

EXPANDED REBEMRANCES

*If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.*

The Rev Dr Harold Porter

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On this Memorial Day weekend, I want to begin with a poem that came out of the earliest efforts to celebrate what is now an official day of national remembrance. It was originally known as Decoration Day to honor and decorate the graves of those on both sides of our Civil War, which claimed more lives than practically all of our other wars combined. Since WWI, Decoration Day celebrated the deaths of all who died in all of our wars. Then, in 1971, the name was changed to Memorial Day and it became a permanent national holiday on this last Monday of May.

Since we also have Veterans Day, as a national holiday, we should note that while on Memorial Day we primary celebrate military deaths, on Veterans day we celebrate all the aspects of the military, whether living or dead.

A personal note, having grown up when Memorial Day was called Decoration Day, our family thought it was a day to honor all person who died before us, especially those of our extended family. So off we went to decorate their graves, military or not.

A further personal note, on one Christmas Eve, I, quite young, received from my dear Aunt Ludie the earliest book ever given to me. Its title was *In Flanders Fields*, and it awakened my early knowledge of the carnage of WWI and the particularly story of all those who died in Flanders, Belgium. They were a portion of the 9 million who would lay in graves when that war ended. It was then that a doctor, Colonel John McCrae, a Canadian soldier, after officiating the burial of his close friend, Alexis Helmer, sat down and wrote one of the most moving war memorial poems in all the Americas and Britain.

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
 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.**

It was from this poem the custom of wearing red poppies on Memorial Day came about throughout Western Europe, the USA and Canada.

What really gripped me was his last line. (Repeat).

And so we ask ourselves, “Have we broken faith with those who gave their lives in this war meant to end all wars?” Sadly, within 21 years of its ending, WWII begins. Of course, most who served and died in WWII have been extolled as our greatest generation, who served not to conquer, but to liberate, not to acquire but to aid.

And then there were more complexed wars in Korea, in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and others, and there were other graves, and even though, each are to be honored, it became more difficult how we should honor these dead. That is why some began wearing white poppies on Memorial Day as a protest against war itself. And were singing “Where Have All the Flowers Gone” lamenting, ironically, that they all have gone to decorate graves.

In Canada they call this same holiday, Remembrance Day, which is a kind of a combination of our Veteran’s and Memorial Days. And they wear poppies as well, all in solemn remembrances of their military - those living or dead.

At the first official Memorial Day in our country, May 30 1868, a few years after our Civil War, Major General James Garfield, who would a decade later become our 20th President, was the primary speaker, and it was memorable

eulogy. A huge crowd had gathered at Arlington National Cemetery, before the tomb of the unknown soldier and the rows and rows of all the graves of the fallen now at rest. Garfield concluded with these words:

“The voices of these dead will forever fill the land like holy benedictions. What other spot so fitting for their last resting place as this under the shadow of the Capitol saved by their valor? Here, where the grim edge of battle joined; here, where all the hope and fear and agony of their country centered; here let them rest, asleep on the Nation’s heart, entombed in the Nation’s love.”

Well said, and yet, the good-hearted Garfield, was to have his own life sacrificed as well. Killed after a few months into his presidency by a citizen extremist.

Yes, we rightly pause on Memorial Day, and solemnly bow our heads for those who fought for freedom, to keep liberty alive, and died for our democracy that upholds both. They did it for all of us together, as one equal people, under our Constitution, which pledges to each of us: justice for all, domestic tranquility for all, security for all, and especially the general welfare for all.

But, this year many of the ways we celebrated Memorial Day, the parades, the solemn memorial gatherings, graves decorated, plus all the family gatherings on this day usually understood as the first day of summer, will be greatly modified. No parades, nor will happen the Indy 500 speedway, or Major League baseball, and even Arlington National Cemetery will be closed to the general public, except for immediate families, and all will have to wear masks.

What this deadly coronavirus has forced us to do is not only to be careful for our own lives, but wisely caring for our neighbors by a distance of at least six feet apart. Still, even as there is much to grieve on this day, there is more for us to embrace. Indeed we need to enlarge the very meaning of Memorial Day. For it is clear, that among the 100,000 of our citizens who have fallen to this virus there are many who did so heroically, risking exposure to the virus so they could continue working for the health and welfare of us all. And the dying is increasing!

As political science professor, Mark Schrod, reminds us, “America has long equated patriotism with armed forces. But you can’t shoot a virus. Those on the frontlines against the coronavirus aren’t conscripts, mercenaries, or enlisted men; they are our doctors, nurses, pharmacists, teachers, caregivers, store clerks, utility workers,” who at greater risk to the virus kept working, to enable our health and safety. Yes, it is clear that we need to enlarge our understanding of patriotism, including all those who unselfishly serve the common good, even at a risk to their lives, far beyond the call of duty.

**If ye break faith with us who die
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Yes, hear the voices that rise from beneath the earth, who we would honor best and keep faith with, by fighting the negative forces of this world as bravely as they did, so that those of us still living will bring liberty and justice forward, helping to create a better and safer world for all.

