

***Marking Our Place***  
**--a service for Memorial Day Weekend--**  
Rev. Mark Stringer  
First Unitarian Church of Des Moines  
May 24, 2009

**Reflection**            Todd Lackmann

Good Morning,

I am Todd Lackmann. Last year at this time I was stationed in Iraq with the Iowa Air National Guard. In the run up to the second gulf war I decided to focus my thoughts on why I remained in the military. The following e-mail was written April 5<sup>th</sup> of 2003.

Hello Mark,

I read with interest your sermon concerning the war and the dialogue you had with your Dad. Last Sunday's guest musicians caused me to remember why it is that I have chosen to remain serving in the military. The song describing Koreans reuniting after fifty years brought forth a flood of emotion for me as I remembered my visits to Berlin.

The first time was three months after the Wall had come down. I drove across Germany with my sister, another American gal, four West Germans, and a Belgian. All of the checkpoints, guard towers, barb wire, and military were still in place at the border. Controls on how many people, and *who* passed through, were simply relaxed. We were waved through after a standard battery of questions and made our way towards Berlin.

It was a striking contrast to see Western standards vs. the best European Communism had to offer. Berlin's western sectors were bright, vibrant and cosmopolitan. Crossing into East Berlin was an eye opener. The Eastern capital was blanketed with soot, the street lights cast a somber glow, many buildings still bore damage 45 years after WW II. The modern architecture was stark and cold. It all felt Orwellian. We walked around Alexanderplatz under the shadow of the tallest structure in Germany, a giant antennae for State T.V. When our hosts explained to us it was impossible to have a restaurant meal without "party connections" we made our way back west at Checkpoint Charlie; which unlike the rest of East Berlin was flooded with light.

We walked beside the Wall the next day, hundreds of people chipped away with most anything available. Through a large hole in the Wall, I exchanged a handshake and words of greeting with an East German

guard, who was also twenty years old. The energy in the air was palpable. At the Brandenburg gate I paid a few dollars to have a Polaroid taken in an East German's army coat. We climbed on top of the Wall there when we noticed a couple of others making their way up. The Eastern side was still guarded by a unit of soldiers, all armed. They made it clear that we were to get down. Some joked with them, or at least tried to, and it was doubtful that they would shoot, just the same though we all hastily retreated. All of it seemed surreal, like a dream.

As we continued walking along the Wall a mile or two, though, I reflected upon the choices this Wall, this *political* division, had caused people to make. Every so often we would come upon a simple white cross bearing a name and two dates, one was the date of birth and the other the day of a failed escape, from the 1960's onward. These memorials were placed directly in front of the Wall where men & woman had perished rather than living under the thumb of a communist regime. I was frozen in place standing in front of a marker for a young man, who was also born in 1969, and died only months prior to the wall's collapse. It was tremendously difficult to reason, that I was so recently the "enemy" of the East German soldier I had enthusiastically met, and that it was entirely possible he could have killed his own countryman. I am certain the three of us *could* have shared beers, laughter and...life

The freedom of being an American, and the responsibility that carries, became real to me that day. How our country acts as a nation sets the pace for Western civilization and in many ways the future course of the world. Dreams are realized here. I have often traveled to other countries and it is a common refrain to hear people speak of what is good in America to them--entertainment, cars, homes, skyscrapers...all things pointing towards the opportunity to pursue choices--in one word, liberty. I have always been grateful to return home.

Later that year, I visited Berlin again and the Wall was mostly gone, in its place remained a jagged swath of empty space. Ten years later I visited a third time; then, even the empty space was gone.

Perhaps it seems like hubris to protect and project American values abroad, and certainly many Americans believe the world will do fine without our intervention. Notwithstanding, I serve to honor the young East German who exemplified the ultimatum of Patrick Henry—Give me liberty or give me death, I serve to end the zealous rule of the Taliban, I serve to dispose a dictator who models himself after Stalin.

For me it is not a contest to level the opposition, rather, it is a gambit to define our shared humanity as one in which the next blacksmith or

wordsmith, the next artist or educator will have opportunities to not only survive, but, thrive, wherever they may live.

--Todd

### **Sermon**

On May 2, 1915 a Canadian physician and Lieutenant Colonel, John McCrae witnessed the battlefield death of his friend, 22-year-old Alexis Helmer in Flanders, a region in Belgium. The next day, McCrae wrote a poem that has become a stirring and often repeated remembrance of the debt owed to those who have given their lives in service to their country. The words of his poem are read or sung in the Memorial or "Remembrance Day" ceremonies of many nations, and can even be found on the Canadian \$10 bill.

