

**“The Ache of Memory”**  
**Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**Memorial Day Sunday, May 25, 2008**  
**Bruce A. Bode**

**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)

**Opening Words**

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

Here we come to give our thanks, to face our ideals, to remember our loved ones, to seek that which is permanent, and to serve integrity, 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.

**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  
Micky Douhan  
Leo Lake  
Niels Holm  
Ruth Butler  
Diana Johanson  
Eleanor Finlay Otte

## **Conclusion of Ceremony**

We honor those who have lived and died in our 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 hymn number #412, "Let Hope and Sorrow Now Unite," and following this hymn we will sing our children to their classrooms.

## **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, but of both Union and Confederate soldiers who were buried at the Arlington National Cemetery, and he did so by decorating their graves with flowers. Thus, this day was first known as Decoration Day, a name that echoes in my memory from my youth.

Later Decoration Day become Memorial Day, a day set aside by our country to 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 is a poem written a couple of years ago by a member of our congregation, Deborah Hammond, upon the occasion of a death of a very close friend of hers.

The poem is titled, "Where to Find Me," and the words are as if spoken to the poet by her deceased friend. I read with the author's permission:

### **Where to Find Me**

I will not be in the grave.  
You already know this, but you may  
put my ashes there if you like;  
if you need a place marker of some sort.

I will not be in the ashes, either.  
You know that too, don't you?  
Ashes in an urn; a bit of stone on a grassy place:  
these are conveniences.

But I am present to you anytime, anywhere, already.  
When you want me I will be on the bus,  
or in the theater seat next to you.  
I'll be in all the rooms of your despair, your joy.

Still, if you need some token place for us to meet,  
sit here with me by the jade tree in the corner for a while.  
Sit on a piece of driftwood at North Beach and listen to the waves  
or watch the otters preen at dawn.

I don't mind if you choose an urn or a grave to visit.  
I've visited many a one in my day, too,  
to give my thoughts  
some direction.

I'm only saying:  
Go wherever you want  
and I will too,  
with you.

## “THE ACHE OF MEMORY”

### Introduction

It was a year ago in February that my father suddenly died of a heart attack – the early evening of February 9, 2007. In this past year lines of a Robert Frost poem have many times come unbidden into my mind – these words:

Only be it understood,  
It shall be no trespassing  
If I come again some spring  
In the grey disguise of years,  
Seeking ache of memory here.

These are the very last lines of a poem titled, “On the Sale of My Farm,” the words of which are printed at the top of your Order of Service today. I’d like to invite you to turn to that poem now, and before I speak about the meaning of these lines, I’d like to provide a couple of historical notes to the complete poem.

First, this poem was never part of Frost’s collected poems. For whatever reason – probably because it was too personal, or perhaps because he was not satisfied with it poetically – it only appeared in print after his death in his *uncollected* work.

And, indeed, to me this poem is undistinguished until the last lines when it suddenly shifts from a kind of casual, care-free, light-hearted, throw-away poem to something very much more substantial and serious.

Let me now read the entire poem for you as you follow along:

### On the Sale of My Farm

Well-away and be it so,  
To the stranger let them go.  
Even cheerfully I yield  
Pasture or chard, mowing-field,  
Yea and wish him all the gain  
I required of them in vain.  
Yea and I can yield him house,

Barn, and shed, with rat and mouse  
To dispute possession of.  
These I can unlearn to love.  
Since I cannot help it? Good!  
Only be it understood,  
It shall be no trespassing  
If I come again some spring  
In the grey disguise of years,  
Seeking ache of memory here.

One is not quite prepared for that shift of mood from outward, casual, and apparently carefree to suddenly inward, serious and sorrowful ... though that is often the way with us: we hide our deeper, darker, and more tender feelings behind a façade of light-hearted banter, even jocularly.

### **Robert Frost's farm**

The farm the poet is speaking of in this poem is a farm he and his wife, Elinor, and their young children lived on and were in the process of buying in the years 1900 to 1911. At this time, Frost was in his mid-twenties to mid-thirties, having been born in 1874.

The farm was located near Derry, New Hampshire, about an hour from Boston. You can still visit it. It's called the Robert Frost Farm and is designated a National Historic Landmark, preserved by the New Hampshire Division of Parks and Recreation.

When Frost and his family lived there, he was completely unknown as a poet. None of his books had not yet published, nor would they be for several more years – not until he and his young family moved to England for two and a half years in 1912.

But it was here on this farm near Derry, New Hampshire – primarily a poultry farm – where Frost wrote a number of his greatest poems. He would later say that the core of all his writing was from the first five years on this farm, five years when he was doing nothing but farming, raising a young family, and writing. (See letter to Robert Chase, March 4, 1952)

For the last five years when he lived on the farm, he was doing more teaching than farming, and because of this the farm suffered from neglect.

