

We Remember Them  
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For many American's, the Memorial Day 3-day weekend signifies the unofficial start of summer. The holiday is marked by the appearance of outdoor grilles, summer clothes, pools opening, and gardens being planted. These activities make it too easy to forget that the origins and sacred meaning of Memorial Day – originally called Decoration Day – is to honor the memory of every military service member who gave their life in our nation's wars.

The holiday was borne out of the American Civil War and a desire to honor our dead. It was officially proclaimed on May 5, 1868 by General John Logan, national commander of the Grand Army of the Republic. His General Order No. 11, states: *The 30th 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.*<sup>1</sup> The date of Decoration Day, as he called it, was chosen because it wasn't the anniversary of any particular battle.

However, Yale University historian David Blight places the first Memorial Day three years before General Logan proclaimed the holiday. In April 1865, a group of former enslaved African Americans gathered at a horse track in Charleston, S.C., which had served as a Confederate Prison in the Civil War. On this land, 257 Union soldiers were buried in a mass grave. After digging up the bodies and placing them in individual graves, they built a 100-yard fence with an archway over the entrance with the words "Martyrs of the Race Course". A short time later, in May, some 10,000 black Charleston residents, white missionaries, teachers, schoolchildren, and Union troops marched around the race track, singing and carrying armfuls of roses. Five black preachers recited scripture and a children's choir sang spirituals and the Star-Spangled Banner.<sup>2</sup>

This story is largely forgotten today but some historians consider that gathering the first Decoration Day – or Memorial Day – as we now know it. Former enslaved African Americans were the first ones to set aside a special time to honor Union soldiers who had died to end the institution of slavery, thus ensuring freedom for all who were enslaved. The cause of freedom was everything to them and it seemed right and fitting to remember the soldiers who died fighting so that they might live in freedom.

So, General Logan gets the credit for Decoration Day, which became our Memorial Day. As with so many holidays, the dominant culture controls the story and the ceremonial ritual. On this holiday of remembrance, it's important honor the true beginnings of this tradition and the memory of those African Americans who first set aside a special time to honor soldiers who had died.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.researchhistory.org/2011/11/25/these-are-the-words-that-james-a-garfield-spoke-at-arlington-cemetery-on-may-30-1868/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1900454,00.html>

## **We remember them.**

The American Civil War remains the deadliest war for U.S. citizens in this country with the loss of over 750,000 military lives. Since then, the U.S has also engaged in the Spanish-American war, World War I, World War II, Korean war, The Vietnam war, The Gulf war, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and countless other military activities across the Globe, leading to a total across all those wars of over 1.4 Million American military lives lost.<sup>3</sup>

This number doesn't account for all the deaths outside of the military, such as the deaths of citizens. These official wars do not account for the atrocities over hundreds of years that have claimed the lives of people of color in this country's history. The often forgotten and uncounted losses, for example, of Indigenous, Black, Latino and immigrant lives.

In alignment with the Unitarian Universalist value of honoring the inherent worth and dignity of all people, let us also consider the lives of the enemy soldiers. Like our own soldiers, some chose to fight, others had no choice. These soldiers were human beings just as much as the U.S. soldiers were. They too had families and friends that loved them.

Behind every single one of those numbers – Counted or Uncounted, Ally or Enemy – is a flesh and blood human being with a name. And behind each name is a story. A story that begins with gladness and pride in choosing a name, and then, an ending beyond someone's imagining. Memorial Day is a time to honor these stories, encapsulated by these names. A time to honor the men, women, transgender, and non-binary individuals of every race, ethnicity, and faith who have lost their lives in the violence of war. By remembering the names of those who died, we offer them some small piece of immortality.

## **We remember them.**

Whether or not we agree with the reason for going to war. Whether or not we believe there is anything that justifies going to war, as citizens of the United States of America, soldiers have fought on our behalf. Regardless of how we, as individuals, may feel about war, military people have literally sacrificed their lives on behalf of our nation. As US citizens, we have a communal responsibility to reflect on their memory and pay tribute to their service.

