

Remembrance of Things Past

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Before I get going this morning I want to take a moment and thank all of you who have been so kind and thoughtful during my four weeks of Paternity Leave. The cards, clothes, casseroles, toys, and flowers have been wonderful to receive and all are greatly appreciated. Thank you to all of you who have been so thoughtful and generous. And most of all I want to thank my wife Sharon. Without her love and support it would be impossible for me to serve you as Senior Minister. I am so grateful to her for her love and friendship as we take on this next chapter in our life together.

On to the business at hand. This weekend is Memorial Day, a day set aside to remember the men and women who sacrificed their lives for their country. It is of course, as Lincoln said, fitting and right that we should do this. This is particularly true in times of war, when such a sacrifice is not some abstraction or a virtue we see only in the movies. These days this valor is present even among our neighbors who serve their country in the military. Sacrifice for the common good is not an

abstract thought, it is right here among us. In his Sci-Fi classic “Starship Troopers” Robert Heinlein went so far as to say that only veterans should vote, because they have sacrificed for the common good of society. I don’t agree; everyone should vote if everyone is subject to the rule of law, but it is an interesting premise. In the book he names a spaceship after a man named “Richard Young”, a World War Two Medal of Honor winner who sacrificed his life for the rest of his platoon. I don’t buy Heinlein’s politics, which seem to overpower his narrative, but he does drive home the true meaning of Memorial Day: a day for remembrance of those who have died for us and our country. It is a day of remembrance for individuals, but also as a nation.

The Buddhist teacher and psychotherapist Jack Kornfield has some interesting ideas about karma, and how we can understand it in modern Western culture. Karma, he says, is our way of remembering. Not just intellectually remembering events or people of the past, but emotional and even spiritual remembering, makes us who we are. Psychotherapy teaches us that emotional patterns developed in our families get worked into us, and as we grow up these patterns continue to affect our lives. However, they are not inevitable. Change is possible through therapy. In a similar way, karma, our actions in the past create patterns in the present. These too are not inevitable. “The past has the power we give to it.” Kornfield writes.

You see this very clearly in Barack Obama's first book "Dreams of My Father." It is an autobiography of his tenuous relationship with his father, whom he really only met once for about two weeks and then corresponded with until his father died. It was the lack of concrete information about the man that created a sort of vacuum that a young Obama could fill with all of his needs and fantasies. Added to this, was the fact that his dad was such a character; self-confident, smart, outgoing, friendly, and even a bit arrogant. Everyone had a story to tell him about his father when he was a kid. So it was really as if he grew up with a mythos—kind of like if people would tell you stories about Paul Bunyan as if he were your father.

After his dad died, Obama goes to Kenya and finds his relatives and hears other stories about his father. These are more realistic and show a much darker side to the man. The mythos was shattered. In his late twenties Barack Obama probably didn't fully buy into the mythos very much anymore, but to have it replaced with these other images must have been startling. As he reflects upon this part of his life, he notes how he spent so much of his time growing up thinking about the father who was not there, and not appreciating enough the mother who was there, and probably had a bigger influence on him.

This is our lesson this Memorial Day. The remembrance of things past is in no small part a choice. This is true both for us as people remembering particular events but it is also true of our society.

Memorial Day is a time to be intentional about our remembering. When I was growing up I really only knew one veteran on a personal basis: my maternal grandfather. Grandpa Max is who I think of on Memorial Day. He would talk about his service in the Second World War from time to time, but I really learned his story when I interviewed him for a project in my American History class in High School. My grandpa grew up in rural Ohio and went to work in a factory in Michigan. After Pearl Harbor he enlisted in the Navy, where he was a mechanic and repaired ships in the Pacific Theater. He was extraordinarily gifted at electronics. He would build his own ham radio equipment. Actually he was stationed at Pearl Harbor Hawaii. I remember being in a bit of awe as he would describe working on aircraft carriers that were talked about in my textbook; how the Lexington had thought to have been lost but was repaired and put back into service. This extra naval strength helped win the war in the Pacific; my grandpa helped repair it. I think in my High School report I may have made it sound like he did so single-handedly.

