

Memory, History, Identity
Unitarian Universalist Church in Cherry Hill
Sunday, May 26, 2024
Rev. Margret A. O’Neill

How did we get to Memorial Day weekend already? Wasn’t it April just last week? As I was sorting through what I wanted to say and do this morning, I realized I have preached some fifteen Memorial Day weekend sermons, and each year I wonder, what do I have to say that is fresh and new? What am I called to repeat because the message is important? If I preached the exact same sermon I did last year, or the year before that, or before that, would anyone even notice? What can I offer that is worthy of this precious space, and that will help us all see the world more clearly? One thing I know is that this is a day to think more deeply about the power of memory.

A front page headline in the local Courier-Post this past Wednesday read, “Why Memorial Day isn’t a happy holiday” - and they suggest we not wish each other a happy Memorial Day. As the school year approaches its annual summer break, with pools opening and beach tags going on sale for the season, I guess people actually do need to be reminded that tomorrow’s holiday is a remembrance of those who have died in wars. The young dead soldiers speak to us still, and today we honor all those who have given their lives for their nations, perhaps in wars they believed in, or for causes they did not support or understand, but nonetheless, in service to the welfare of the greater whole. I am also reminded that not all those harmed in wars are soldiers, so it is good we memorialize and take a lesson from all the people, perhaps every creature, we have lost to war, soldier and civilian, human and other species, around the globe and throughout time up to this very moment. The young dead soldiers remind us that the work of creating peace is not done, and so we remember them.

We remember. We remember people we have known, and those we know only through story. We hold in remembrance people we might never have met, people like the young dead soldiers. We remember events, those we experienced and those we know through the stories we have been told. This weekend is a time for remembering, and I invariably find myself thinking and talking about the meaning of memory on this weekend.

Remembering events of the past, acknowledging the power of memory to shape the present and future, recalling the pleasant and the painful, the gains and the losses, it is good to be reminded that everything in the present is a product of the past. And here in Cherry Hill, I have often celebrated this congregation’s birthday this weekend, a time for remembering, acknowledging and celebrating the history of this congregation, our memories from years ago or perhaps from the day before yesterday.

I have said before, and it bears repeating now, it is in remembering that we know who we are. Jill Bolte Taylor, neuroscientist and author, writes about the evolution of life: “With the advent of the single-celled organism, a new era of information processing was born at the molecular level. Through the manipulation of atoms and molecules into DNA and RNA sequences, information could be entered, coded, and stored for future use. Moments in time no longer came and went without a record and, by interweaving a continuum of sequential moments into a common thread, the life of the cell evolved as a bridge across time.”

It is our very nature – our cellular nature as well as our human nature – our collective as well as our individual nature - to live as a bridge across time. Our experiences become information that is stored in our bodies and our brains, and in that process of storage and recall we know who we are, and from this knowledge we can project who we might yet become. Memory is central to our sense of identity. Philosopher John Locke speculated several centuries ago that we know who we are by what we remember; that “our identity is an extension of consciousness backward in time.”

Even as René Descartes speculated 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 remember what I have done and who I have been, and I give meaning to those memories as I shape my future. And we are a church community because together we remember what we have done and who we have been, giving meaning and context as we shape our shared future. And so we asked you today to record your memories as one way of celebrating all the experiences you have had in this church, as a way of sharing the identity of this congregation with your next minister, to help him know who you most truly are.

Sometimes we exercise selective memory, as individuals and in our organizations and larger cultures. Selective memory is a process of picking and choosing what we will remember and how, as well as what we choose to forget, perhaps changing the story to paint a more flattering portrait of ourselves, to reduce a sense of hurt or to satisfy our ego. That practice of selective memory can lead us to an incomplete understanding of our identity, of who we actually are. Some people only want to cultivate and remember the happy times – the sorts of things people post on Facebook to show how wonderful their lives are.

Others might want to recall only bad things that have happened to them, as a way to explain why they are not the perfect people they might hope to be. And in reality, all our lives are some mix of the good and the bad, the joyful and the hurtful, and every one of those events, and our memories of them, contribute to who we are in the present moment.

