

A Time Set Aside to Remember

May 24, 2020

The word "holiday" comes from the Old English word *haligdæg* meaning "holy day, consecrated day, religious anniversary; Sabbath," implying both "religious festival" and "day of exemption from labor and recreation." But both the pronunciation and sense diverged in the 16th century, giving it fewer religious connotations, coinciding with the rise of Protestantism in the world.

Today, we tend to think of "holidays" as falling into one of two groups: "Religious Holidays" and "non-religious holidays". However, while I was studying Religion & Society at Syracuse University, it occurred to me that *all* holidays are *both*, in some sense.

For example, Christmas is a religious holiday for Christians, celebrating the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. But it is also thought of as a *non*-religious holiday by the millions of people around the world who celebrate it even though they do not identify as Christian. For them, it is a day to celebrate giving, sharing, friends and family, music, lights, joy and, of course, participating in a healthy economy.

Halloween is thought of, generally, as a *non*-religious holiday, because it is not recognized by the dominant religion. However, for the millions of modern Pagans, it *is* a religious holiday, called Samhain, and it is a day to grieve together the deaths of the previous year, as well as a day to remember and honor our ancestors. It is also a day to recognize that death is an inevitable part of every life, and to celebrate the fact that we all have that in common.

Like Christmas, though, it is only a "religious" holiday for people of a specific religion. For everyone else, it is one big grand party that anyone can enjoy.

Then, there is this whole other grouping of holidays that are "civic" in nature... Memorial Day is one of them. Some others would be Independence Day (i.e. the 4th of July), Veterans Day, Thanksgiving, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and Earth Day, to name a few. These are also days "set aside" to observe something that we have *named* as "important". Giving something its own holiday recognizes its value and lifts it up to be remembered year after year. For some, it means a day off from work. For others, it means a day of added abundance, as there are always sales associated with a holiday, whatever it is. No matter what, though, it is noticed, and, thereby, remembered, even if the original meaning becomes obscured over time.

One *could* say, that they are part of our "civic religion."

Memorial Day was originally conceived in the years immediately following the Civil War. It used to be called "Decoration Day," because the widows of the men who were killed in the war would decorate the men's grave markers. Several locations, both in the North and the South, claim to be the originator, but, it soon became a national day to remember the loved ones who were lost in that terrible and tragic struggle. It served as a way for the nation, as one nation, no longer divided, to grieve together all of those who were lost.

Since then, it has evolved to include all of those who were lost in every war that the United States has been a part of... as well as a day off from work, a day to have cook-outs and bar-b-ques, and a day to mark the unofficial beginning of Summer. And, of course, a day to shop at all those Memorial Day sales!

But this year, Memorial Day is somehow different. This year, the United States is not officially at war. I mean, there are a long list of armed conflicts that the U.S. has been in continuous involvement in for years, but it is not a *defined* conflict, like when I was growing up watching the Viet Nam War on the evening news.

Nonetheless, this year, *does* remind me of those Viet Nam years... only, instead of watching the number of deaths of U.S. soldiers in some small and distant country that I had never heard of before, and probably *still* wouldn't know much about except that I have the memory of several of my high school friends being drafted and coming home in a casket... this year I am watching the news reports that feature the current death toll from COVID-19, how the U.S. ranks in the world, and how each state ranks in comparison with the others. So far, over 94 thousand confirmed deaths in the U.S. Only 58 thousand Americans died in Viet Nam, and that conflict went on for 20 years.

Also, the Viet Nam War seemed, at the time, extremely far away. The risk of me, personally, dying was non-existent. They did not allow women in armed conflict back in those days. But the risk of loss of *very* real. My boyfriend at the time, who I actually later married and was married to for several years, was assigned the number "6" in the draft lottery, and was only saved from actually going to Viet Nam because the draft ended shortly before we both graduated from high school. Many of my friends were not so lucky.

But this is here and now. And both the personal risk of dying *is* real, as well as the personal risk of loss. As most of you probably already know, we here at the UU Wellesley Hills have, experienced our first death due to COVID-19. Long-time UU Wellesley Hills member Thomas Alexander Weil died at the age of 90 earlier this week at St. Patrick's Manor in Natick. Tommy and his wife Dianne became active in our congregation in 1970 and together raised their three children in this community. Tommy will be greatly missed by very many here; indeed, some of you have known him for decades. Please keep his family in your thoughts and hearts during this particularly tender time.

There is, currently, no holiday to commemorate the deaths resulting from COVID-19, but I am quite sure that, eventually, there will be. I understand that the president has called for flags to be flown at half-mast this weekend in their honor. For right now, I am inviting all of you to remember Tommy, along with all the other tens of thousands, that have fallen to this deadly disease, in addition to the roughly 660 thousand Americans who have died historically due to war since we have been a nation.

Another thing that is reminding me very much of the time of the Viet Nam War, is the political divide that has developed over COVID-19. It reminds me of the country divided over the Viet Nam War.

This coronavirus thing is *hard!* It has been wearing on for how long now? Nearly 3 months? I am one of the *extremely fortunate* and privileged people who can work completely from home. Yes, I am coming to you from my apartment in beautiful downtown Worcester, MA. I have had no loss in income, and I work for a fabulous employer, UU Wellesley Hills, who took the initiative to keep me safe from the virus. A dear friend or mine in California went right to work and made masks for both myself and my spouse, so we have been very safe and healthy throughout this entire ordeal.

But I realize that this is not the reality for everyone. Not everyone is enjoying the privilege of safety and security that I do. My heart goes out to each one.

The unemployment rate is now over 20%, causing an enormous amount of hardship and financial insecurity.

In addition, this experience has been exceptionally hard on people with mental health issues. Just last week, there were 3 people that I personally know, who lost family members in their 20s due to opioid addiction.

It is hard for people to stay home and not do all the things that we normally do. Humans are social animals. We *need* to be around other humans! And when we cannot, it causes anxiety... that people sometimes express in various ways... like over-using a substance that they may have already been abusing...

One of the *many* things that are difficult, right now, is the *political* tension that has developed over this. Out of an abundance of caution, UU Wellesley Hills closed our campus and will remain closed for the time being. Having said this, the state of Massachusetts has, just this week, begun a phased approach to re-opening.

Perhaps this "phased re-opening" will serve to reduce some of that tension. The fact is the shutdown has been devastating financially. Of course, we are all waiting to see what happens to the infection, and ultimately, the death rate. I wear my mask when I go out to protect myself, but, in the end, I wear my mask to

protect everyone else that I may encounter. It is one of the ways that I show people that I meet "I care about your welfare".

This is one of the many ways that I "live my UU faith out loud". I am living out my UU 6th Principle, "The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all."

Yes. You heard me right. I wear a mask and practice social distancing with the goal of creating a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. These things may seem incongruent, but they really are not.

Make no mistake. I will avoid people or situations that I feel are unsafe. But I do understand that people have many concerns for our economic future. And, if we take anything at all from the lessons of Memorial Day, it is that war kills, and the American Civil War killed more Americans than any other war we were involved in, except for WWII.

Giving someone else a chance to test their ability to make good decisions helps us all to learn to share in and support the achievements of others. I am going to trust in people's ability to make good decisions. I am going to continue to protect myself and others, to the best of my ability. I hope that you will, too.

Tomorrow is Memorial Day, one of our Civic "holy days". Please celebrate it responsibly and safely, and stay apart now, so that we can all be together later.