well up from within.

2. One night about 30 years ago as we sat up talking into the small hours of the morning, my late Zen master, Kobun Chino Roshi, turned to me and asked, "What happens to those we loved who are no longer with us?" I considered the question for a moment, and then Kobun said, "Do you think that when we think of them, that is their way of speaking to us?"

Since that early morning moment I've continued to live with Kobun's question, and it's been true, in my experience, that my departed have blamed me for whatever I think needed blame and forgiven me for whatever I think needs forgiveness, and in the dark hours of my being, they remain available to me.

Rainer Maria Rilke, a German language poet of the late 19th and early 20th century, who has been my master of language and perception for almost 50 years now, struck a chord for me in this poem:

I love the dark hours of my being
in which my senses drop into the deep.
I have found in them, as in old letters,
my private life, that is already lived through,
and become wide and powerful now, like legends.
Then I know there is room in me
for a second huge and timeless life.

But sometimes I am like a tree that stands
over a grave, a leafy tree, fully grown,
who has lived out that particular dream, that the dead boy
(around whom its warm roots are pressing)
lost through his sad moods and his poems.

One of the old Zen Masters said that only egotistical people concern themselves with what happens after death, because they are thinking what will happen to *Me* after I die.

This sounds a little harsh, but then truth often does.

This same teacher also said that we suffer because we believe that Buddha said we don't exist. But he didn't say we don't exist. He only said that we don't have a separate self.

We can confirm this physically if we imagine looking at our world from the viewpoint of an atom, from which there would be no way to determine where you left off and I begin.

Our problem—if it is a problem—is our limited perception. William Blake said that if the doors of our perception—our five senses—could be clarified, we would see our world and ourselves as we truly are: *Infinite!*

In “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” Blake tells us that:

Man has no Body distinct from his Soul for that called Body is a portion of Soul discerned by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age.

And he goes on to say:

Energy is the only life and is from the Body and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy.

And that,

Energy is Eternal Delight.

So if we conceive ourselves as separate from others while they are alive and with us, it would be only natural to feel even more separated from them when they are gone.

But curiously, sometimes our experience seems just the opposite. I’ve had the experience of feeling closer to loved ones after their deaths, of feeling their abiding presence in place of what may have been—while they were living—a glancing or conflicted presence.

My late sister, Scotti, so plain-spoken that I eulogized her by saying that what she lacked in tact, she made up for in frankness, has remained so vivid in my consciousness that it’s been difficult to miss her.

We remember the scene near the end of *Our Town* where Emily comes back from the grave to revisit her twelfth birthday and is so devastated to see how little her family seemed to appreciate each other, how everyone seemed to glance over the surface of things in the course of their daily lives, until she begs to return to the grave and, in desperation, asks the Stage Manager:

Does anyone pay attention? Does anyone really live their life every moment?

And the Stage Manager’s laconic response is:

Poets and saints maybe; they do some.

That line has stuck with me over the last 50 years as something to aspire to, though, having known a great many more poets than saints, that one has always seemed an odd association.

We've all heard people say that they didn't fully appreciate someone they loved until they were gone. When someone dies we're no longer distracted by their personal, sometimes irritating quirks, or by their desires, which may have conflicted with our desires. In fact, we often find that what we may have considered irritations in our daily lives with them become, in remembering and grieving for them, among their most endearing qualities. We may discover with them, as we must with ourselves, that our wisdom and our neurosis are made of the same stuff, that our hang-ups contain our wealth. We also discover that as we learn to be less judgmental of our own oddities, we naturally become less eager to judge others.

One of my great teachers said that a fool sees himself as others, and a wise man sees others as himself.

My sister Scotti, again, summed this up beautifully when she cautioned me about the pitfalls of needing to be *right* about almost anything. Peering over the rims of her glasses one morning when I was about to go off to give someone a piece of my mind, she said. "Just remember dear, the toes you step on today may be connected to the ass you may have to kiss tomorrow."

One of my favorite responses to this question of who we are is in one of Rilke's very early poems:

I live my life in growing orbits
which move out over the things of the world.
Perhaps I can never achieve the last,
but that will be my desire.

I am circling around God, around the ancient tower,
and I have been circling for a thousand years,
and I still don't know if I am a falcon, or a storm,
or an unfinished song.

Through turbulence, bubbles form on the surface of this river of life, and maybe, for the time of its existence, the bubble thinks of itself as an entity separate from the river. But then it bursts and rediscovers what it always has been, simply one with the great river itself.

Perhaps my favorite metaphor for our lives is that of Ananda Coomaraswamy's billiard balls:

Coomaraswamy says that if you place two billiard balls in close contact and roll a third ball against the first, the first ball hits them, and it stops dead. But the third ball moves out and leaves the other two behind. Now it's not the same ball, but it's the same energy.

