

Life, Death and Reincarnation

Tomorrow is Memorial Day or as we call it in the South and it was originally named, Decoration Day. Having its origins in decorating the graves of lives lost in the Civil War, it was celebrated on May 30th, which was not the date of any notable battle and therefore neutral on winners and losers. After World War I the holiday was expanded to honor all military service. It was not an official federal holiday until a designation in 1968 made it a Monday holiday celebrated on the last Monday in May, which went into effect in 1971.

Memorial Day calls us to the cemetery, not to celebrate death but to celebrate life. It is a time of honoring lives lost in the service to a cause bigger than an individual's personality. In reality, not all the lives lost came out of a voluntary choice. Being forced into military service began in this country with the Revolutionary war and was declared constitutional by the Supreme Court in 1918. At this time, only males at their 18th birthday are required to register for service. War takes its greatest toll on men by virtue of how we wage war and we view military war as primarily a masculine endeavor. In 1965 Pete Seeger released a song titled, "Where have all the flowers gone." It traces the flowers being picked by young girls, who take husbands, who become soldiers, who reside in graveyards, which become overrun with flowers. The song was a protest against war during the height of the Vietnam War. Many soldiers did not go willingly and the opinions around the appropriateness of committing American lives to a battle far from our shores divided our country.

Memorial Day has its origins in another battle that divided our country. Which got me pondering an expansion of honoring lives around Memorial Day. I think one thing you can honestly say about the United States of America is that we are an opinionated people. Even when we begin to languish in apathy in what we do or we skip voting, if you ask a question about something we will generally give you an opinion that stakes a claim to one side or another. The Civil War was not a threat from some outside invader. You can say it was about state's rights or you can say it was about slavery—it was an engagement in which people died at the hands of their fellow countrymen over an issue the people felt impacted how they lived their lives. In my opinion, the loss of life between 1861 and 1865 was not the only civil war that has divided our nation and resulted in the loss of lives.

Immediately following the civil war, as "Reconstruction" and segregation tried to undo as much freedom for blacks as possible, a new conflict began to seek prominence—Women's right to vote.

It would take until 1920 for the 19th Amendment to be passed. Over the ensuing years women would be beaten, imprisoned and tortured over their quest for a place at the political table. The Movement was not limited to the United States and resulted in a shift around the rights of women that included much of Western Europe.

The Civil War did not end the oppression of people of color. The Civil Rights movement of the 20th century again produced many deaths and divided our country around the basic rights of all people which had been limited by segregation and voting restrictions. This era also produced the work of Cesar Chavez and Delores Heurta to organize immigrant migrant works and through a union for farm workers, improve working conditions and gain basic rights for these workers.

Immigration is a topic that seems to divide our country right now but it is not a new issue. The first widely restrictive law was in legislation passed in 1917. Following WWI, the Immigration Act of 1924 set quotas; banned Asian immigration except for the Philippines, which was a US territory; increased taxes for immigrants; reinforced literacy tests and allowed greater discretion in denying admission. Between 1820 and 1860, the Irish accounted for 1/3 of the immigrants to this country. Nearly 4.5 million entered the country between 1820 and 1930. Asian immigration began around 1848 with the influx of Chinese, fleeing harsh conditions at home under British rule and the lure of the gold rush in the West. I found this at a history site titled "Asian Nation": Because they were forbidden from owning land, intermarrying with Whites, owning homes, working in many occupations, getting an education, and living in certain parts of the city or entire cities, the Chinese basically had no other choice but to retreat into their own isolated communities as a matter of survival. These first Chinatowns at least allowed them to make a living among themselves. This is where the stereotypical image of Chinese restaurants and laundry shops, Japanese gardeners and produce stands, and Korean grocery stores began.

The right to love and marry seems basic. Yet transracial and same gender marriage has been sanctioned only recently through the bitter battles around the rights of people of color and the rights of people who identify as gay, lesbian and transgender. People who identify as LGBT continue to die, giving their lives in service to freedom for all as they speak out for civil rights and protection from discrimination.

This past year a disability rights advocate, Carrie Ann Lucas died.

