

Rev. Betsy Mead Tabor
UU Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes
May 28, 2017

We sing the old songs this Memorial Day.

“Awakened by Song”

Valerie and I, both of us upset, did not speak or make eye contact as we began the sobering job of cleaning the filthy kitchen.

It was the first day of our week in Appalachia, four years ago. A group from my home church had traveled to McDowell County, the fifth poorest county in the US. Deep in the green hills of West Virginia, we encountered a region blighted by poverty and devastated by 150 years of coal mining. We breathed air in which coal dust is so present that you not only smell it but feel its particles on your face. We felt there a palpable sense of limited choices, limited movement, a bleakness that was hard to shake.

Our work site was a broken down house, the likes of which I’d only seen in films. The grime of the kitchen felt like an assault. Encrusted food on the stove. Stacks of dirty dishes in the sink and on the counter. On the table, rusted light fixtures, opened bags of stale hot dog rolls and cereal. A slick of grease on every surface.

To distract us from our unsavory task, I started singing *I’ve Been Working on the Railroad*. Valerie, my teammate whom I hardly knew, joined in. We sang *O Suzannah, She’ll Be Comin’ Round the Mountain, O My Darlin’ Clementine*. In that grim setting, singing helped.

The mood lightened—our church friends smiled as they hauled supplies through the kitchen to other parts of the house. Valerie and I discovered that we both liked 60s folk songs—I think of them as campfire songs. As we turned rags and towels black with grime, rinsing them over and over again, we belted out Bob Dylan, the Kingston Trio, Peter Paul and Mary.

Into all this walked a young girl, eleven. She watched as our group swept through her home, dumping refuse (which was everywhere) into garbage bags and carrying in supplies: ceiling panels, joint compound and flooring. She watched from the doorway as Valerie and I scrubbed and sang.

I felt at a great distance from this girl. How ever to bridge the gap between her, for whom this was home, and us, standing in her kitchen wearing protective facemasks, gloves and safety glasses?

It turns out that songs bridged the gap. What song could we sing together? The girl suggested Taylor Swift—a non-starter for us, but then Valerie brilliantly asked what her favorite Christmas song was? *Jingle Bell Rock*. We were off and running. The girl ran to get her little brother. She proudly told us that he knew all the words to *Frosty the Snowman*. And so it went. Together we sang all the Christmas songs anyone could think of, and the distance between us collapsed. We’d become pals.

There's nothing like a shared song to bridge a divide. Singing in that kitchen, we felt unexpectedly and delightedly connected to those two children...A good thing to remember next time things get complicated.

This holiday, Memorial Day, is complicated. It's happy, it's heavy, and for some folks, it's just a three-day weekend. But Memorial Day is not only about rolling out "those lazy-crazy-hazy days of summer." It's more than burgers and hotdogs, potato salad and rhubarb pie. It's more than putting in the vegetable garden, hiking and the lake. It's about war. And death. Honoring fallen soldiers. It's about the heartache of those who loved them.

Dating from the Civil War, Memorial Day, or "Decoration Day" as they called it then, lifts up the hundreds of thousands soldiers of US Armed Forces killed in the line of duty—most of them young, their dreams just starting to take shape. On this weekend, families visit their graves. They trim the grass around the stone, plant fresh flowers, leave bouquets on the ground. Pete Seeger asked in his song *Where Have All the Flowers Gone*: "Where have all the soldiers gone?" Remember? "Gone to graveyards every one. When will they ever learn, when will they ever learn?"

Memorial Day can be an uncomfortable reminder of this country's long history of war. Of Gettysburg where 50,000 soldiers died in a single day. We remember some wars with a measure of pride and gratitude, while others evoke lasting regret. Right now, we have sons and daughters, neighbors and friends, in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. Bob Dylan's lyrics come to mind: "How many times must the cannonballs fly/Before they're forever banned? The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind."

Memorial Day is exuberant, too. It's a time we celebrate this land, this land that "was made for you and me." Parades and flags remind even the cynic of America's ideals: equality, freedom, the pursuit of happiness. This is the spirit that's so much in our own Unitarian Universalist values, in our principles. Pete Seeger sang those values, "It's the hammer of justice, it's the bell of freedom, it's the song about love between my brothers and my sisters...."

That's a lot of emotional content rolled into one holiday! Celebration and sadness. Lofty principles. Patriotic fervor. Love of this land. Nostalgia. Families devastated by the deaths of loved ones at war. Fun times celebrating summer.

And so we sing the old songs this Memorial Day. Songs that collapse the distance between our high-tech world and simpler times...though not uncomplicated times. They call to mind scenes of America's plantations or small town life or the Great Plains once upon a time. Some of us might have learned these songs at our parent's knee, in school or camp. For some of us, they're unfamiliar—but we'll recognize them next time around.

Who knew that *Home on the Range* and *You Are My Sunshine* could sing like hymns! They might remind us of singing out on a summer's night or camping. Or take us back to a circle of kids and counselors at day's end, under the stars which look so close when we're out in the country.

Several of our songs today were written just after the Civil War when people were struggling with sadness and loss, on the one hand, and hoping for better times, on the other. Memorial Day started in towns where bloody battles had recently taken place. Thousands of unmarked mounds—graves of soldiers buried where they fell—moved people to see beyond their own hatreds and heartache to the loss and grief of families far away. In town after town, while tending the graves of husbands, brothers and sons, they also placed flowers on the graves of the unnamed dead. What do you suppose inspired that tenderness? That letting go?

In one story, Fred Byers of the 96th Illinois volunteer infantry, during a train stop, observed in a grove of trees “maidens, clad in homespun dresses...with bunches, bouquets, and wreaths of wild flowers which they were strewing upon little mounds.” [One of the girls later explained:] ‘Us girls went out there to drop flowers on the graves of some of our soldiers... killed in a cavalry fight. They were buried in the woods by our folks. We...don’t know their names, but I told the girls that we would put flowers over *them*, and then some day, *somebody*, I hope, will drop flowers on my brother’s grave. We don’t know where [it] is.’”¹

A tender heart impulse created this holiday—an impulse of healing and hope that continues, slowly but surely, to whittle away at the distance between Americans.

This morning’s songs connect us to the people of this country’s past. In a moment we’ll hear *Johnny’s Gone for a Soldier* and feel the hope of a young couple that things will work out: “WHEN I come back, we’ll married be.” In *Home on the Range*, we feel the cowboy’s longing for time free of “discouraging word”—do you not dream of happy, carefree days, free from discouraging words?

Then we’ll sing the wistful *Red River Valley*. It’s about a valley of peace and love that may have started as a real place in Iowa, but in the singing of it time after time, the valley stands for something bigger, the valley we long for...a place of milk and honey, as the Bible says. For slaves, perhaps the valley was an image that transcended this life, that suggested a better life after this one. *Red River Valley* sings like a hymn....

Songs help when we struggle to find words. They can help when we feel at a distance from one another, New England Unitarian Universalists and children living deep in the mountains of West Virginia. They can collapse the distance of time and space, and bridge the greatest distance of all, that between the living and those now gone.

As we appreciate the many meanings and moods of this weekend, may we sing songs of remembering and hope and peace.

So may it be.

¹ Illinois, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, [Alfred Bayliss, Supt.?] “Circular 81 – Memorial Day 1906” (n.p., [1906]), 15. Accessed 20 May 2013. Internet: www.civilwarcenter.olemiss.edu/memorial_day, Internet.