

## We Remember

Readings: 'At the Vietnam Memorial' by George Bilgere  
'Advice from La Llorona' by Deborah A. Miranda  
'In Blackwater Woods' by Mary Oliver

Before there was Memorial Day, there was Decoration Day. Decoration Day was first observed in the years after the American Civil War. There is a dispute about who first went to the cemeteries to decorate the graves of dead soldiers, with a number of communities claiming to be first. Many communities needed to honor and thank those who died in the war that ended slavery, that kept this country whole. Over 600,000 soldiers died in that war, about two percent of the population. Everyone knew people who died. People started gathering in the spring in the cemetery to show gratitude to the dead.

This event quickly became more coordinated. In 1868, a former General John A. Logan, the leader of Civil War Veterans organization, declared that Decoration Days should be held throughout the North. The practice quickly spread.

A few years later, there was a large Decoration Day gathering at Arlington National Cemetery. Frederick Douglass, a black man who escaped slavery and then became one of the leading orators of the day spoke. It is a beautiful speech – I commend it to you in its entirety. He ends with a passage that calls to us across space and time. Less than a decade after the end of the Civil War, Douglass said,

We must never forget that the loyal soldiers who rest beneath this sod flung themselves between the nation and the nation's destroyers. If today we have a country not boiling in an agony of blood,... if now we have a united country, no longer cursed by the hell-black system of human bondage, if the American name is no longer a by-word and a hissing to a mocking earth, if the star-spangled banner floats only over free American citizens in every quarter of the land, and our country has before it a long and glorious career of justice, liberty, and civilization, we are indebted to the unselfish devotion of the noble army who rest in these honored graves all around us.<sup>1</sup>

Douglass' refrain of 'if' sounds a challenge and casts a vision that still speaks to us. He envisions a country that is not boiling in an agony of blood, a united country, a country not cursed by slavery, a country that is full of free people, a country that has justice, liberty, and civilization stretched out before it. We can all do our internal calculations about how well this country is living into this promise, a vision that so many lost their lives to protect, about our own small efforts to create this country and this world.

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<sup>1</sup> Douglass, Frederick. 'The Unknown Loyal Dead.' Quoted in Coates, Ta-Nehisi. 'The Other Decoration Day Speech.' *The Atlantic*. January 19, 2011. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2011/01/the-other-decoration-day-speech/69782/>

Over generations, Decoration Day became Memorial Day, a day still dedicated to mourning those who died in war. Though for most of us, it might be more about the beginning of summer and cookouts and a three-day weekend.

That's why I appreciate that Memorial Day is a day of remembrance here in this congregation. When I began serving as your minister, some of you told me that this is what you do on the Sunday before Memorial Day. This isn't a common practice among Unitarian Universalists. Most congregations that do a service in remembrance of the dead do one in the fall, connected to All Souls Day and *Día de los Muertos*. Others honor the dead on the first Sunday of the new year or another time in winter.

It is good to remember now, as it feels like spring is finally here after a long winter. It is good to remember that grief and loss have no season; death doesn't take a summer vacation. We can be mourning in spring just as easily as in the fall.

And friends, we have much mourning to do this year. There has been a lot of death here in our church community. We had seven church members die this year, the most in a year in recent memory. They are Camilla Klinesteker, Betty McFerran, Pat Pratt, Sarah Renstrom, Jean Schroder, Fay Smith, and Raeann Snook. How we will miss them. Some of you have said this feels like the passing of a generation. Our lives, the church, and the world have been changed by their presence among us. Many other People's people experienced the death of a loved one, as we saw in the montage and know from joys and concerns and in other ways. There are so many of us grieving people we love. And so many of us are living with other losses.

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 illnesses and injuries. 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, choosing love, 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.

That doesn't mean that it is easy. It is hard. Chris read a poem earlier, 'Advice from La Llorona.' *La Llorona*, which means 'weeping woman' in Spanish is a mythic figure in Mexico, a woman whose children have died, who wanders the countryside in search of them or other children to take their place. Some parents tell their children to behave or *La Llorona* will catch them. She is the subject of horror movies and songs and many poems including the one by Deborah A. Miranda that we all heard earlier. Miranda is a Lesbian poet and educator who claims a multiracial identity who is an enrolled member of the Esselen tribe of California.

I am going to read it again, as I think it is such powerful advice for how to live during a season of grief:

**Advice from La Llorona**

Each grief has its unique side.  
Choose the one that appeals to you.  
Go gently.  
Your body needs energy to repair the amputation.  
Humor phantom pain.

Your brain cells are soaked with salt;  
connections fail unexpectedly and often.  
Ask for help.  
Accept help.

Read your grief like the daily newspaper:  
headlines may have information you need.  
Scream. Drop-kick the garbage can across the street.

Don't feel guilty if you have a good time.  
Don't act as if you haven't been hit by a Mack Truck.  
Do things a little differently  
but don't make a lot of changes.  
Revel in contradiction.

Talk to the person who died.  
Give her a piece of your mind.

Try to touch someone at least once a day.  
Approach grief with determination.  
Pretend the finish line doesn't keep receding.  
Lean into the pain.  
You can't outrun it.<sup>2</sup>

I have one more piece of advice that I would add to this list. When we are living with grief, rituals are important, that can be as small as savoring a cup of coffee in a favorite mug every morning or as large as a memorial service. I often think of rituals as the technology we work with here. We use simple tools – a few words, a candle, some water, a flower, a stone. We use them to mark the most significant moments of our lives. This works. It has worked for millennia. So now, let's

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<sup>2</sup> From Miranda, Deborah A. *The Zen of La Llorona*. Cromer, United Kingdom: Salt Publishing, 2005.

engage this spiritual technology. I invite all of you who are living with loss to come forward to light a candle.

Your loss might be the death of a person or another experience of loss. It can be a loss that is recent or one you have carried for a long time. If you want to speak a word or two aloud as you light a candle, please do that. If you would rather light in silence, do that. Music will be playing as we do this. Let us begin.