

## We Remember

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By Rev. Dr. Joshua Snyder

Shortly after he died, one of John Updike's last poems was reprinted in the New York Times. It is a part of his last book of poetry that is being released posthumously. When I first read it, I wished I had written it. It is entitled "Requim."

It came to me the other day:

Were I to die, no one would say,  
"Oh, what a shame! So young, so full  
Of promise — depths unplumbable!"

Instead, a shrug and tearless eyes  
Will greet my overdue demise;  
The wide response will be, I know,  
"I thought he died a while ago."

For life's a shabby subterfuge,  
And death is real, and dark, and huge.

The shock of it will register  
Nowhere but where it will occur.

I love the ironic tone here. But the last stanza summarizes the human experience of death doesn't it. "Death is real and dark and huge." And yet only one person at a time experiences it directly. Obviously friends and loved one feel grief and loss at another's passing, but in a way that is a result of the experience of death; it is not death itself up close. Only the one who dies knows that experience.

I first saw death, the real thing, when I was a ministry student, and then later as a part-time hospital chaplain. I don't really remember what I thought death was before that. I guess I had assumed it was like in the movies where someone gets shot or stabbed, and they just keel over. Or on some TV shows where you see the EKG machine go bloop, bloop, bloop, and then flatline. In these movies and TV shows, the line between life and death is clearly defined. One minute you are lying in bed, and the next you are struggling to get out your last line that there is another Skywalker.

But what I saw in the hospital was nothing like that. Death is sometimes abrupt, but more often it is anticipated. EKG machines can tell the doctors and nurses that someone is going to die hours before it actually happens. A nurse pointed it out to me once. The line indicating a heartbeat looks fine except every third or fourth beat is not as strong as

the others were. The heart just starts to slow down like a runner faltering toward the end of the finish line. I never saw anyone actually flatline; although I didn't often look.

I was usually out with the families. I once heard a doctor say that they had it easy next to the chaplains. To be in that room when families hear of a loved one dies is indescribably. The best description I have ever heard is Pablo Neruda's poem this morning. He captures both the power of death and its unreality. For when someone close to us dies it is like our sense of the world is altered. Things become surreal like the imagery he uses in his poem. "Death arrives among all that sound like a shoe with no foot in it, like a suit with no man in it, comes and knocks, using a ring with no stone in it, with no finger in it, comes and shouts with no mouth, with no tongue, with no throat. Nevertheless its steps can be heard and its clothing makes a hushed sound, like a tree." That is exactly what that room feels like.

In her memoir of dealing with grief, Joan Didion called her experience of the surrealness of grief "The Year of Magical Thinking." In it, she accounts her year of surviving cancer only to have her husband die unexpectedly. With two such shocking traumas back to back, she accounts her emotional life. The world seems unreal in the midst of that grief, like you are an alien from another planet. You observe what is happening to yourself, and you appear in control, but somehow it is a level removed from where you are. Rationally speaking this is a

common psychological defense mechanism. Denial is there for a reason. It is like a circuit breaker—when emotions get too intense to handle, then denial sets in to give your system some space. I have seen people wail and scream when they hear that their mother or wife or father or child has died. Others simply sit there, unable to utter a word.

Many veterans experience something similar when they return home from war. There is a great commercial out, that I saw just recently, where a soldier dressed in uniform is in the airport and no one else is there. He picks up his luggage, there is lots of luggage on the carousel, but there are no people. He then walks in downtown Philadelphia and the streets and buildings are abandoned. Then another vet, also his age in his twenties or so, comes up to him and shakes his hand. Then people appear. It graphically demonstrates the loneliness and surrealness of coming home after being in such a radically different place with a radically different culture and mindset.

Today we celebrate Memorial Day, a tradition that goes back to remembering the dead of the Civil War. This is a day when we pause to remember the men and women in the armed services who died in service to their country. For the families who have no soldier coming home, this is an important day. The magical thinking that accompanies death is doubly so for these families. A recent history of the nineteenth century traced the phenomenon of spiritualism. Not spirituality but spiritualism; holding séances to communicate with the spirits of the dead. It was a

practice that was very popular in the Victorian era of the late nineteenth century. This was, of course, charlatanry that took advantage of people's grief for money, and fed them lies. Why was it so popular? Because so many people lost a son or brother or husband in a far away land during the Civil War. Some place called Gettysburg, or Cold Harbor, or Shiloh. Where were they buried? How do I get some closure on my grief? Again, I do not condone séances, but one can understand a certain pastoral need they fulfilled in people.

On Memorial Day I choose instead to remember that great song and poem America the Beautiful. I must admit that I prefer its message to the unashamed militarism of The Star Spangled Banner. It is also a heck of a lot easier to sing! In the third stanza there is the line: "O beautiful for heroes proved in liberating strife. Who more than self their country loved, and mercy more than life!" I love this line because it captures something beyond the glorification of war, which for me interferes with honoring the dead. No this points to something deep within the human spirit. A nobility that is brought out in warriors who care more for others than they do for themselves. Until Frank Miller turned it into a blood-fest in his movie 300, Thermopylae was a good example of this. Three hundred Spartans hold off the entire Persian army sacrificing themselves because they knew it would ultimately lead to victory and the preservation of Greek democracy. Although war is violent and destructive there is still the capacity for human beings to

show great compassion toward others. That is what this line hints at in America the Beautiful. It gives us a way to understand their legacy within the context of American history.

