



WHAT DO WE MEMORIALIZE?

The older I get the less control seem to have over what pops into my mind at these times of remembrance. Perhaps it's the same with you even if you are much younger than me. What came to me this year was something I think I considered a rather small event at the time. It seems to have grown in significance.

It was 1976 and we had just moved from San Francisco to the hamlet of Annapolis in the northwestern corner of Sonoma County. We were still unpacking when there was a knock at the door. Two elderly women had come to welcome us and with a request. Memorial Day was coming up and they asked if we would have our children spread rose petals on the graves in the small local cemetery. It was to become our first spiritual service in our new

home.

Early in the morning we gathered at the cemetery. The children were carrying baskets of rose petals. We followed the two women who had invited us as they went around to each grave saying something about the life of the person buried there. In the background I heard cars and loud motorcycles speeding toward the ocean. There seemed to me to be a significant chasm between what was happening in the cemetery and on the nearby county road. Memorial Day meant something very deep and personal to these two women and I was honored to be part of that. To the travelers on the road it was, as it continues to be, merely the beginning of the summer holiday season which will last until Labor Day. But there is something more.



The first official Memorial Day was on May 5, 1866, although local commemorations had happened at various places before that. The idea was to remember those who had died in our bloody Civil War. It became a bridge of sorrow connecting families who had lost those they loved in both the North and the South. The common practice was to lay flowers on the graves and indeed its first name was “Decoration Day.” It is still called that in some places.



Before long Memorial Day became a time of remembering all those who had died not just Civil War soldiers. We get a pretty clear picture of how the commemoration evolved from the “Decoration Day” segment of American composer Charles Ives’ (1874–1954) *A Symphony; New England Holidays*. Ives once shared what he remembered. Early in the morning people would go out into their gardens and the woods surrounding the village to pick flowers. Before noon they would

gather in the common Green and share memories of people and events, from struggles like abolition of slavery, wars and other challenges to humanity, up until the present day. There were many flowers by then and a parade slowly formed. There were all manner of marching bands from soldiers to schoolchildren to fire brigades. The people followed behind. They marched solemn to muted drums. Ives said that march to the cemetery was, “a thing a boy never forgets” After the last grave had been decorated, *Taps* was played. Then came the quickstep march back to town to what Ives called, “a Yankee stimulant”. The first great picnic of the summer would be held on the common Green. Eventually the day would end with the sunset and what Ives called “a benediction upon the day.”



In some small fashion I felt that we were privileged to be part of something similar to what Ives remembered as we followed the two elderly women around the cemetery. That experience left me with a deeper understanding of the day we set aside as a memorial.

As we came back to a picnic at our new home, Sister Marti commented on how many people had fought in wars at that little cemetery. She hoped that the memory of those who had died in wars, or who had been forever changed would be a way of decreasing war in the future. In the silence that followed it seemed to me that we all, including the children, had that prayer in our hearts.



One of our places of burial at Starcross is called, “*The Garden of*

Memories. Walking through it often seems to me going on a path of history. Not only the story of Starcross but the history of all the people who have been laid to rest here. There are friends and loved ones who have been connected to us as they walked alongside of us. And there are others who were separated by great distances. But we are all colleagues in this adventure we call existence. It saddens me that some died young, but through the years I have realized that all, in their own way, lived life to its fullest.

The markers are simple redwood timbers that we found on the property, probably left over from some project long ago. Even though many of them had



never met each other there is nonetheless, for me, a strong sense of community when I stand in this place.

I think it was Sister Julie who first call this a garden. She felt that each life was a seed and sometimes we did not see what grew from that seed for many years. In that respect the lives

commemorated here are like some of the great redwood trees that surround us nearby.

Is it not likely that each one of us has our own garden of memories someplace in the paths we each walk?



In the Pacific Northwest and parts of northern California people talk of the “Chinook Wind” — named after the Chinook Native American culture. In normal times, whatever those might be in this period of climate crisis, the

Chinook Wind can cause the snow pack to lessen or disappear in just a few hours. A light, warm wind brings the smell of the Pacific Ocean, of the earth, and of all growing things.



Our preoccupations can be swept away by the Chinook Winds that blow from time to time in our lives. Memorial Day, a walk in a garden of memories, looking through a book of photographs, or just sitting with some iced tea and opening our mind, can help us experience this gentle breeze wherever you are.



A final Memorial Day wish for all of us, taken partly from a Buddhist prayer,

May we be safe, and free from fear. May we be at ease and peaceful. May we be filled with loving kindness — for others and for ourselves.

Brother Toby