And I love this little poem by Juan Ramon Jimenez:

I am not I.
I am this one
Walking beside me whom I do not see,
Whom at times I manage to visit,
And whom at other times I forget;
Who remains calm and silent while I talk,
And forgives gently, when I hate,
Who walks where I am not,
Who will remain standing when I die.

And, in *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman inquires magnificently about those we can no longer see:

What do you think has become of the young and old men?
And what do you think has become of the women and children?
They are alive and well somewhere,
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the
end to arrest it,
And ceased the moment life appeared.
All goes onward and outward and nothing collapses,
And to die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier.
Has anyone supposed it lucky to be born?
I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die, and
I know it.
I pass death with the dying, and birth with the new-washed babe,
and am not contained between my hat and boots
And pursue manifold objects, no two alike, and everyone good.
The earth good, and the stars good, and their adjuncts all good.
I am not an earth or an adjunct of an earth,
I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and
fathomless as myself.
They do not know how immortal,
but I know.

And he concludes this great poem we've come to know as "Song of Myself" by celebrating his own death:

I depart as air,
I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love.
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you never-the-less,
And filter and fiber your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you.

3. Taisen Deshimaru says that “Seen from the subjective point of death, life is frightening and mysterious.”

But you know from your own experience that life is just life. It can be frightening and mysterious, or not, depending on your mind, depending on how you choose to see it.

I had *my own* very personal experience of this about 40 years ago in Riverside, California. THE CRASH

My belief that I was dying

The surprise that I felt no fear or desperation, only a mild disappointment.

In his *Eighth Duino Elegy*, Rilke writes of death that:

Only we see it; the animals are free,
and always keep their deaths behind them,
God in front; and when they run, they run
into eternity, as fountains run.

A child
is sometimes lost in stillness there, but soon
is jolted back. Or someone dies and IS it.
For, close to death, we no longer see death,
because we finally look outwards then.

4. In letters, Rilke tells us our responsibility as artists, and as human beings:

It is our task to imprint this temporary, perishable earth into ourselves so deeply, so painfully and passionately, that its essence can rise again “invisibly” inside us. We are the bees of the invisible. We wildly collect the honey of the visible to store it in the great golden hive of the invisible.

And he limns this process beautifully in another of his late poems:

The space the birds go hurtling through is not
the form-intensifying space you trust.
(Out there in the open, you deny yourself
and disappear without returning.)

Space reaches out from us, translating things.
To realize the being of a tree

project your inner space around it.
Surround it with awareness.
It will not be confined.
Only its reconfiguration
within your emptied mind
can make it fully tree.

Throughout “The Duino Elegies,” Rilke speaks of and addresses “The Angels.” And again, in letters, he tells us who these angels are:

The angel of the Elegies is that creature in whom the transformation of the visible into the invisible, which we are accomplishing, already appears in its completion...that being who guarantees the recognition of a higher level of reality in the invisible. And this is terrifying for us because we, its lovers and transformers, still cling to the visible.

He tells us that Angels are what we would be if we were freed from human distraction, and that only humans make sharp distinctions between the living and the dead. Angels, they say, move through both realms—the living and the dead—and don’t see any difference.

And there’s a poem by Thomas Hardy, called, “Transformations” which is simply too apt and too beautiful not to share with you this morning.

Portion of this yew,
Is a man my grandsire knew,
Bosomed here at its foot:
This branch may be his wife,
A ruddy human life
Now turned to a green shoot.

These grasses must be made
Of her who often prayed,
Last century for repose:
And the fair girl long ago
Whom I often tried to know
May be entering this rose.

So they are not underground,
But as nerves and leaves abound
In the growths of upper air,
And they feel the sun and rain,
And energy again
That made them what they were!

The other day someone, hearing that I would be speaking at a Unitarian church said,

“Well just don’t mention Jesus or they might come and burn a question mark on your lawn. And so, of course I just can’t resist the temptation, which leads to this little poem I’ve stolen from The Thomas Gospel:

WHEN I HAVE DOUBTS

Jesus says that if the Kingdom
is up in the air,
the birds will be there before you,
and if in the sea, the fishes
will have it as their own.

But tell me, dear Jesus,
isn’t that just, and just
as it should be?

5. I’m going to conclude by reading a few of my own poems through which I’ve come to begin to understand how I view those loved ones I can no longer touch and see, and my relationship with them.

PSALM

All my dead are with me.
All my dead are at ease,
free of time and what never may be.
All my dead are at peace with each other.
They will never change their minds.
They forgive me whatever I feel
needs forgiveness, and blame
what I think needs blame.
They are sunlight come to comfort me.
They lead me on the trail of my life’s work.
In my hand I see my father’s hand,
holding this pen.
My mother’s eyes, finally free of longing,
gaze at me from the mirror.
When I stand they look up
to see where I’m going.
They can’t see far through the tall grass,
but they see the tall grass,
and they smile to see it moving behind me.