I can remember the good friends I had in school, the caring teachers and the amazing music programs that gave me joy, and at the same time I can remember the older girls who bullied me unmercifully when I was in 7th grade, and the kids who shunned me because I was not part of the “in crowd.” I can remember the things that were not a good fit for me in my Catholic upbringing, and at the same time I can remember the fun of creating a rock-and-roll Mass with my friends in my teenage years, gathered in the back of the church with our drums and guitars. The good and the bad and the in-between, every memory has its place -- they have all shaped me, helped me gain strength and learn compassion, made me who I am today.

Memorial Day is an excellent example of selective memory, contributing to an incomplete understanding of our national identity. I shared this story last year, and it is such an important correction to memory that I am sharing it again today. The history books tell us that in 1865, at end of the devastating Civil War, the tradition of Memorial Day in America was started. Period. 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, building an enclosure and an arch labeled, "Martyrs of the Race Course." They invested their time, their resources and their newly won freedom to give these unknown soldiers a proper burial, gratitude for fighting for the freedom of people they had never met.

Black residents of Charleston organized a May Day ceremony attended by nearly ten thousand people, mostly Black 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, along with 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 about US history, but that story was not part of what I was taught in school, so I did not know – but the question for me is, how did I not know those facts until so many years later? Forgetting or denying the true origin of Memorial Day actively dishonors the memories of those who responded with love as they emerged from the horrors of slavery – people who chose to act not in resentment, but with gratitude and generosity. Perhaps now, in correcting the shared memory of our nation, we can see our true identity and begin to bring ourselves back into wholeness. Memorial Day 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.

Individuals remember, a nation remembers, and a faith community– a church, a synagogue or mosque - also has a shared memory, the stories that have shaped their collective identity over time. And as Ms Melanie and I said earlier, a birthday is a time for celebrating and remembering all that has created our understanding of who we are. This UU Church in Cherry Hill, started by New Jersey residents who had been attending First Unitarian Church in Philadelphia, has its memories, its stories that you share.

You share some memories that are joyful and others that are harder to face, and each event, each memory, has contributed to shaping the congregation as it is today. I hope you have been working on your memory project during the words and the music this morning, and that you will keep writing and drawing as memories occur to you. Some of you have been here much longer than I have, and some are newer to this congregation, but we all have our memories.

There are stories I have been told, and others that I have read about in the church history that is posted on the website. There are memories of those early days in the 1950s when there were over 200 kids in the religious education program. There are stories of creativity, putting on musical theater performances; stories of courage offering a meeting place to people with HIV and AIDS when others turned them away. There are stories of the highly popular singles group, stories about the buildings and the arboretum, stories of the individuals who created a positive legacy in the life of the church.

And then there are the difficult memories – the church leaders and ministers who betrayed the trust of those who relied on them; the fires that destroyed the Hillside Building and the original Sanctuary; disagreements that several times caused a split in the congregation, with people choosing to leave the community rather than work through their difficulties. Yes, some memories are difficult, but rather than deny the difficult things that happened, we can choose to explore our memories and learn from what went wrong in the past, and to deepen our commitment. Educated by an understanding of the past, we can work to create a healthier environment with good boundaries to prevent harm, and compassion to build a bridge across even the most challenging differences. In accepting and integrating the full range of experiences into our shared memory, we can become stronger and better, as we create resilient human connections that lift us all into a better future.

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, he says, 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.

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 exist entirely in continuity of memory. A person or congregation that remembers nothing of their past has difficulty knowing who they are in the present moment. A person who mis-remembers their past has an incomplete and flawed identity.

That is the importance of our memories, and of creating remembrances of the past – most deeply, that is how we become clear and confident in our identity, our connections, our sense of self that is the foundation of the completeness of who we are.

In celebrating this birthday of the UU Church in Cherry Hill, with 68 years of triumph and tragedy, times of brokenness and moments of shining joy, we come to learn that in celebrating and memorializing all of who we are, we create countless opportunities to be born anew into possibility, making every day a birthday for some deeper aspect of our lives.

And so as our closing hymn today, we chose to sing Happy birthday – happy birthday to the UU Church of Cherry Hill, happy birthday to ourselves and each other, happy birthday to everyone, celebrating who we have been, who we are and who we are becoming, each of us and all of us as bridges across time.

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