Thus, when the time came to sell the farm so that he might move closer to his teaching, no buyers came forward. The Frosts were forced to sell the mortgage for the farm back to the bank at a price considerably below market value. (*Robert Frost: A Life*, Jay Parini, p. 104) Some of Frost's mixed feelings related to the selling of this farm – to a bank and thence to a stranger – are caught in the poem.

Twenty-seven years later, in 1938, following the sudden death of his wife, Elinor, from a heart attack – they had been married for forty-three years – “the only woman he had ever loved” (Parini, p. 310) – Frost returned to the farm intending to scatter Elinor's ashes, according to her wishes, along a stream on the farm named Hyla Brook. (Frost has a fine poem by the name of “Hyla Brook.”)

But the wish that had earlier been expressed in the poem, where Frost wrote:

Only be it understood,  
It shall be no trespassing  
If I come again some spring ...

that wish was not to be fulfilled. For when Frost returned “In the grey disguise of years,” the farm had become a commercial garage and an auto graveyard (see pamphlet on The Robert Frost Farm published by the New Hampshire Division of Parks and Recreation), and Frost was met with indifference by the current owners; he could not explain himself, indeed, was treated almost like a trespasser. And so he turned away, telling his children that it would be a sacrilege to leave their mother's ashes there.

### **Another note on the poem**

One other interesting note about this poem: About a year ago, as I was thinking of this poem, I sent it to a friend whose father had also recently died. My friend wrote back saying, in summary:

“There must be a typo in that poem. Look at the line, ‘Pasture or chard, mowing-field,...’ That can't be right. Someone didn't read the handwriting properly. Certainly, it should read: ‘Pasture, orchard, mowing-field,’ with no break between the ‘r’ and the ‘c.’”

And, certainly, I agree this must be the case! It both makes much more logical sense and is rhythmically much the better ... though I've never seen anyone other than my friend point this out, and have only found it published as you have it in your Order of Service today.

So let me read the poem once again with that line now corrected:

Well-away and be it so,  
To the stranger let them go.  
Even cheerfully I yield  
Pasture, orchard, mowing-field,  
Yea and wish him all the gain  
I required of them in vain.  
Yea and I can yield him house,  
Barn, and shed, with rat and mouse  
To dispute possession of.  
These I can unlearn to love.  
Since I cannot help it? Good!  
Only be it understood,  
It shall be no trespassing  
If I come again some spring  
In the grey disguise of years,  
Seeking ache of memory here.

### **Examples of the ache of memory**

The ache of memory. I trust you know something of that ache and of the physical places that call forth that ache for you.

In my mind is a clear image of a friend from whom Flossie and I purchased a house in Grand Rapids, Michigan that was to be our home for over twenty years. This friend from whom we purchased the house was moving to the southwest part of our country, but would periodically return to Michigan for a visit.

And I remember the first time he returned to the house he had sold to us. I remember him walking down its entry-way leading into the living room, and then simply laying his head flat against the living room wall, overcome with an "ache of memory."

I am struck in the poem by the fact that the poet returns to his former dwelling *seeking* ache of memory there. Usually an ache, as in a toothache, is something you prefer to avoid and want to get rid of. But the poet comes *seeking* out the ache of memory ... doesn't want to avoid this ache at all. Indeed, he reserves the right to return to this place he no longer owns for the expressed purpose of *seeking* ache of memory there.

I have found that most people understand urge. And certainly when my friend from whom we purchased our house returned, we welcomed him; we understood his need to re-connect with a part of his life.

And then on a later occasion, the owners of the house prior to our friend, whom we had not known or met, unexpectedly stopped by to see the place where so much of their life had been lived. And, of course, we were most happy to give them all the time and space they needed to wander about and remember. They were no trespassers.

And I, too, on more than one occasion have knocked on the door of the house I primarily grew up in – this in Lynden, Washington – asking the unknown owners if I might take a look. And they have made me welcome; they understood; I was no trespasser.

And many, many times I drive by that place where I grew up. The car seems to have a will of its own. It doesn't follow the shortest route to where I am going, but it takes a detour to go by that house, or it takes me along roads where I rode the bus to school, or it steers itself to streams and ditches where I went fishing as a youngster.

And at least once a year, it seems, I must walk in the woods where I played in my youth – the woods that was across from the house where I grew up. There I must see if the trillium are where they used to be, and the vine maple hugging the ground, or the hazel nut trees where you could harvest nuts in the fall or cut arrows for your hand-made bow at other times; or, again, to check where a little pond appeared in the spring, or to examine the ditch where frog eggs hatched into pollywogs, or to walk the trails and the paths I used to walk. Certainly there I am “seeking ache of memory.”

### **Why seek “the ache of memory”**

Why seek out this ache of memory?

I suppose to check to see how my interior memory matches present reality. I suppose to recollect myself, to learn again, and for the first time, who I am. As T.S. Eliot says, and as last Sunday's speaker, Kurt Hoelting, quoted:

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

(Excerpt from "Little Gidding")

And it's always the first time ... because each time when we circle around and return, it's a different place. We are different; our experience is different.