I think of his old stories about seeing ships come in whose guns had fired so often that they overheated and the casing melted. So that these ships returned to port looking like they had giant strands of wet spaghetti hanging off of them. It was an amazing thing to see. Or about the time when he was training in the navy with flags which indicated various orders and where to go. My grandfather was color blind, and

would often get confused by these flags and find himself in the wrong spot—usually in time to get yelled at.

I knew it somewhat as a kid, but my grandfather was also an alcoholic. He could get mean and scary. I remember shock at hearing about his opinion of Japanese people, still decades after the war was over. His wife, my grandmother, died about ten years before he did. Those were very painful years for him, but he did adapt after a time. Then the last five years of his life he couldn't take care of himself anymore and had to go into a home. This he mightily resisted, and I know that was perhaps even harder for him. Although when I turned 18 my grandpa told me some more stories about his war years. These were stories that were highly inappropriate for both my High School paper and my sermon this morning! They had to do with shore leave in Honolulu; I will leave it at that. It certainly gave me a new perspective on who the man was.

Like I said, I remember my Grandpa Max on Memorial Day. All and all he was a flawed, heroic, brilliant, hurting, mess of a wonderful human being. Having gotten to know him into my young adult years, I saw a fuller picture of what he was like beyond my child-like impressions. How to remember him? How to remember his war, his country that he sought to defend? How we answer those questions says a lot about who we are.

What we choose to remember says a good deal about us as a country too. Nations are like individuals in this way. Take for example our Ancient Reading today from my namesake Joshua. Moses was promised land by God, but he died just before the Hebrews enter it. It is Joshua who must take over as leader of the Israelites and claim their land. I by that I mean invade it and kill everyone who is there. God you see didn't promise vacant land. A group of people called the Canaanites already lived there, thank you very much. But Joshua had been promised the land, and so he rallies his troops and they attack. One could say this is the first battle of the Mid-East conflict.

However, one gets a slightly different view of things from the book of Judges, the very next book in the Bible. Just to give you a taste of how Judges describes this process of the Jews entering the promised land, this is Judges 1: 31-32: "Asher did not drive out the inhabitants of Acco, or the inhabitants of Sidon, or Ahlad...or Rehob; but the Asherites lived among the Canaanites, the inhabitants of the land; for they did not drive them out." According to Judges the Jewish tribes just sort of moved in, and married the locals. This is a lot less dramatic than Joshua's version of walls getting blasted down by a trumpet, the sun stopping in its course along the sky, and just total war against a people. The book of Joshua sounds like a summer blockbuster movie.

Judges, on the other hand, sounds more like real life. People move in, they marry the locals, they maybe eat some of the local food even if it

maybe isn't exactly what the Torah dietary laws are, and OK there are some mixed marriages where we worship the God of the Jews and Ba'al, the God of the Canaanites. And I bet it was a Unitarian minister who did the wedding! So what? Big deal. We break a few of those old laws and worship a few more Gods than we did before. Boy that does sound like there were Unitarians around then doesn't it?

At least some parts of the Old Testament were written as a response to this assimilation with the culture of Canaan and a lapse of the laws of the Torah. These are the parts of the Bible that sound so strident about seemingly small things. It is the author's way of warning people: do not forget. Remember. Remember who you are. Remember that you were once slaves in the land of Egypt. Remember that God kept a promise, a covenant, and you are expected to hold up your end of the bargain by following the rules and worshiping only one God; Yahweh. Yes it sounds almost fundamentalist to our ears and some people take it that way. But what is going on is a threat to Jewish identity, or at least it is perceived that way. Indeed, probably the whole reason the Bible was written in the first place was to preserve that memory for future generations.

