"Remembering Well,"
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on May 29, 2011

This Memorial Day weekend, I find myself feeling ambivalent. I love Memorial Day's call to remember and honor our war dead; but I hope these observances don't glorify war or encourage the next generation to think military might is the answer to our problems.

At a time when our country is engaged in three different conflicts, at a huge cost both in human lives and dollars spent, I wish our leaders were more conservative about sending our troops into harm's way. And yet, I was in favor of the UN coalition moving to stop Libyan leader Gaddafi killing his own people.

I'm someone who is generally against killing; and yet I think the world is better off with Osama bin Laden dead, and I'm proud that our country pulled off that operation so successfully, with no innocent people killed.

I know we need to take a strong stand against terrorism, but I have real concerns about how we've done that. I worry that the so-called "war on terror" is the justification for a new era of unbridled defense spending that perpetuates the military-industrial complex.

Like I said, I'm ambivalent about these things. But I hope you don't hear that as wishy-washy. That's how ambivalence is often portrayed. But think about the word: 'ambi,' means both, as in ambidextrous, both hands. Valence means strong. So ambivalence means pulled strongly in two ways. I once heard someone say "Ambivalence is a holy emotion." In the face of things that are complicated, the deeper, more thoughtful response can be ambivalence; to see a situation not as either/or, but as both/and.

I both want to observe Memorial Day, and I want to be thoughtful about how we do it. This is a poignant time of year. I always think of lines Walt Whitman wrote to mourn the death of President Lincoln:

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd,
And the great star early droop'd in the western sky in the night,
I mourn'd, and yet shall mourn with ever-returning spring.

Memorial Day calls us to mourn. To remember those who have paid the greatest cost of war, who lost their lives fighting for their country. It's also a time, of course, to mourn for those who came back from war wounded, in body or mind or spirit. To mourn with those who lost their children, their parents, their loved ones, to the horrors of war.

I remember standing in a cemetery on Memorial Day a few years ago. The middle school band had played, and veterans had laid a wreath on a grave. A Navy chaplain spoke to those gathered there, and he said, "A soldier or sailor's prayer is always a prayer for peace."

I appreciated that he did not feel the need to speak in defense of war, to try to glorify or justify the terrible cost of war. No, he simply acknowledged that what soldiers want is to do their duty and come home.

I could talk today about my fears for our country--how our excessive spending on arms is putting us and our world at risk, that we can't begin to think about dealing with the deficit if we can't significantly cut back our military spending. I could talk about my reservations about the ongoing war in Afghanistan or all the money we are pouring into Pakistan, with questionable results. I could talk about the human cost of war, even to those "lucky" enough to return home, so often broken beyond repair. But these are al big and complicated issues.

Today I want to keep it simple, so we can focus on what Memorial Day is for, remembering those who have died. This gives Memorial Day a more religious tone than other national holidays. It's a time when many of us also remember those in our families who have died, whether they served in the military or not. I know some of you have your own Memorial Day rituals--including visiting the graves of your loved ones, and planting flowers there.

Today I'm thinking about how we make a memorial; how we remember those we have loved and lost. About how we grieve. This week I looked at a book on my shelf that's about this, called Remembering Well, by the UU minister Sarah York. She writes:

"(When) My mother died ... she didn't want a funeral. "Get together and have a party," she had said, when the topic was allowed to come up. This life is all there is as far as she was concerned, and when it's over, it's over--the less fuss the better.

Sarah says, "We did not honor her request. We needed the ritual. We needed to say good-bye, but we also needed a ritual that would honor her spirit and would be faithful to her values and beliefs. She was hostile toward any expression of organized religion, so even though I was a minister, holding a memorial service in a church was out of the question.

"Our task was to put together something that would honor and celebrate the life and spirit of this complex woman...

"My father had made arrangements for cremation and a private service, but wanted to give the neighbors in their small rural community an opportunity to 'pay their respects.' An evening visitation with a viewing of an open casket, the typical ritual in western North Carolina, was not

appropriate. My father, an atheist who would never run his lawn mower on Sunday out of respect for his Baptist neighbors, did not want to offend them. So he rented an empty casket for the visitation in the funeral home, and topped it with a beautiful spray of yellow roses. Neighbors filed by the closed casket, some of them touching it. One man knelt before the casket to offer a prayer."[1]

Afterwords they had a family service to bury the ashes at a spot her mother loved.

A few years ago I was leading a graveside service. There were a number of children there, so before we began I felt compelled to say something to them. I acknowledged that graveyards are often pictured as scary places. But look around, I said, it's beautiful here, with the green grass and tall trees and the birds singing. I asked them if they had ever buried a pet, or a baby bird they had found. I said this is what we do, as humans, we return the bodies of those we care about to the earth, and it's a beautiful and natural thing.

Memorial Day reminds us of the value of making memorials to those who have died--whether that is a stone or flowers in a cemetery, a tree we've planted in our back yard, a collection of photographs or a candle on a shelf at home.

It reminds us of the power of ritual, for gathering with others to name and act out our grief and loss. "Give sorrow words," Shakespeare wrote. "The grief that does not speak/ Whispers the o'er-fraught heart, and bids it break."

Give sorrow words, and actions too. There is power and grace in showing up for this--in going to the cemetery on Memorial Day, in visiting a friend in the hospital, in sending a note with your condolences. Julia Kasdorf wrote a poem about this, called "What I Learned From My Mother":

I learned from my mother how to love
the living, to have plenty of vases on hand
in case you have to rush to the hospital
with peonies cut from the lawn, black ants
still stuck to the buds I learned to save jars
large enough to hold fruit salad for a whole
grieving household...
I learned that whatever we say means nothing,
what anyone will remember is that we came.

What anyone will remember is that we came. What matters is showing up--showing up for others and for yourself. In addition to caring for those in need, please remember to show up for yourself. Make the time to attend to your own grief and loss; pay attention to it, give it its due. Mary Oliver says, "This is the first, the wildest and the wisest thing I know: that the soul exists and is built entirely out of attentiveness."

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[1] Sarah York, *Remembering Well: Rituals for Celebrating Life and Mourning Death* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

This attentiveness invites us into a holy place, an ambivalent place: where we are open and attentive to the complexities of the human heart, where we hold both the light and the shadow. To remember well means giving sorrow words and acting it out: visiting graves, making memorials, in doing so blessing others and ourselves. It means showing up, as best we can, to these lives we have been given.

Remembering well means giving death its due, which paradoxically, then allows us to say yes to life. With its pain and heartache, disappointment and beauty, we say yes to life.

Amen.