

**Appropriate Honor**  
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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
Unitarian Universalist  
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**Readings**

from the *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 54

Plant yourself firmly in the Tao and  
you won't ever be uprooted.  
Embrace the Tao firmly and you won't ever  
be separated from it.  
Your children will thrive,  
and your children's children.

Cultivate goodness in your self,  
and goodness will be genuine.  
Cultivate it in your family,  
and goodness will flourish.  
Cultivate it in your community,  
and goodness will grow and multiply.  
Cultivate it in your country,  
and goodness will be abundant.  
Cultivate it in the world,  
and goodness will be everywhere..

How do I know the world works like this?  
By watching.

from *Daring Democracy*, by Frances Moore Lappe and Adam Eichen

Until we try with all we've got... we will never know what is possible. That's the spirit of our country, our planet, and all those we love need in us now. That, we can muster. It is not superhuman. It is the essence of humanity.

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Every day seems to bring yet more worrisome, frightening news, putting millions on the edge of despair. At the same time, we've come to see that despair itself is ultimately our only enemy, and we've become ever-more clear that there's an effective antidote: meaningful action we take together.

But we realize that to take action – and more, to join with others you do not know – requires courage. So in this moment of extreme threat, we may come to see that the opposite of evil is no longer goodness. It is courage. Goodness without action isn't good enough.

## Sermon

Every Memorial Day when I was growing up my town had a big parade down Grand Avenue, the main road that ran north to south along the spine of our town. When I was old enough, friends and I would ride our bikes up and down along the parade route. One year, I suppose when I was even a little older, we made it all the way to Silver Lake Park, where the parade ended – and where on other sorts of days I would go with my mother feed the ducks. But in addition to the ducks and the paths around the pond, there was a veteran's monument in the park – and on Memorial Day there were people handing out plastic poppies in remembrance of veterans: A tradition inspired, as I surely didn't know at the time, by the World War I poem "In Flanders Fields" written by Canadian military doctor and artillery commander Major John McCrae in honor of his friend Lieutenant Alexis Helmer, killed by an artillery shell in the Second Battle of Ypres. It begins:

In Flanders fields the poppies blow  
Between the crosses, row on row,  
That mark our place; and in the sky  
The larks, still bravely singing, fly  
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

Yes, poppies to remind us to remember.

And yes indeed, we ought always to remember the sacrifices veterans have made, too often the ultimate sacrifice – and so remember their courage, their patriotism and high ideals that for many was their motivation for joining the service to begin with.

Those memories are for many if not most of us quite personal.

As for me, on Memorial Day and also on Veterans Day I think of my Uncle Bob, killed during the Battle of the Bulge in World War II. I never knew Uncle Bob, but heard plenty of stories growing up, as I've shared with you on other occasions.

You each of course have your own memories. Many of you are yourselves veterans.

We honor your courage and your service. Thank you.

And yet... as I think we all know: thank you... memory... poppies... are of course not enough.

Standing with hand over heart at a football game as the National Anthem is sung... is not enough.

For that matter, such gestures are not even necessary, maybe even a distraction if at the same time we fail to couple such symbolic displays of patriotism with *living* patriotism – as good citizens of a democracy.

Living patriotism.

Which for some might look like kneeling in an attitude of prayer during the National Anthem, kneeling with silent prayer or hope that our nation might more fully live up to its ideals of equality and justice for all. That's patriotic too, that is a way of honoring those vets who have put on a uniform in order to defend the right of each citizen to protest, to speak out, to speak up.

In any case, you know what? No American, whether private citizen or public servant, should be in the business of telling other Americans what is an appropriate way to be patriotic or to honor veterans.

Rather, it is for each of us to decide for ourselves how we might most appropriately and effectively honor our veterans and express our patriotism, our love of country

And to my mind, in general the best way is, as I suggested a moment ago, to be as good a citizen as I know how – keeping in mind that in a democracy the highest office in the land is *not* the office of president; it is the office of citizen.

Seems to me it is more important than ever to remember this, more pressing than usual at *this* moment in our political and social history to consider how best to be a citizen in our democracy. For this is a moment fraught with danger (I've lost sleep thinking of North Korea); it is a moment filled with ugly rhetoric (I've rolled my eyes in disgust all too frequently); it is a moment with one policy or proposal after another turning back the clock on hard-won rights, turning our back on immigrants, turning back the clock on protections for the environment and action to combat climate change, and on and on (my heart breaks a little more every day as I think about vulnerable people impacted by all this).

So, in such a time as this I've been heartened to read this new book all about good citizenship in a democracy. You heard a passage earlier, from this book by Frances Moore Lappe, written with a young man named Adam Eichen: *Daring Democracy: Igniting Power, Meaning, and Connection for the America we Want*.

At the outset the authors pose the challenge we face at this time in our history as citizens of our democracy:

Creating democracies truly accountable to their citizens is essential to our very survival – to the flourishing of societies supporting human life, and now, because of climate change, to the survival of the Earth as we've inherited it.