So here you have Joshua, riding in like John Wayne taking over the place because God said so. Or you have Judges who says you can live here with the other folks but beware the risk of forgetting who you are. Which story do we tell? Which version of events gets relayed again

and again? It all depends on memory. Memory is not perfect of course. Our minds do not perfectly replicate the events of the past as they occurred. But even if they did, context and interpretation of those events are really what is important. The events of the past are just facts, they have no meaning until we have a relationship to them. This context and interpretation gives our memories meaning and importance. Memory says as much about the present as it does the past. How we remember and for what purpose will determine what we remember. So in a sense all of our memories are a form of revisionist history to one degree or another. There is usually some emotional agenda going on behind the scenes of our memories. As Jack Kornfield said of karma, the past has the importance we assign to it. We give it the power over us that it has.

Believe it or not, this actually is not a bad thing. The Unitarian Universalist minister and essayist Robert Fulghum makes a pretty good living on his memory and the meaning he derives from it. His essays could launch a thousand sermons potentially. Our Modern Reading today is a case in point. Fulghum puts himself back into the same mindset of a being a teenager again. He remembers the utter disgust of having to do the dishes by hand, and a rare sense of admiration toward his mother for being unafraid of the dinner dandruff; the gunk. As a teenager you think such work is beneath you. “When you are a kid, you feel that if they really loved you, they wouldn’t ever ask you to take out the garbage. When you join the ranks of the grown-ups, you take out the

garbage because you love them. And by ‘them’ I mean not only your own family, but the family of humankind.”

Through memory Robert Fulghum is able to turn the experience of washing the dishes around one hundred eighty degrees. Instead of being something that is awful and disgusting, he sees through wisdom and time that dirty work like this is a rite of passage. When you can do it, it marks you as a grown-up. Cleaning up is no longer seen as a punishment, but as an act of love and defense of the common good.

In Return of the Jedi, Luke Skywalker confronts Obi-wan Kenobi for lying to him about his father. Obi-wan had said that Luke’s father Anakin had been killed by Darth Vader. Instead Anakin had become Darth Vader. Obi-wan defends his actions quietly and simply by stating that what he said “was right from a certain point of view.” This is all Robert Fulghum is doing; looking at the past from a different point of view. This new point of view takes into account maturity, growing up, experience, new insights, even spiritual enlightenment perhaps.

This is exactly what Barack Obama experienced following his “pilgrimage” to Kenya. He sees his dad from a new point of view. He sees the fuller picture of the man. Obama comes to understand that it is both the strengths and weaknesses of his father that go into making him who he is. To a less dramatic degree perhaps, I have had a similar understanding about my grandfather. Yes he had foibles, some which I

cannot excuse or explain away. But we can always forgive. I find it easier to do the latter the older I get. I am not sad to know some of my grandfather's flaws, because I can be so acutely aware of my own imperfections. Granted he and I are not imperfect in exactly the same ways, but the fact remains that we are. If I did not know him as a human being, he would remain some sort of artificial superman that I might feel that I could never live up to. He might have that mythos around him that I could feel judged by if I were under the mistaken impression that he was perfect. It's hard to know; karma manifests itself in many different emotional patterns. But thankfully I am spared this fate.

So too as a nation, we must come to understand, accept, and learn from our collective imperfections and shortcomings. The debate around torture, water boarding, which member of congress knew what when, and even the basic notion of our common American values all hinge on one key factor: memory. Memory always has an element of choice involved. Do we remember Joshua's version of events or Judges'? Barack Obama's version or Dick Cheney's? Just as I can choose as an individual to see my grandfather from a certain point of view, so too can we as a nation come to accept and learn from our faults. Through this reflection it is possible to learn and resolve to live once again according to our ideals.

I will end with a challenge. How will you be remembered? What legacy would you like to leave to the people who remember you? These

are karmic questions, existential questions. The actions we take in life will go a long way to shaping the future. Often this happens in ways we can never imagine. Therefore let us strive to be remembered well. May our common sacrifice for the good of everyone be worthy of this Memorial Day. Amen Blessed Be.