TO THE ANGELS

Whoever you are, if
you are, as we think of you,

watching and listening
to the play of our lives
we sense most clearly
when we are not quite
our everyday selves,
getting and spending, looking
out, ahead or behind.
Rilke, my sort of angel,
said you are what
we would be, freed
from all these lovely,
and not so lovely
human distractions,
that in fact you
do not know us apart
from those we once knew
with our
eyes and fingers and tongues,
whose voices still
reach us at moments
when our need, in silence,
brings their half-forgotten
words through the timbre
of what was spoken or
we wished had been
or may even be, now
you've paused
a moment between us.

JUST BEFORE HE DIED

My father told me all he would miss
was that Hungarian stew my mother was cooking
the evening I took him to the hospital.
Years have passed now. My mother
dead for a decade. I wonder
if he really did miss that pungent stew?
I wonder if he still does?
I wonder if she brought it in a golden bowl?
Or if he turned, as a child
turns to other things,
like the first glimpse of mountains,
driving west?

ADUMBRATIO

In his death, my father has been wandering
through the forest. He enters a clearing
and stops to ponder the living sweep of the
sky. He holds back in the shadows, so as
not to be noticed, avoiding the probing fingers
of light. Sometimes he takes the form of
a bird or a pebble or the wind's high rejoinder
in the pines. When clouds build over the
afternoon, his shadow dissolves into moss,
lichen, the dry carpet of leaves. I walk
eastward along the bed of a stream where
a stream once was or will be.

DOROTHY

*How can that depth be fathomed
where a man may see himself reflected?*

Thoreau

I held her hand through her last drugged sleep
and called the names that used to make her smile

Mother, Mom,
names I'd pled with as a child
to let me be with her.

Dorothy Marion Scott, she insisted
as her illness worked its course,
never married, never gave birth,
still asking for her parents,
as if they'd suddenly been called away
or simply wandered off
to view some paintings in a church
faraway.

My words were only sounds now, coming back.
just slight rhyme and assonance,
until I said, "Dorothy,"
the name I'd never called before.

Her eyes opened.
I saw myself there twice.
I wonder who she was just then,
and if she saw me gazing in
before they closed again.

SAIL BABY SAIL

Now I sing to my mother, the lullabies she sang to me as a child. Her hand trembles to her mouth, as if to find the lips that once formed words, as if to move them again with her fingers into speech. She makes a face at me, and bounces her eyebrows as she would when she sang, *Gunk, gunk went the little bull froggy*, and I smooth back her hair as I sing to her now, *Gunk, gunk went the lady froggy too*. She laughs, and for a moment her trembling is gone. She holds her smile like a note sustained at the end of a phrase, like a child waiting for another surprise. I tickle her forehead, and remember a twilight over her shoulder, or think I remember, and the creaking of the chair as we rocked and the perfume she wore. *Sail baby sail*, I half mumble, half sing, *Far across the sea. Only don't forget to sail, home again to me*. She cries, and I catch her tears in a tissue, 'my tear catcher,' I call it, and she laughs. Something is passing between us, something I felt a dozen years ago as I talked to my father, long after he'd stopped breathing, something that holds us together, something like music, something we might carry to another life, like the sound of a human voice talking.

THE LOCAL NEWS

For sixty-four years now
my heart has worked without praise,
without benefits, time off, or even a
certificate of appreciation.
It stumbles only when it comes across beauty,
previewing the loss of something it loves,
or with the loss itself, which finally comes down to
looking at beauty across a divide,
unattainable, but for the moment that keeps
it, and the moment, alive.

I've always been one of those who look back--
half Zennist, half Goddist, my Zen master said--
like Orpheus or Lot's wife, who I know
I'd have coveted,
given my intrinsic predilection for salt.

I think of her as *Margot*, though
the concoctors of Genesis
never bothered to give her a name,
and given the chance I know I'd go back for her,
as I know I would for Eurydice too,

disregarding, for a moment,
the fickle nature of memory
and who I might be when her hand touches mine.

LYING UNDER THE OAKS ON A MORNING IN JUNE

I can't tell now if I'm drifting
among the roots or the branches,
rising into the clear spring sky
or drawn down to lie
with those dear, departed selves
I loved and couldn't help
but go on loving.

Benediction

Our benediction this morning is from the Rev. Kendyl Gibbons:

There is, finally, only one thing required of us: that is, to take life whole, the sunlight and shadows together; to live the life that is given us with courage and humor and truth.

We have such a little moment out of the vastness of time for all our wondering and loving. Therefore, let there be no half-heartedness; rather, let the soul be ardent in its pain, in its yearning, in its praise.

Then shall peace enfold our days, and glory shall not fade from our lives.

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 Dan Gerber at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on "Memorial Day Sunday," May 27, 2007. The spoken sermon is available on audio cassette at the Fellowship.)