For that is what is at the heart of Memorial Day after all: memory. How do we remember those who have died in service to us, people they have never seen but only imagined. They sacrificed themselves for their friends and neighbors, I am sure, but also to some high minded ideals like freedom and justice, for people now and in the future. That is great compassion. Compassion worthy of our memory. For our legacy you see, is not confined to the one or two generations that follow us that we may have the blessing to meet. No our legacy goes much further beyond that. The ancient philosopher Heraclitus said that you can never step into the same river twice. By stepping into it once, it is forever different. Each act we take alters the world. Like Jimmy Stewart in “It’s a Wonderful Life” our lives are intertwined with other people in ways we can never fully know. We swim in an ocean of interconnectedness. Our lives, and certainly our deaths, are always destroying the old world, and creating and recreating a new one.

This worldview of interconnectedness is what the Heart Sutra is trying to get across in its own rather enigmatic way. The Heart Sutra is perhaps the most popular text in Mahayana Buddhism, and especially in Zen. Many Zen centers recite it daily, and many people know it by heart. It is sort of like the Lord’s Prayer of Zen or the first Surah in

Islam. The Heart Sutra is always chanted, often in both English and Japanese or Korean, during a funeral. It is at the time of death that Buddhists need a little reminder of our interconnectedness. All of us, each and every person you meet, leads a life that is intertwined and interdependent upon yours. There is no eye because it is interrelated with everything: the light that enters it, the object that light bounces off of, the nerve impulses in your retina that the light stimulates, and your brain that somehow unscrambles all those nerve impulse to form a picture in your head that we call “sight.” There is no eye independent of the entire system. It is this complex system of light and physics and biology and neuro-electricity that is really the thing that is “seeing.” The eye is just one piece of it that gets all the attention. And they go through everything right down to the most fundamental teachings of the Buddha himself: there is no twelve link chain, there are no four noble truths. There is simply this matrix of interrelated, intertwined, phenomena, relationship, Being-itself. If you pull on any one strand the whole thing comes with it. If any one of us dies, the whole universe is in mourning, for it has lost a great contribution to the whole.

I once heard a commentary on NPR in which the fellow suggested that you should try if you could to get a physicist to speak at your funeral. This physicist could comfort your widow or widower by describing how the photons that reflected off of your face during your lifetime are still here bouncing around the universe somewhere. Indeed

the Heart Sutra almost invokes Maxwell's laws of the conservation of matter and energy: there is no increase or decrease; there is no arising or ceasing. It is all a process in which all of the pieces are accounted for. Even after death.

Thus the question arises, not only how do we remember those who have died, but how would we like to be remembered ourselves? While we are keeping alive the legacy of those honored dead, how might we reflect on what our own legacy could and should be? For leave one we will—make no mistake of that. But will it be for the better or for the worse?

My first real experience of death, not directly as Updike correctly notes, but of that surreal reflection of death that Pablo Neruda captures, was the death of my maternal grandmother the week before I entered high school. My Grandma Bell, as I called her, never Grandma Molly, was the sweetest person I have ever known; the perfect embodiment of unconditional love. Now as an adult I realize that she probably had some flaws, made some mistake somewhere in her life, but in my memory and in my experience of her, that simply was not possible. She was the matriarch of the family. Every Sunday we ate lunch at her house on the lake after church. I would spend two weeks every summer swimming and fishing up there. I enjoyed a second Christmas every year at her house that rivaled the one I would awake to at home. All the traditions of our family ran through her.

She died very suddenly of a heart attack at the end of the summer. August 27, 1987: I can still recall the date for it is ingrained in me. My Dad gave us the news, and the world felt slightly askew after that. “Magical Thinking” was a good term. Everything changed in my family following my Grandmother’s death: where we had Thanksgiving, what we did after church, how we interacted with my Grandfather, who would live almost another decade as a widower. Everything was different, but as these things do, time healed the emotional scars of grief, and I eventually went on with my life.

In my early days at seminary, I took a class with a professor who liked to explore family of origin issues with ministers and congregations. One day he asked a very intriguing question. He asked, “Who was it in your family that ordained you?” That is you must have gotten this idea of ministry from somewhere or from someone. Who was it? I found out from my mother that my Grandmother used to say of me as a toddler, “One day he will be a preacher.” Probably because I liked to talk a lot. But I realized that not only was she the one that ordained me into ministry, but her compassionate, unconditional love was the paradigm for me of grace. It is the ideal I strive for in my personal spiritual development and occasionally have attained from time to time.

I don’t know if my Grandmother really thought that I would in fact become a preacher. She died long before I made that life decision. At least she did before I consciously made that life decision. In fact

nothing increases or decreases, it is not defiled or pure. Her life and legacy were imparted to me in ways I am sure she could not have realized at the time. Her legacy was one of love; pure and simple. Not reading about it or theologizing about it, but feeling and experiencing true love and trying to share it with as many people as I can. That is her legacy, and it inspired me to create a similar legacy for myself; how I wish to be remembered by the universe if no one else. What will your legacy be? What are you willing to sacrifice for? How do you wish to be remembered? To quote another famous legacy around here, “Something to think about while you are doing the dishes this week.” Amen Blessed Be.