Or, again, perhaps we seek out the ache of memory because memory is crucial to our humanity in a way that is different from most species. For most species, memory is ground in to the very cells of their bodies, into their DNA – and so, too, for us.

But for us humans, there is a greater flexibility with regard to memory, so that, as with so many aspects of our species, memory is something we must cultivate – it's not just given, but it's something we give ourselves to. Thus, we take notes, we take pictures, we write journals, we put up plaques and monuments, we create cemeteries.

Our archeologists, for example, are able to identify our species – *homo sapiens sapiens* – by the fact that we are the species who create burial sites; we are those creatures who mark a place by which to remember those whom we have loved and lost.

### **The desire for afterlife**

And is not our longing for an afterlife at least partially due to an ache of memory – an ache to return to a place we have known and loved, not only to recollect ourselves, or to maintain our identity, but also so see what's become of the place we're no longer directly a part of ... to see how it's doing. Part of the ache of memory is the ache of being cut off from something that was once precious to us.

In various poems, for example, the poet Robinson Jeffers imagines himself – or his ghost – returning to the house that he had built. Jeffers had built a house, adjoining buildings, and a tower out of sea-rock that he had pulled up from the coast in Carmel, California. In a poem titled “Ghost,” found in his effects after his death, he writes:

There is a juggle of masonry here, on a small hill  
Above the gray-mouthed Pacific, cottages and a thick-walled tower, all  
made of rough sea-rock  
And Portland cement. I imagine, fifty years from now,  
A mist-gray figure moping about this place in mad moon-light,  
examining the mortar-joints, pawing the  
Parasite ivy: “Does the place stand? How did it take that last  
earthquake?” Then someone comes  
From the house-door, taking a poodle for his bedtime walk. The dog  
snarls and retreats; the man  
Stands rigid, saying “Who are you? What are you doing here?”  
“Nothing to hurt you,” it answers, “I am just looking  
At the walls that I built. I see that you have played hell  
With the trees I planted.” “There has to be room for people,” he  
answers. “My God,” he says, “*That* still!”  
(“Ghost,” from The Beginning and the End and other poems)

Jeffers had some issues with our species and with what he regarded as human overpopulation.

At any rate, there’s an ache associated with returning to the places with which we are connected, and there’s an ache and a sorrow in contemplating the fact that we can never return.

### **Entering sorrow**

With regard to that sorrow, I respectfully submit that we must allow ourselves to enter it – to give ourselves to the “ache of memory.” I submit that to avoid the ache of memory is not healthful; it will block your development; you will lose track of parts of yourself.

And with regard to loved ones who have passed, if you attempt to avoid the ache of memory with regard to them, you will lose parts of them as well.

For after a loved one dies, you cannot remember that loved one without also remembering that that loved one is no longer physically with you. Now you have to go through the gate of death to meet your departed loved one.

So there's some advice here, namely, not to try to avoid the ache of memory or the sorrow of the world. Allow yourself to enter the sorrow of the world and to experience the ache of memory. How often we waste our energy out of fear and avoidance!

And, really, how can you avoid that ache of memory or the sorrows of the world? As William Blake says, "Joy and woe are woven fine, a clothing for the soul divine."

Does not all memory of the life we have lived have some kind of ache in it?

It may be an ache for a beauty we first encountered in a place – the first awakening to a love of some kind.

Or, an ache of yearning for what we once had but have no longer – "the wonder and glory we have lost and would find again." (Dr. Duncan E. Littlefair)

Or, an ache of regret for something left undone.

Or, an ache of remorse for something we have done, but to our shame.

Or, an ache of sadness for missing out on something because of our lack of consciousness at the time – oh, how we wish we might have more aware at that time!

Or, finally, an ache of sorrow for loved ones lost, for companionship ended.

There may be an ache in all memory of life we have lived, one way or the other.

So I'm suggesting, as Robert Frost does, that we seek out the ache of memory, that we not be afraid to go to those places that hold memories for us ... for, indeed, memories are held in things and places. Memories are physically encoded in the brains, but for the mind to retrieve those memories, it often seems to require a physical prod or a physical contact ... so that going to the place opens and unlocks the vault of memory.

I conclude with a final poem by Conrad Aiken about how physical things – like a table, or silverware, or a drinking glass – are touchstones of memory.

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.

(“Music I Heard,” by Conrad Aiken)

### **Benediction**

And now may the faith we nourish here  
And the memories we gather here  
Give us hope for the future.  
May the love that we share  
And the companionship we feel  
Strengthen us and bring joy to our hearts.  
And may the blessings of our fellowship rest upon us,  
This day and forevermore. Amen.

### **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 service given by The Reverend Bruce A. Bode at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship on Memorial Day Sunday, May 25, 2008. The spoken message, available on

audio cassette at the Fellowship, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)