She was not killed on a battlefield but in the elusive offices of bureaucrats who denied her insurance coverage for care she needed. People advocating for the rights of those with disabilities don't find the spotlight, mainly because the battle is newer and the rights so fundamental most people take them for granted. Edward Roberts was the first person who relied on a wheelchair to attend the University of California at Berkeley in 1962. Having suffered polio, two years before the vaccine was discovered, Roberts rested in an iron lung at night, which posed a problem for his housing. Through advocacy for his rights as a student and gathering a group that became known as the "Rolling Quads" Roberts is known as the father of Independent Living. Who in this room imagines that living on your own is a right to fight for? Did you know we put a man on the moon before we legislated the right of all children to access education without regard to disability? Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldren landed on the moon July 20th, 1969. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was signed into law November 29, 1975. Prior to IDEA it was permissible for schools to simply say they lacked the resources to provide education to children with disabilities.

Now we must fear that sending our children to school to learn is sending them into sacrifice they did not sign up for. Giving their lives to save classmates and teachers and teachers giving their lives to save colleagues and students. Whatever our belief is about the cause of this phenomena or what our belief is about the best solution, it is imperative we find a way to take the battlefield out of our schools.

One last battle I want to mention. None of those who die sign up for this battle either. They simply go to church to worship. With a frightening increase in frequency, people go to church and are gunned down or blown up **in this country**. In September of 1963, four little girls were killed when their church in Birmingham Alabama was blown up. Last October, 11 people were killed as they attended Shabbat at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburg, PA. That seems to be a little close to home to ignore. This is not some barbaric terrorist in a foreign land. These are people of our country making horrendous choices.

To end the loss of life in service to ideals beyond our personality, we have to end the violence that seems to surround our differing opinions. We also have to continue to evolve our consciousness beyond the very human tendencies to create dichotomies of power that oppress the ability of certain individuals to live and dream and love with the same freedom we desire for ourselves.

Many areas of conflicting opinions are nuanced issues with lots of possibilities to explore. And some are basic rights of human beings. We, you and me, have to be able to **listen** to those who disagree even with our assessment that an issue is a basic right. We have to listen from our heart; going to a place of wisdom within that is a more valuable guide than ego and intellect.

Mostly on Memorial Day we think of life as a sum of days on this planet. We think of death as the end of the days and the final punctuation in the rambling sentence of how we created our days from the first to the last. We forget that Life is also a spiritual power and a divine attribute.

Unity co-founder Charles Fillmore describes life as “divine, spiritual, and its source is God, Spirit. The river of life is within man in his spiritual **consciousness**. He comes into consciousness of the river of life through the quickening of Spirit. He can be truly quickened with new life and vitalized in mind and body only by consciously contacting Spirit. This contact is made through prayer, meditation, and good works.” I would put forward that many have given up mortal life as a way of taking a stand on an issue to better the lives of all humanity and that to me is a very good work. These individuals we honor have been quickened by the Life of Spirit.

In Keep A True Lent, Fillmore goes on to say, “We all have life, and it is God's eternal life.” “So long as man continues to lose his body through death he will be in doubt as to the reality of eternal life. Eternal life means to be eternally conscious of life in its fullness. By his very belief that life can go out of his body, man shows that he is not in the consciousness of eternal life.” OK, I am not seeing this the same way Fillmore sees that last part. He presumes that eternal life would require a body of some sort until that body is totally spiritualized. Which brings Fillmore to the idea of reincarnation. Also in Keep A True Lent, Charles writes: “To give humans opportunity to get the full benefit of salvation, life is necessary, and a body through which to express life is also necessary. So, when one loses his body by death, the law of expression works within him for re-embodiment, and he takes advantage of the Adam method of generation to regain a body. Divine mercy permits this process in order that man may have further opportunity to demonstrate Christ life.”

Contemplation of the appearance of death in the material world brings a myriad of spiritual issues up for pondering. Where does our spirit-self go? Does it carry any of our humanity, our individualized personality or wisdom with it? Some believe reincarnation carries the whole personality forward; some believe only the wisdom or life lessons carry forward.

Some believe we carry a debt or bonus of karmic acts of violence or benevolence forward and many do not believe we take on a body again at all. Fillmore's chapter on Reincarnation is in and out of various versions of Keep A True Lent. Unity principles do not take a stand on the issue of what comes after physical death, other than to propose eternal life is some sort of reality. Whether we live forever in spiritualized bodies mirroring our humanity or we sign up for a return trip to take on new lessons or we become a pool of spiritual life energy, there is plenty of mystery to occupy us.

This Memorial Day weekend let us honor all who have given up their physical lives believing in something better for all. Let us honor the families who live without their loved ones. Let us contemplate the good works many have done without a uniform or a medal or even recognition. Let us ponder what death in this earthly body means for the eternal nature of spiritual life. And let us experience the eternal life that continues to connect us to all the life and love of creation. And so it is.