After today's worship service, all are invited to participate in an annual ceremony of remembrance. We will pay special homage to the large Monument across the street that commemorates the end of World War I by hanging a wreath that our children made with symbolic herbs. As part of the wreath dedication ceremony, the names of Winchester Unitarian Society members who sacrificed their lives in World War I and World War II will be read aloud. During the ceremony, I invite you to speak their names with the holy intention of invoking the stories of their lives and all who loved them.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_battles\\_with\\_most\\_United\\_States\\_military\\_fatalities](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_battles_with_most_United_States_military_fatalities)

For members of the military, Memorial Day is a time when they remember their fallen comrades – the ones who they stood shoulder to shoulder with – and have lost. In our reading this morning, we heard about the military’s honored tradition of playing Taps at funerals and wreath laying ceremonies. Probably most have heard the haunting sound of a single trumpet calling out a final farewell at the end of their comrade’s life – signaling that it is safe to close their eyes and sleep in eternal peace.<sup>4</sup>

As the Taps are being played, the American flag is folded with exquisite precision into the symbolic tri-cornered shape – emblematic of the tri-cornered hat worn by the Patriots of the American Revolution – and solemnly presented to the Next-of-Kin with spoken words of appreciation for their loved one’s honorable and faithful service.<sup>5</sup> Echoing what was beautifully said by Paul Sawyer in this morning’s reading, about this ceremonial ritual, “...*something speaks to [us] in [our] heart and soul about dying, and, for those of us who remain, about remembering well.*”

For those who attended Family Worship this morning, Heather shared a military ritual of remembrance. At military balls, food halls, and veteran association events a small, round table is set but never occupied. It’s a prisoner of war/missing in action table. This tradition has been in place since the end of the Vietnam War and symbolizes the frailty of one prisoner alone against their oppressors. The table is set in a particular way and decorated with symbolic items that help the military remember their comrades who did not return.

In January, I discovered a military tribute to fallen comrades smack in the middle of Concourse A at Chicago’s Midway Airport. I was at the Airport, heading home after two weeks of seminary classes. I had arrived early and was leisurely strolling down the concourse to my gate when I noticed an exhibit. I had plenty of time, so I stopped to read the description and realized it was a memorial to honor those who fought in the Battle of Midway, an epic World War II sea and air battle that turned the tide of the war in the Pacific. I had always assumed the airport was named Midway because Chicago is midway across the country, but on that night, I learned it had nothing to do with where the airport is located.

As I entered the Midway Memorial exhibit, I was encircled by static photos that used 3D effects to show images of the ocean with battleships and airplanes flying overhead. Superimposed on the images were faces of U.S. military people who had fought in the battle. The display was both beautiful and eerily life-like.

I looked up and saw there were some quotes painted on the wall above the photos. One read, “*For all the guys that never returned, for all the men that gave that last effort and could not get back to be as fortunate as I, I will tell the kids about what you did and why.*”<sup>6</sup> An old man now,

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<sup>4</sup> <https://tapsbugler.com/protocol-for-taps/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.veteransflagdepot.com/flag-presentation-protocol-and-flag-folding/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://posts.google.com/bulletin/share/KdZJQgBa/R3Cm7n>

Private First-Class Edgar R. Fox of the US Marine Corps, volunteers at elementary schools to tell those stories and keep his promise. And, now that I know the story of the Battle of Midway, now that I've seen their faces, now that I know their names, I will not forget. Their memory continues to live on with me and by all who visit the exhibit.

### **We remember them.**

On Memorial Day, we are reminded about our obligation, as civilians, to pay tribute to those who have died in military service.