There is in our religious heritage a comparable day of remembrances, All Saints Day, a day of remembrance and celebration of All Saints everywhere. And rightly so, for what is a Saint? Some one who courageously stood up for goodness and made life more attractive and bearable for us all. Heroes, saints, all somehow touch and strengthen and measure the quality of our own lives. Let us speak well, not ill, of the dead, yes, that is our custom, as we look into our own soul.

However, I once was a little bit staggered by something Jesus said on this subject as he, early on, sought to welcome others to join him in his mission, symbolically called the Kingdom of God for this earth. And one man, among others, who was eager to follow him said, “First, I must need go and bury my father.” But Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, come and proclaim the Kingdom of God.” A staggering reply!

But a couple things brought me to a better understanding. First, I realized that Jesus was not an arrogant bully, unconcerned, or uncaring, unsympathetic with those who were grieving or disagreed with him. He was just the opposite. And secondly, when he spoke of the Kingdom of God, he was symbolically describing

earth as a beloved community, that would exist by divine grace, with justice for all and human compassion for everybody. An urgent necessity for now and the future, he thought.

Therefore, he warned, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back - to the dead - to the past - will be able to bring about such a new Heaven on earth. It is always up to the living to move this world forward.

Yes, on Memorial Day we honor the dead and remember their sacrifices and then hopefully, we built further on for a better world.

So, let me briefly conclude with three tangible efforts that we the living must plough ahead with in response to this pandemic and its great devastation. I’ll state them very briefly.

I. National Medical Care for All in the USA:

Laurie Garrett, Pulitzer prize author of *The Coming Plague* warned us, “America has never been sufficiently invested in public health.” And COVID – 19 clearly reveals, that as a nation, even though we have some of the greatest doctors and nurses, and medical specialties, we have truly the most complex, wasteful, costly, confusing, and unbalanced health care system of any advanced nation on this earth! Indeed, it is a dishonor to call it a system. And it is mostly a national administration problem of our government.

Even during this pandemic, we have hospitals closing down for lack of funds, and look how badly we supplied our care workers for the equipment to fight this deadly virus. But this pandemic clearly teaches us, to finally work for a single national health care system that does not depend on insurance companies who gamble for profits on our health, or the various insurance policies our job does or does not provide, or the vagaries of the State medical politics we live in.

After all, medical care is a moral right. Our nation’s health care budget is miniscule compared to our military budget. And we all have pre-existing health conditions somewhere down the line of our lives as we age, so let us be in this all together. When we do have a governmental Medicare program established for all, our nation’s flag will fly much higher and our love for country will be far, far

greater. It is way past time. No one pushes for this more than our emergence care doctors and especially our brave nurses, who always are in the trenches, the front lines.

2. A More Balanced Economic Equality: The coronavirus reminds us we are one society, a pan-fraternity of homo sapiens of many cultures. We need to arrange for an economy that levels the pie for all of us. The despairing difference in wages and wealth in our country have reached a boiling point and this pandemic has exposed the fragility of the economy for many. It works well for 1/5th of our nation but not for the other 4/5th.

But recall out of our last great economic depression in the 1930's, we responded by creating a new Social Security program, and Unemployment insurance, and other helpful financial protection programs that even today will help soften, in part, our lives during the economic crisis before us. Similarly, out of our present downturn, we need to respond with new economic policies that trickle up, not down, so as not to by-pass those mostly in need. To do so, we will need a stronger national government, not a lessor, or weakened one.

3. A Robust Save the Earth Policy: As we came together trying to tame the coronavirus, we realize the same personal actions on are part are needed to confront climate change. When we followed what science clearly taught us to do, to blunt this pandemic, we were amazed. We all slowed down our travel, our fuel consumption, and set aside our overconsumption habits, and could readily see how cleaner and clearer our atmosphere became! It was a hopeful sign that working together we can lessen our contribution to climate harm. Our Earth is at a tender age, and its needs nursing by all of us.

I offer these three, but there are others as well. Bur, whether we like it or not, a new world order will be emerging as this pandemic recedes. In it, we will face climate change, cybersecurity, and pandemics, and it will take an international effort, not simply an America first attitude, to overcome these pandemic threats. We need to bring our country back to the world democratic leadership we once had, before we tried to go it alone. We will need new, and good-will leadership. It is a time for solidarity, not finger pointing. We need to work with the WHO

(World Health Organization), not undermine it. We need to rejoin the Paris Agreement on climate change, and cooperate with the 194 countries, since we are the second highest emitters of greenhouse gas.

And let us return to our good neighbor policy, standing up for justice and human rights that only a democracy can help shape this world. Yes, on this Memorial Day let us not break faith with those who lived their lives, for more than just themselves!

Let me close with hopeful words of the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres. A man of great moral leadership who reminds us we are all in this world together.

“We have three immediate priorities: (He said to the United Nations) “to end the Covid-19 pandemic, to address its socio-economic impacts, and to use the recovery to build back better, and to leave no one behind.”

May it be so. Amen.