

Remembering for the Future

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Phoenix

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My friend Dorothy, who imparted great wisdom to me, once informed me that as a person got to her age (and perhaps to my own age), she spent a lot of time thinking about the hereafter – when you walk into a room you stop, look around and ask, “Now, what did I come in here after?”

Tom and Ray Magliozzi, well known for years as the Car Talk guys on National Public Radio, once read a list of new words that should be added to the dictionary – one of the words was “destinesia” – going into a room and forgetting why you are there.

Most of us have stories – putting the peanut butter in the freezer and the ice cream in the cupboard; finding our glasses in the cutlery drawer; finally locating our car keys in the pocket of the jacket we wore yesterday, misplacing our cell phone several times every day . . .

Memory is such a slippery thing for all of us, all our lives – my very smart son, when he was in elementary school, could never remember exactly what had happened to that jacket he was wearing in the morning when he left the house, which was nowhere to be found when he got home from school several hours later. And remember memorizing for all those tests in school? – the US presidents, the capitols of all the states – I had a 10th-grade teacher who expected us to learn all the monarchs of England. Good luck with that!

But we also know that memory is central to our human sense of identity – as philosopher John Locke speculated several centuries ago, we know who we are by what we remember. Just as René Descartes said that we know we exist because we can think about existing – “I think, therefore I am,” John Locke said we know who we are because we have our memories. I am me, because I have memories about what I have done and who I have been, and I weave the fabric of myself from those memories as I shape my future.

Re-membering. To “member” is to join – we talk about becoming a member, when we make ourselves part of something larger. Parts of our bodies are sometimes referred to as our “members,” because each segment of us is essential to what makes us whole.

In the same way, to re-member is to re-connect that which has been severed, to bring back a part of who and what we are. In our memory, by remembering, by hearing the stories of our family and community, we make ourselves whole, again and again rejoining the parts of ourselves.

This May weekend of Memorial Day is one of those times we look into our past, and into the essentials of our lives on a troubled and hopeful planet. Today we honor those who have risked their lives to keep us safe against threats; we sing of peace, shalom, of our longing for a world we imagine, one that does not experience conflict and war.

We dedicate ourselves to the care of our children, the children of this congregational community, and all children, because each new generation connects the past and the future. Our children are shaped by the context of our lives and by their own experience, by the memories we help them create as they weave their own life stories. And we pause to reflect in this time on how we learn and build from our past into the future we create in our living.

We define ourselves by the events of our lives, what we have lived through, the successes or failures from which we have learned, the ways we have been shaped by our past. When we

meet someone for the first time, we often want to know, not only who they are in the present moment, but who have they been? What have they done? Where did they grow up, where did they go to school, what work have they done, what families have they been part of? This information from the past shapes how we see them, our understanding of who they are in the present, and how they are similar to or different from ourselves.

We understand ourselves as individuals, we understand our family and community systems, we know ourselves as a nation, by what we remember, and which memories we choose to celebrate. And sometimes we find our history has been shaped by what we choose to forget. For instance, the stories of our nation tell us that in 1865 the tradition of Memorial Day in America was started, but it is seldom remembered that the tradition was started by former Black slaves who had been freed during the Civil War.

As a historic source recounts, this occurred in Charleston, South Carolina, as Black freedmen took initiative to honor 257 dead Union Soldiers who had been buried in a mass grave in a Confederate prison camp. The former slaves dug up the bodies and worked for 2 weeks, cleaning up and landscaping the new burial ground. They built an enclosure and an arch labeled, "Martyrs of the Race Course," to give these unknown soldiers a proper burial as gratitude for fighting for their freedom. Black residents of Charleston organized a May Day ceremony attended by nearly ten thousand people, mostly freedmen, and the event was covered by the New York Tribune and other national papers. Those present included about 3,000 Black school children newly enrolled in freedmen's schools, mutual aid societies, Union troops, Black ministers, and White northern ministers.

American history professor David Blight said of that day: "African Americans invented Memorial Day in Charleston, South Carolina. What you have there is black Americans recently freed from slavery, announcing to the world with their flowers, their feet, and their songs what the war had been about. What they basically were creating was the Independence Day of a Second American Revolution."

I know a fair amount of US history, but I did not grow up knowing that reality of Memorial Day – the question is, *how* did I not know that until the past few years? That national forgetting actively dishonors the memories of those who emerged from the horrors of slavery, not in resentment, but with gratitude and generosity. Perhaps now, in re-membering, we can reconnect those severed parts, we can begin to bring ourselves back into wholeness. Memorial Day is not only a day of remembering, it is an act of reconciliation, a holiday for honoring those who gave their lives for a larger cause in which they believed, and also for honoring those who responded to that gift with their hearts and hands. As we honor both the sacrifice of military service and the generosity of those who were freed from slavery in that war, as we commemorate their valor and grieve the losses, we weave the memory into a new shape. That act of remembering helps us know ourselves in a different way, a way that is more honest and whole.