Lappe and Eichen proceed to analyze how we came to this moment in the history of our democracy, this era when dollars have more power than votes, when the rich and well-connected have more influence than the rest of us.

Then they offer success stories in the project which they are inviting us to join... this project of reclaiming our democracy.

Noting, to give just one of many examples, that even as national and state efforts to suppress voting rights for minority communities get lots of attention, there have at the same time been successful state and local efforts to enhance voters' access.

Finally, Lappe and Eichen offer many ways we can each share in this work. They describe organizations we could join, candidates and ballot initiatives to support, demonstrations to attend, conversations to have with family and neighbors, and so on. You know about all these sorts of things. The thread through it all, though, is the reminder that democracy is not a spectator sport, democracy is not about voting in an election and then getting on with the rest of your life.

Democracy is, for example, about the initiative here in Hingham to encourage the Board of Selectman to issue a proclamation of welcome to all who reside in or come to our town. And when the Selectmen voted to issue such a proclamation after deleting any direct reference to welcoming all regardless of immigration status... democracy became about taking it as a disappointment but still as a small step, having accomplished something simply through the community-wide conversation... and then keeping on, seeking other ways to lift up the plight of undocumented immigrants here and everywhere.

Democracy, another example close to home, is about members of our congregation joining with others to sit outside Governor Baker's office until he takes more meaningful steps to curb fossil fuel use in the commonwealth

There are, in short, plenty of ways to engage in the democratic process in the direction of human rights, voting rights, environmental policy, and on and on. And I know that many of you are deeply so engaged. Thank you for *your* service too!

All this said, though, a word about the role of a church or any religious body or spiritual community in all this.

We are not a political party. We are not primarily an issue-oriented social change organization or peace group.

What then *are* we?

Well, the reading we heard earlier from the ancient Chinese classic the *Tao Te Ching* offers some pretty good clues.

The form of the passage is straightforward. We are first enjoined to root ourselves in something called the *tao* – almost always translated as the “way.” Which we could understand simply as “how things are”: how the universe works, materially and morally.

Then, from such rootedness or groundedness we are told we ought to cultivate goodness... in one's self, one's community, one's country, the world.

Now, other translations use the word “virtue” or “integrity” instead of “goodness.” One translator (Victor Mair) tells us that the original Chinese word, is *te* (part of the title of the *Tao Te Ching*). And “signifies the personal qualities or strengths of the individual, one's personhood. *Te* is determined by the sum total of one's actions, good and bad.”

We are meant, in other words, to cultivate *te* – integrity, goodness, virtue – through the *whole* of our lives, not just in some abstract way sitting on a meditation cushion... or writing a sermon... but through both what we say *and* what we do... words *and* deeds... daily.

Then, as we heard, the flow of this “cultivation” of *te* – integrity, goodness, virtue, personal power ... - is from the individual outward to the community, nation, and world.

When it comes, then, to the role of the church or of any religious community?

We are here to begin with to help each one of us find our grounding in *tao* – which we could also describe as having to do with our deepest values and our most profound experience of what it means to be a human being – choose your language: individual manifestation of the divine or of the eternal *tao* or Way or of the universe, part and parcel of the whole, part of the interdependent web of life, human life and all life.

How do we do this? First – every Sunday, simply walking together into this ancient house is a visual and visceral reminder that we are not alone, that we have each other, that we are part of a generations long legacy of love, that we are indeed part and parcel of one another and of all life and of the source of all life by whatever name.

Then through classes, meditation groups, almost any gathering, we deepen and broaden this grounding, often doing so through the variety of conversations we have with one another: whether about an ancient text or poem, about life in general, about our lives in particular, as well as about what we might do to address this or that injustice in the world or need in our community.

I have, as many of you know, often described these as “conversations about things that matter.” But this would be better extended to say that these are conversations about things that matter which, at their best, support and lead to *lives that matter*: our daily lives in relation to our neighbors or at work, our votes, our volunteering, our emails to public officials, our marching, our rallying, our speaking up and speaking out. Each of us not trying to do everything, but each of us doing what we can do, assured that we are part of a very large family of folks also seeking to contribute to the larger good, seeking to enhance and enrich life each in their own way.

All grounded, I’ll say it again, in our understanding and *experience* of profound interrelatedness, of who we most truly are as human beings, which then leads so naturally to how we choose to serve this life we share: whether as individuals or together as a community – echoing Frances Moore Lappe and Adam Eichen, joining together with courage. (Remembering that the root of the word courage is the Latin word for heart.)

Finally for this morning, bringing my message full circle:

This learning to be as good and decent a human being as we can be, whether through our church life or wherever and whenever – learning to be a human being of integrity and goodness and virtue, of course means learning to be a better citizen, which, as I began by affirming, is the very best way to honor our veterans and all those who currently serve in the armed forces.

With the enduring hope that someday – not in my lifetime or yours, but that someday the living veterans we honor with a poppy or a plaque will be veterans not of wars – because there will be no more wars – but rather will be veterans of volunteer and civic service of all kinds on behalf of the common good of our community, our nation, of the world, of this earth we share.

So may it be.