

“Mystic Chords of Memory”

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Reading

“Litany of Contradictory Things” (adapted), by Michael Moynahan

Wheat and weeds:
let them grow together.
Israelis and Palestinians:
let them grow together.
Catholics and Protestants of Northern Ireland:
let them grow together.
Sikhs and Hindus and Muslims of India:
let them grow together.
Russians and Americans:
let them grow together.
Blacks and Whites of our nation:
let them grow together.
Revolutionaries and reactionaries:
let them grow together.
Republicans and Democrats:
let them grow together.
Rich and poor, humble and haughty:
let them grow together.
Joys and sorrows, laughter, tears:
let them grow together.
Strength and weakness:
let them grow together.
Doubt and faith:
let them grow together.
Virtue and vice:
let them grow together.
The helpful and the helpless:
let them grow together.
All the contrarities:
let them grow together.

Sermon

"The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

Such a deeply poignant sentence from Lincoln's first inaugural address in 1861. To begin with, poignant because we know there were to be four more years of war... and deaths numbering beyond anything Lincoln would have imagined.

Poignant too because we know that during the Civil War the war in the west against native nations – Apache, Ute, Navaho, and others – would continue with more ferocity than ever.

Additionally poignant for us in 2021 since these days it may feel as though we are further away than ever from a "chorus of Union"... and may feel as though fewer Americans than ever are "touched... by the better angels of our nature."

All this said, what a powerfully resonant phrase: "the mystic chords of memory" – suggesting as it does that there are harmonies deeper (mystic harmonies) than whatever roils on the surface of our lives, in the headlines, in debates in Congress, on social media, on battlefields.

It's not that there aren't genuinely substantive differences among us and between us, whether as Americans or as human beings wherever we are. The question has to do with how we understand those differences and what we will do about those differences.

Most importantly, are we indeed able to discern or create harmony out of difference and diversity? Not eliminate difference or diversity, but see and feel the deeper harmonies, the mystic chords of memory – remembering, in other words, who we truly are: to re-member, to put ourselves back together in our wholeness.

The reading we heard earlier prayerfully invites us to this sort of seeing and feeling, this remembering this possibility. It is based on a parable in the Gospel of Matthew. Summarizing and simplifying the parable: A farmer sows a field of wheat and awhile later his servants discover that in the middle of the night someone has come along and in the same field sowed "tares" – a troublesome weed. Should they pull out the tares? No, says the master, because you would uproot the wheat at the same time. What, then, to do? At harvest time pull everything up – and then save the wheat and burn the tares.

Now the ordinary interpretation derives from what might be a secondary source which immediately follows the parable, in which Jesus says that the weeds represent the evil ones, the sinners, and when the harvest time comes they will be separated out from the good ones, the pure ones, the saints, and burned.

Or we could lean more in the direction of the interpretation implied in the reading – let the contraries grow together – without judging good and evil, saved and damned – the implication being that the contraries grow better that way! How about that?

It's not that there aren't moral distinctions sometimes to be made. But maybe we shouldn't be making such distinctions as quickly as we often do: Oh, *those* people, you know

how they are: those Republicans... or... those Democrats; or those Israelis... those Palestinians... and so on.

Rather, instead of leaping to judgement, maybe we should listen again to Lincoln, who assumed that there are “better angels of our nature” – the deeper mystic chords... if we take the time to listen carefully enough. Deep mystic chords that harmonize apparent opposites, contraries – differences from one person or group to another (maybe, after all, we need each other, complement one another), and also the contrary feelings we experience in our own lives, joy and sorrow most obviously.

Indeed, one of the Thanksgiving hymns we sing every year, “Come Ye Thankful People,” affirms as much, drawing from the same gospel parable: “Wheat and tares together sown, here for joy or sorrow grown.”

Joy and sorrow woven together, as it seems they must be in the nature of things, much as we might resist this truth and want only joy and never sorrow. Yet as Kahlil Gibran wrote in *The Prophet*: “The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.” As it is often said, a broken heart is an open heart, able to hold sorrow and also to hold joy.

Well, all these reflections take me back to Memorial Day.

Memorial Day was originally a day called Decoration Day to honor the Civil War dead by decorating their graves with flowers. But after World War I it became a day to honor all those who gave their lives in all of our nation’s too many wars – to mourn with sorrowful hearts, even (as with almost any grieving) as we are grateful for the joy that those lost had given to us, and grateful for the peace they helped to make possible – so we always hope.

For me, though, and I expect for many of you, Memorial Day also goes beyond remembrance to include a hope and a prayer for a future Memorial Day when there will be no one living who mourns for someone they knew and loved who lost their lives in a war... because war will have become a phenomenon long past. Not that we humans wouldn’t still have disagreements and differences... but perhaps a day will have come when it will simply be unthinkable to resort to war to resolve those disagreements. (Instead, let us grow together.)

I’ve shared on other Memorial Days words from a letter my Uncle Bob wrote not long before he was killed in World War II’s Battle of the Bulge. He wrote home that seeing all his fellow soldiers of different faiths getting along so well, he thought he might become a minister after the war, to help spread this message of harmony he was witnessing – the mystic chords.

I guess I ended up taking on the cause of the uncle I never knew.

The uncle who of course never heard Pete Seeger’s “Where Have All the Flowers Gone?” which we sang earlier this morning.

A word about the origins of that song, relevant, as you’ll hear, to this morning’s theme. For the words to what feels like the quintessentially *American* peace song, were inspired by a passage in a *Russian* novel! For Pete got the words to the first three verses from a traditional Ukrainian folk song which he had read in the novel *And Quiet Flows the Don* written in 1934 by Russian novelist Mikhail Sholokhov.

Americans and Russians, let them, let us, grow together.

Let me draw towards a conclusion with this additional thought. I'm not a farmer, but I've heard this much about farming: Monoculture is often a bad idea – for all sorts of reasons I won't go into and mostly don't know much about. Indigenous peoples know this well. In a chapter in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer tells of the three sisters as they are traditionally called: corn, beans, and squash. Turns out they each are far more likely to thrive when planted together in just the right ways. Kimmerer, who is not only a member of the Potawatomi Nation, but is also a botanist, goes into beautiful detail as to why this is so. But, interesting as all the detail is, just knowing that it is so is quite wonderful, isn't it?

Corn, beans, and squash, let them grow together – because they actually grow better together.

Isn't the same thing true of us human beings? Don't we grow better together, learning from one another, particularly from those who are very different from us? Maybe sometimes even (or especially) learn from our so-called enemies – if we would stop and listen for those mystic chords – listen to our better angels?

There are groups of those ordinarily thought to be enemies or opponents who not only believe this but are doing something about it.

There are in fact Republican and Democratic senators sitting together these days and working on a bipartisan police reform bill; and another group working on a bipartisan infrastructure bill. Republicans and Democrats, let them grow together.

In Israel/Palestine there are interfaith groups in frequent conversation, not only during this current crisis, but over the past years and decades: Jews and Muslims and Christians, let them grow together. Israelis and Palestinians, let them grow together.

Let us all grow together, on this Memorial Day and always, heeding the call of the mystic chords of memory, singing the song of our better angels, remembering and singing the song of who we human beings truly are and must seek to more fully be.

So may it be.