Through our memories, we know ourselves as a people who do our best to make the right decisions, who blunder into tragedy, who help each other and hurt each other, and who love and bind ourselves to each other in community. We know who we are by keeping in our minds and hearts those we have loved and lost; the blessed actions and the mistakes of the past – and so in keeping the memories alive we find our wholeness.

Theologian Charles Foster in his book, *Educating Congregations*, has said, "Memory links events across our history into a web of meanings that, in turn, embed us in their perception and promise. Through memory we live into, and are shaped by, those events that distinctively shape our life and mission." Our memory tells us who we are, so we may create ourselves as we might

become. At its best, memory “fuels our efforts to live with hope into the future. It gives impetus to our creativity and transformation, to freedom and new life.” That is true for us each and all, both individually and for the communities in which we are embedded.

Story is important for our memory. Families tell stories, to pass the heritage along to the children, to remind themselves of how they are bound together, the meaning of their lives and who they are in the world. By our stories we know ourselves. Passed down through generations, our images of ourselves are woven from our stories, the fabric of our collective memory. A state or a nation has stories – the remembering we do on Memorial Day is part of our story, the story of a nation in which we have known violence, the violence of injustice as well as the violence of war, and in which we seek healing.

Websites describing Memorial Day, relaying a sort of sanitized history, say the practice “originated in the years following the Civil War.” The account gives no credit to the extraordinary effort it took for the Black freedmen, people who had little to share except the labor of their hands, labor which now belonged to themselves for the first time in centuries, to implement this loving act.

The fact that we have largely failed to remember that the Memorial Day celebration was originated by people of African descent, people who had been slaves prior to the war, is one more consequence of the continuing dominance of white supremacy in our society, and this helps us know the work that remains for us to do, to create the world of justice and peace for which we yearn.

We know ourselves as we tell the stories, and from them we weave our future. And when we forget? In the philosophy of John Locke, identity and selfhood consist entirely in continuity of memory. A person who remembers nothing of their past literally has no identity. A person who mis-remembers their past has an incomplete and flawed identity. That is the source of our fear of forgetting – not just that we will miss an appointment or a deadline, or that the ice cream will melt before we retrieve it from the cupboard – but most deeply, that we will lose our identity, that our membering will slip away, that we will forget the completeness of who we are.

Forgetting pulls us loose from our foundations, eroding our identity. Sometimes perhaps it is far too easy to forget or to revise the past, especially a past that is in some way uncomfortable, and to live in an imagined past, or focus on the present moment – as though each succeeding moment were unique in itself, unanchored to what has gone before, with no continuity to the larger flow of historical events of which we are only a small and transient part.

This loosening of the bonds of memory can lead to a loss of perspective – we can be beguiled into thinking that we created ourselves, and that what we do in the present moment is of ultimate worth and entirely of our own making, forgetting the giants on whose shoulders we rest, forgetting the real contributors and the difference it made.

The identity of our human organizations is anchored by our historical record. In every human community there is a need for answers to those questions about what we used to do when. When, how and why was this organization created? What have been the landmark moments in our history? Where did our traditions begin, why do we do things a certain way? Who have we been, and who are we now?

When we lose parts of our corporate memory, our recollection of the shared history that links us to our faith traditions and the foundation of common experiences within the life of a faith community, we can lose the deeper meanings of who we are.

This disconnection can happen at two levels: personally, when we see ourselves, as unique individuals, existing outside any connection to community or the common heritage of a people. This can lead to a sense of consumerism, in which we want to be made happy by the congregation, rather than being challenged and transformed by it.

We can also get disconnected congregationally, when we see each faith community as an island, disconnected from any history but our own, and isolated from other congregations and the community around us, from others that share our commitments and our struggles. Such isolation cuts us off from our roots and tears our identity from its meaning, from its link to something larger. When we forget who we are related to, those whom we love, those who have been our partners in the struggle, we also forget who we are. And when we forget who we are, we are in grave danger of forgetting who we can be. It is crucial that we remember the reality of our heritage and our connections so that we might re-member ourselves back into wholeness.

We are a courageous people, a doubting, questioning and challenging people, sometimes an argumentative people – and for all that, we Unitarian Universalists are a loving people, gathering in and making space for faithful doubters and questioners of all stripes, working to create a more open and just society for all.

When we remember who we have been, perhaps we may become more tolerant of each other, more accepting that not everything in this community will be exactly to our liking, but that we are better together than we are separately, better re-membered than divided. As we engage with the completeness of our memory, we reclaim our precious historical heritage. We remember to appreciate all the ways we are different from each other; we honor our religious heritage, and we know ourselves as a people of a vibrant and living faith.

In remembering who we are, we create who we might be. Re-membering ourselves, we build on our past as we shape our vision for the future, and move forward together in confidence, becoming always more truly ourselves in community. We can become ever more truly an active collective presence in a troubled world, and together we may create a world that knows itself for what it has been, what it is, and what it can be. And that gives us one more reason to rejoice together as we join the harmony of our different voices to create beauty, peace and justice in the world. Let us rise now in body or spirit to join in our closing hymn, #1017 Building a New Way

Sources:

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