"We Make a Memorial,"
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on May 26, 2013

On Memorial Day weekend, do you think of lilacs blooming and parades, with veterans marching and bands playing? Or trips to the cemetery, placing flowers on the graves there? Or do you think of backyard barbecues the start of beach season? Or, perhaps, Memorial Day sales?

This Memorial Day I'm thinking about the dead, and how we remember and honor them. I'm thinking, of course, of our military dead--those who lost their lives serving our country. They are the ones that Memorial Day was made for, and it is good and important that we remember and honor them.

And, on this weekend, it is a good time, isn't it, to remember those dear to us who have died, whether they served in the military or not. Hear these words from the poet Mary Oliver:

I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,
and each name a comfortable music in the mouth
tending as all music does, toward silence,
and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.[1]

It's good to pause, and remember. So hear again part of Stephen Spender's homage those who have gone before us:

Near the snow, near the sun, in the highest fields,
See how these names are fêted by the waving grass
And by the streamers of white cloud
And whispers of wind in the listening sky.
The names of those who in their lives fought for life,
Who wore at their hearts the fire's centre.
Born of the sun, they travelled a short while toward the sun
And left the vivid air signed with their honour.[2]

[1] Mary Oliver, "When Death Comes."
[2] Stephen Spender, "The Truly Great."

Some of you have a tradition, this weekend, of going out to the cemetery, visiting the graves of your loved ones and placing flowers there. This is particularly on my mind today, because in a few hours my family will be flying down to North Carolina, where on Tuesday we'll gather with my siblings to bury my father's ashes, in the cemetery where his parents and grandparents are buried. I'm looking forward to visiting that plot, where I haven't been in twenty years.

Earlier this week, the funeral director sent me a fax, including a map of the plot, so we could decide where to dig the hole. I was surprised by how precious that piece of paper felt to me. Seeing the names of my grandparents and great-grandparents, and the dates when they were buried, and the price of the plot, $25 in 1901, and the fee for "perpetual care," $144, paid by my grandfather in 1946--all this felt important to me. For my dad, who was a kind of prodigal son, I imagine his burial in that place, next to his parents, as coming home, and that feels good.

A few years ago a funeral director wrote an essay advocating for funerals, where there's a body present, over the increasing popular memorial service. This person worried that memorial services can allow us to ignore the physicality of death, the real loss of it, if there is no body present. I've heard families say, "Don't to spend too much time on death, we want this to be a celebration of life," and I think that's something we do pretty well in this tradition. But at the same time it's important to acknowledge the truth that death happens, that death is real, and we need have ways to touch and acknowledge this reality.

That's why I love going to the cemetery. It feels good to be outside, under the sky, in touch with the earth. Funeral directors don't always have the greatest reputation, but I have yet to meet one I haven't appreciated and respected. They've taught me how we care for and respect the dead. A couple of years ago, I was standing with a funeral director at a grave in Groveland. The burial was over, and the mourners were slowly taking their leave. The funeral director said, "I always stand by the grave until the last person is gone. I never want anyone to have that final view, leaving the cemetery, of their loved one's grave, with no one there."

Of course, cemeteries aren't the only places for memorials to those who have died. You see them in all kinds of places. Do you remember, when Princess Diana died, the mountains of flowers that were left outside Buckingham palace as a memorial to her too-short life? In the days after the Boston Marathon bombings, a memorial sprang up in Copley Square. One person, fighting back tears, told the Globe, "It's like this big huge outdoor cathedral. I'm just drawn here. ... In some ways it says to me good does outweigh evil."[3]

On a smaller, but wider, scale, you see memorials people create on highways everywhere, at places where a loved one died. There's a Christmas tree planted on the shoulder of I-95 that I pass all the time. Decorated with ornaments, it's placed where a traffic accident took a life several years ago.

When the terrible shootings happened in Newtown, Connecticut, last December, people sent thousands of teddy bears and other gifts to honor those children who had been killed. But these gifts created something of a problem in Newtown--warehouse space and lots of volunteers were

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[3] Article by Evan Allen in *The Boston Globe*, May 3, 2013 available online at http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2013/05/02/marathon-bombing-memorial-grows-drawing-visitors-from-near-and-far/PuNTubylBTdeAkAdF1wNLN/story.html

needed to process all those gifts. They were sent by caring and well-meaning people, but were they really needed? One thing we could practice, in times of tragedy, is to ask, what will be helpful, for the victims and for ourselves? What do those who are suffering really need?