You may recall seeing a story that was in the news last year of a boy, Preston Sharp, who visited his Grandfather's grave to place a flag and some flowers. 10-year old Preston noticed there were no flags or flowers on the graves to honor some of the other veterans. He was upset and decided to make it his mission to place a flag and a flower on the graves of each of graves. When he finished with that cemetery, he moved onto others and people in the community began coming to help him. He has now come up with the Flag and Flower Challenge to get everyone in the US to honor veterans. Preston's commitment is remarkable. His website says, *"I won't stop honoring veterans until I can't bend down anymore."*<sup>7</sup>

Just that part of Preston's ritual of remembrance is touching enough, but the part that really tugged at my heart was at the end of the news story, when they showed this young boy at a grave site. After placing the flag and flower, he leaned over the grave and said, "Thank you for your service, Norman." Preston didn't know Norman, all he knows is that Norman served in the military and he died, yet there is so much honoring, dignity, and respect for Norman as a flesh and blood human being in that simple expression of gratitude – "Thank you for your service, Norman."

Preston asks anyone who participates in the Flag and Flower Challenge to do the same. On his website it states, *"you have to say the veterans name out loud because a veteran's name not said out loud is a veteran forgotten."* Preston, and all who support his effort, may not know who the fallen veteran is, but the person's story and memory is honored by saying their name.

Preston made me wonder about what happens at here at Winchester's Wildwood Cemetery. I've seen flags on veteran's gravesites, but how do they get there? So, I called the Cemetery Coordinator at the Town Hall and asked. I learned that a representative of the Veteran's Association, in partnership with volunteers from the Boy Scouts, place flags on the graves of veterans on Memorial Day. Knowing that it's a personal effort and flags aren't put in place as a part of a cemetery employee's job, somehow, makes it feel more sacred and intentional. It's a labor done with respect, and to honor those who have served their country in this way. Perhaps they even bent down to say, "Thank you for your service, Jonathan or Samuel or Elizabeth." I hope so.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://prestonsharp.net>

For many people, the Memorial Day custom of visiting graves and adorning them with flags or flowers has expanded to decorating the graves of all their beloved ones who have died. Yesterday, I went to Winchester's Wildwood Cemetery to place flowers on my parents' grave, neither of whom is a veteran. I've entered the front gates of Wildwood Cemetery many times, but yesterday I paid special attention to the large monument near the entrance and read the plaque which said: *"In lasting tribute to the men and women of Winchester who gave their lives in our country's service."*

I smiled to see a small U.S. flag fluttering in the soft afternoon breeze at the grave of every veteran. I couldn't help but be moved by the sight of flags on so many graves. Inspired by Preston Sharp, as I slowly passed by graves, I read the last names on the headstones and thanked each of them, by name, for their service. This simple tribute was a sacred moment of reverence for their life and service. For a moment, I felt personally connected to this person I don't know and whose life didn't directly touch mine. Yet, what I do know is, at some point, this person risked their life and may have died in active duty on my behalf as a U.S. citizen.

### **We remember them.**

Our Memorial Day custom now includes honoring the memory of all our loved ones who have died. Ceremonies of remembrance play an important role in our communal lives. They help us to call forth all those we have lost, and the dead become present with us in our minds and in our hearts. Communal remembering is how we care for each other. Together, we can hold the pain of loss, because it's too much to bear alone. No matter who you have lost, no matter how they left this world, no matter how they are related to you – today we will take a moment to remember them.

In a few minutes you will be invited to participate in an invocation of remembrance when you may speak aloud the names of all loved ones who have died and live on in memory.

You might choose to call forth the name of one of your ancestors who died in military service, the name of a person whose life and memory you respect, or of someone you love who has died. No matter who you have lost, no matter how they left this world, no matter how they are related to you – our intention here today is to remember all those whom we have lost, and still carry in our hearts.

I now invite you to speak aloud, or whisper in your heart, the names of loved ones who have died and live on in memory. This time is yours.

### **With Love and With Gratitude – We Remember Them.**

Blessed Be. Amen.