

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie  
 Arlington Street Church  
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## Remember

Laurence Binyon: if you haven't heard of him, neither had I. He taught poetry at Harvard at the turn of the last century. His own poetry is high cringe-factor, including something he wrote in 1914, at the outbreak of the Great War – a piece called *For the Fallen*. Astonishingly, however, four lines in that otherwise bad poem are redemptively beautiful; this morning's chalice lighting is his:

They shall grow not old, as we who are left grow old  
 Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn  
 At the going down of the sun and in the morning  
 we will remember them

I spent a lot of time in the past few weeks in the archives of Memorial Day. I was especially moved by the stories of its origins. “According to Professor David Blight of the Yale University History Department, the first Memorial Day was observed in 1865 by liberated slaves. [They gathered] at the historic race track in Charleston, South Carolina, ... a former Confederate prison camp as well as a mass grave for Union soldiers who died in captivity.

“The freed slaves reinterred the [bodies of the] dead Union soldiers from the mass grave to individual graves, fenced in the graveyard, and built an entry arch declaring it a Union graveyard. This was a daring action for them to take in the South shortly after the North's victory.”

Three years later, “on May 30<sup>th</sup>, 1868, the freed slaves returned to the graveyard with flowers they had picked from the countryside, and decorated the individual grave sites, thereby creating the first Decoration Day. A parade by thousands of [former slaves] and Union soldiers from the area was followed by patriotic singing and a picnic.”

If we can believe it, on that same day, the Memorial Day Order was issued from

the Grand Army of the Republic Headquarters as General Orders Number 11. It begins, “The 30th day of May, 1868, is designated for the purpose of strewing with flowers or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village, and hamlet churchyard in the land. In this observance, no form or ceremony is prescribed, but Posts and comrades will, in their own way, arrange such fitting services and testimonials of respect as circumstances may permit.”<sup>1</sup>

Can you imagine an America in which Decoration Day persisted into the present as a time to honor the Civil War dead, and rededicate our own lives to the noble vision and great purposes of the union, these United States? It was not to be. We have been at war ever since, more often than not. Now we have scores more years of war dead to honor, and counting: war without end.

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“During the First World War, the poppy was the only thing that grew in the aftermath of the complete devastation ... of the Flanders and Picardy regions of Belgium and Northern France....”<sup>2</sup> Lieutenant Colonel John McCrae,<sup>3</sup> a surgeon serving with the Canadian Armed Forces, attached to the 1<sup>st</sup> Field Artillery Brigade, was there. In the spring of 1915, he treated injured men – Canadians, British, Indians, French, and Germans. He wrote of that time, “I wish I could embody on paper some of the varied sensations of that seventeen days ... seventeen days of Hades! At the end of the first day, if anyone had told us we had to spend seventeen days there, we would have folded our hands and said it could not have been done.”<sup>4</sup> This is his poem *In Flanders Fields*.

In Flanders fields the poppies blow  
Between the crosses, row on row  
That mark our place; and in the sky  
The larks, still bravely singing, fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below.  
We are the Dead. Short days ago  
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,  
Loved and were loved, and now we lie

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1 [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memorial\\_Day](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memorial_Day)

2 [myitforum.com/cs2/blogs/chobbs/archive/2008/10/29/rant-are-we-not-so-bothered-about-remembering-our-war-dead.aspx](http://myitforum.com/cs2/blogs/chobbs/archive/2008/10/29/rant-are-we-not-so-bothered-about-remembering-our-war-dead.aspx)

3 1872-1918

4 [arlingtoncemetery.net/flanders.htm](http://arlingtoncemetery.net/flanders.htm)

In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:  
 To you from failing hands we throw  
 The torch; be yours to hold it high.  
 If ye break faith with us who die  
 We shall not sleep, though poppies grow  
 In Flanders fields.

So the dead speak to us. On Memorial Day, we pause to remember to listen to them. *Do not break faith with us, they say. Let the cause of freedom for which we died be your cause, now. Let our lives not have been given in vain.*

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David Pyle is a Iraq war veteran, a Unitarian Universalist divinity school student, and an aspiring United States Army Chaplain. After losing his wartime buddy, he wrote, “War is the only form of hell I still believe in. It is a hell that exists in this time, in this world, not in some metaphysical afterlife. I wish with all my heart we could rid ourselves of it. I wish for the day to come when we no longer send our young men and women off to walk through that hell. I wish for the day when our problems are solved by meeting, not by killing.... I wish with all my heart for what military forces we have to become a tool of peace, not a weapon of war....

“Clinton Lee Scott once said, 'Always it is easier to pay homage to our prophets than to heed the direction of their vision.' David Pyle continues, “The true meaning of Memorial Day is not homage ... not to honor those who have served, those who have died for our nation.... Honor is the easy way out of the vision [to which] they call us.... I hear [in] their prophetic voices two phrases:

*Never again*  
 and  
*Remember me.*

“The true meaning of Memorial Day,” he concludes, “is to remember. It is to remember that the cost of war is almost always way too high. The true meaning of Memorial Day is ... to remember the price they paid. To remember the price their families pay. To remember the physical and psychic wounds that the survivors of war, on all sides, carry with them till the end of their days.... To remember the horrors unleashed

upon civilian populations by the tools of modern warfare.... To remember the lives never lived.<sup>5</sup>

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I love Memorial Day in its modern manifestation as much as the next person: a small town parade, a cookout or picnic, sales, white clothing coming out of the closet, and the unofficial beginning of summer. But we are missing something essential if, in the midst of our revelry, we don't take the opportunity – even two minutes –

to remember and reflect;  
to honor the soldier and dishonor war;  
and, above all, to rededicate ourselves to peace.

Here is the recounting of Clarence Bunsen's “famous Memorial Day address” in Garrison Keillor's *Lake Wobegon, Minnesota*:

“The VFW honor guard stood at parade rest in front of the monument to the Grand Army of the Republic, their feet hurt, their jackets were too tight, they needed a drink. The crowd stood on the grass. A boy recited [a poem]....

“There was a tremendous long silence, and then Pastor Ingqvist gave a nod, and after a moment, Clarence stepped forward and hesitated, and said, 'If there was one time when words truly seemed inadequate, one occasion when silence seemed so appropriate, it would be here and now. It would be more fitting if we were silent for two minutes and looked around us and thought of our people here and their gifts to this country.'

“He stepped back. Everyone looked around at the markers and the little flags fluttering, and listened to the breeze in the leaves. An oriole sang. And then someone blew his nose. The whole honor guard was crying. Old men with rifles to their shoulders dug down in their pockets and got out their big red hankies and blew.

“And afterward, they pressed around Clarence and shook his hand and said that was absolutely perfect, they'd be grateful to him for the rest of their lives.”<sup>6</sup>

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My spiritual companions, can we, too, pause, now, to remember?

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<sup>5</sup> [celestiallands.org/wayside/?p=75](http://celestiallands.org/wayside/?p=75)

<sup>6</sup> Garrison Keillor, *In Search of Lake Wobegon*, p. 26

Listen!

To you from failing hands we throw  
The torch; be yours to hold it high.  
If ye break faith with us who die  
We shall not sleep

Listen!

*Never again. Remember me.*

Let us hold in our minds and hearts all the soldiers, their families, and friends. In their memory and in their honor, let us rededicate our lives to a vision of the world at peace.