It is part of being human, isn't it, to want to do something when tragedy strikes? To want to make a memorial when someone we care for dies? Little children find a baby bird that fell from a nest, and what do they do? They bury it in the ground, perhaps cover the grave with pebbles and flower petals. Maybe they make a grave marker with crayons and construction paper.

There's something in us, central to our humanity, the urges us to show respect and reverence for those who have died, and those who mourn. The bombings at the Boston Marathon seemed to bring out the best in people, mostly. People gave blood, and went to church, hugged strangers, shed tears and sang "Sweet Caroline." And all these things helped.

But if tragedy brings out the best in us, it can also bring out the worst. When it was learned that the body of Tamerlan Tsarnaev was at a funeral home in Worcester, the news trucks and protestors showed up. The funeral director, Peter Stephan didn't think twice about accepting the suspected bomber's body. "This is what we do," Stephan said. "Everybody who is dead deserves to be buried."[4]

The journalist Charlie Pierce, who claims Worcester as his hometown, wrote in Esquire[5] asking his fellow citizens to stop being such jerks; to let the funeral director do his job, which was already hard enough. He said other nefarious characters have their graves, so leave the family alone, allow them to bury their dead, for God's sake.

Just up the turnpike from Portland, Maine, in the town of Gray, there's a cemetery which holds the grave of an unknown Confederate soldier. When a young man from Gray was killed in the Civil War, his body was sent home to be buried. But when the casket arrived, they discovered it held the body of a Confederate soldier. The bodies must have been mixed up. The people of Gray, even in the midst of that terrible war, felt this soldier deserved a proper burial. That's what they would want for their own sons. So they buried him in their cemetery, and the ladies of Gray raised money to buy a tombstone that reads, "Stranger/a soldier of the late war/died 1862."

The body of that other soldier, the boy from Gray, did arrive, about a week later. He is buried in the same cemetery, about a hundred feet from grave of that unknown Confederate soldier.

It says something about our character, as individuals and as a society, how we treat our dead. It says something about our reverence for life, and who we think is deserving of our respect, and who is not.

A few years ago, workers digging up a city street in Portsmouth were surprised to discover the crumbling remains of wooden coffins. They had unearthed a forgotten graveyard under the street. DNA evidence revealed that the bodies there are of people of African descent. There are as many as 200 people buried there, under the street and buildings. Old maps show a "Negro Burying

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[4] Article by Wesley Lowrey and Brian MacQuarrie in *The Boston Globe*, May 4, 2013.

[5] Available online at http://www.esquire.com/blogs/politics/Worcester_Should_Please_Shut_Up

Ground" in use as early as 1705. But at some point those graves were paved over, built over, and forgotten.

This discovery created a dilemma, and offered a moral choice. Do you say, "It's too bad this happened, but what can we do?" Or do you try to right an old wrong? There's a plan in the works to close off that street and create a memorial park, and they're raising money to do this, "to honor those forgotten." Rev. Lauren Smith, co-minister of the UU church in Portsmouth, preached a powerful sermon at this year's Martin Luther KIng breakfast.[6] She introduced the West African word "sankofa," which means, "go back and get it." She said, "it's not wrong to go back for that which has been forgotten." That is what people are doing by creating a memorial to those long-forgotten dead. Lauren said, "The underlying message is that when we return to the past for something that was lost or forgotten we retrieve our future."

Memorial Day asks us to make the time and the effort to remember, to visit those graves, those memorials which remind us who we are and what we stand for. And we're invited to make new memorials, that others will visit and be moved by, even when we're gone.

We make a memorial. That's what we do. And it's good for us. May the spirit of life and love, bless and keep all those who have died. And may that same spirit bless us, and this world, now and forever,

Amen.

[6] Available online at http://www.seacoastonline.com/articles/20130121-NEWS-130129975