

## We Remember

Readings: 'Lonely Eagles' by Marilyn Nelson  
 'Finding a Box of Family Letters' by Dana Gioia  
 'There is a Brokenness' by Rashani Réa

On this memorial day weekend, we remember specifically those who died in military service to our country, the 33 who died in combat zones this year, the untold thousands who have died in previous years, and those who had part of them die in their military service, who came home with that generation's name for the moral injury that war inflicts—shell shock, Battle fatigue, operational exhaustion, combat stress reaction, post-traumatic stress disorder.

So many gave so much for the promise of this country, the lofty words of our highest aspirations, the unrealized promise, the sometimes broken promise that is this country.

We are grateful. We grieve. We honor these dead. We speak their names.

"As we look at these headstones, row on row on row...

And once more, let our hearts be broken.

God have mercy on them for their heroic gift.

May we live the good lives they would have lived"<sup>1</sup>

And as we remember these service members, we also remember that we are one human family, a world community that transcends national border and national interests. We remember that other lands have sunlight, skies and clover. We remember that hearts in other lands are beating with hopes and dreams as true and high as ours.

So may we live the good lives they would have lived. And to live the good life the dead—all our beloved dead—call us to with their messages to 'get out there and dance,' the tender growth they've left for us, the breath that literally supports us—we make ourselves vulnerable to more loss and more grief.

In the poem 'Auguries of Innocence,' William Blake writes,

'Man was made for Joy & Woe  
 And when this we rightly know  
 Thro the World we safely go  
 Joy & Woe are woven fine  
 A Clothing for the soul divine  
 Under every grief & pine  
 Runs a joy with silken twine'

We know this. We know that joy and woe are woven fine. Brené Brown, a professor of social work, gives a lecture that reminds us of this. She begins, 'Christmas Eve, beautiful night, light snowfall, young family of four in the car on the way to grandma's house for dinner. They're listening to the radio... "Jingle Bells" come on. The kids in the back seat go crazy. Everyone breaks into song. The camera pans in on the faces of the kids, mom, dad. what happens next?"

What do you think happens next? Anyone want to offer an answer?

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<sup>1</sup> from 'Memorial Day Sonnet' by Garrison Kiellor

In her research, Brown finds that 60% say “car crash” and about 15% more have ‘equally fatalistic answers, but more creative.’ Perhaps this is because movies and television have taught us that this sort of peaceful scene needs to be interrupted with tragedy for the sake of a powerful narrative.<sup>2</sup> I think it points to something deeper. We all know that joy and woe are woven fine, that joy is grief inside out. Our most precious moments are so precious because they are so fleeting.

We all were made for joy and woe. Joy and sadness, grief and gladness are woven together in our lives. If we live lives of meaning and connection, lives where we are in relationship with people who love, support, value, and inspire us, loss is unavoidable. Grief is unavoidable. Loving makes losing inevitable.

In a beautiful lecture on grief, minister John H. Nichols said, ‘The richer our lives are the more vulnerable we are to loss. Each loss involves a partial disintegration of the universe in which we live—at least a challenge to our way of looking at life and the world... Grief is not to be belittled. It is the very process by which we grow up either to confront the world in which loss is always possible, meet it on its terms and enjoy it, or to hide from it.’<sup>3</sup>

We all must choose to confront the world in which loss is always possible, meet it on its terms and enjoy it. Hiding from life for fear of loss is no life at all. Lives that are worth living—lives of meaning, connection, and relationship promise loss.

This does not mean that our hearts don’t shatter when the loss and grief come. So many in our community and our world are grieving. We grieve our beloved dead this year at People’s Church – Dick Heintz, Jim Croteau, Sally Gottlieb, John Walker and Don Bregger – and we grieve those we have lost in other parts of our lives, family and community connections, and the people whose lives impacted and inspired us from afar.

And death is not the only loss we grieve. Relationships end with divorce or moving away or the shift in priorities and the slow fade that often marks the end of a friendship. There are lost jobs and lost pets. There are the dreams we set aside, recognizing that they will not be realized. As we age, most of us experience a series of losses. We need more sleep than we used to. The food we love no longer sits well in our stomach or we need to avoid it for health reasons. We can’t see like we used to. We struggle to hear and that strains our relationships.

Life is a series of losses... and yet we live through it. We live the lives of banana trees, sending out shoots and new growth, and through it all creating new life. In the midst of the loss and change, we create new and stronger connections, new relationships, an even more powerful legacy of love.

In the poem I read earlier, ‘Lonely Eagles’ by Marilyn Nelson, she tells the story of a man who slept on his dead comrade’s air mattress for the remainder of his tour of duty. He was sleeping on the dead man’s breath.

It’s a beautiful, haunting image. We are all sleeping on the breath of those we have lost – few so literally as that man in the poem.

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<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Senior, Jennifer. *All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenthood*. New York: HarperCollins, 2014. pages 244-245.

<sup>3</sup> from Nichols, John H. ‘Loss: The Litmus Test of a Religious Faith’ retrieved from

<http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/facing-death/workshop-3/handout-3-loss-litmus-test-religious-faith>

Some would say that our dead are with us as spirits or guardian angels. Some know they are with us in the ways their voices and their wisdom echo in our heads. Others see their presence in the objects they left behind, the hidden egg or chocolate bar or bottle of whiskey, our inheritance. Others know their presence in the way we now live out their deeply held values, contributing to their legacy, being part of the creative force that other person left behind. We can rest in the comfort of the love and wisdom that our beloved dead shared with us, a love and wisdom sometimes expressed through their words, through their breath.

So, on this Memorial Day Weekend, may we take some time to remember those who have given their lives in military service to this country.

May we remember all of those we have lost – and attend to the other losses in our lives.

May we live the lives of a banana tree, a life that helps to create new life.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.