McCrae wrote:

*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.*

*We are the dead. Short days ago □*

*We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow, □*

*Loved, and were loved, and now we lie □*

*In Flanders fields.*

This first part of the poem nobly reminds us of the human sacrifice that war demands. Even as life goes on in its various forms in the aftermath of a battle's carnage, with the poppies blowing between the crosses, the birds flying above the still raging violence, and the soldiers, like McCrae, remaining to tell their stories, the price paid by at least some of their comrades is beyond measure, and even perhaps, comprehension. Family members and friends who knew these often faceless-to-the-rest-of-us soldiers as complete and complex people are left in the empty spaces to wonder: *How could someone who was just here, laughing and loving and loathing, just like the rest of us, be taken from this earthly plane at the hands of another laughing, loving and loathing human, over conflicts that often have their roots in the aspirations of the few at the significant cost of the many?*

One of the most striking aspects of the reflection that Todd shared

with me more than six years ago, and again with all of us today, is his realization that just a few months before he stood at the Berlin Wall, the East German soldier with whom he had exchanged greetings likely would have been his enemy. The absurdity of our human ways cries out of Todd's declaration of what could have been, and what could be. "I am certain," he said, "the three of us *could* have shared beers, laughter and...life."

We can and will think whatever we must about war: its causes, realities, and purposes. We do, after all, live in a free country, where freedom of thought and expression are privileges we share and should be encouraged to exercise.

We can and should, I think, debate the goals of any military act proposed or performed in our country's name, but we would do well, I think, to temper any certainty we may have about our own views by learning from the experiences and perspectives of those most impacted by our military action or inaction.

We can and must remember that any statement we make about war, no matter our perspectives, may be heard and experienced in sometimes painful ways by those most impacted by war's savagery, those whose lives have been forever altered by the violence that cannot be fully comprehended by those not in its grasp.

This week, I had a lengthy conversation with Stephanie Deutsch whose 21-year-old brother, Michael, was killed while serving in Iraq in 2003. She shared with me the passion for justice that propelled her brother into military service, his sense of responsibility, his willingness to serve "so that others would not have to." Even amidst the sadness of the story she related, her eyes twinkled and her smile widened as she told me about Michael's giving spirit and his way with children. Still, her pride over the person Michael was does not take away her confusion over why he had to die at such a young age, and does not alleviate the sense of loss that still permeates and challenges her family relationships even these six years later. She told me of how difficult it can be to decide whether or not to attend memorial tributes for fallen soldiers, memorials with good intentions but with often painful outcomes. If she chooses to go and hear her brother's name read aloud, she has to relive the day the uniformed officer knocked on her door to tell her the news of Michael's death. If she chooses to skip the memorial, she has to imagine her brother's name being read with perhaps no family present to hear it.

For Michael's family, and perhaps some of your families, Memorial Day is not simply the kickoff of summer, it is a day to remember, to savor, to honor, and to grieve.

The day before I met with Stephanie, I received a newsletter from the Progressive Coalition of Central Iowa, which declared in a headline on the lower third of the front page, that they had 40 caskets they were ready to give to "good homes." These light-wood-and-cardboard caskets had been built for and used in a demonstration against the Iraq war several years ago and had been kept in storage ever since. The group was losing this storage space and needed to get rid of the coffins. If I hadn't been busy at the time of this demonstration years ago, I might have participated, just as I have in others like it, for, the fact is, I have not been supportive of the stated motivation of the Iraq war and believe it to have been, politically speaking, the wrong action at the wrong time. Still, something about the use of coffins and this Memorial-Day-week request for them to be given to "good homes" these many years later was difficult for me to read. I asked Stephanie about it. What did she think? Was it offensive to her? To my surprise, she didn't seem to think much of it at all. In fact, she made it clear that people need to do what they are called to do, whether she agrees with them or not. That is what her brother did, and that is what she has learned to do after his death. Where she once might have been timid, she has learned to be bold. Where she once might have held back, she now reaches out. Time is short, far shorter than we realize. Stephanie believes that if Michael's death is to have the meaning it deserves, she must live out loud, living her truth as best she can. Michael's memory deserves nothing less, from her and from all those in whose names he died, which includes each of us.

Which brings me back to the poem with which I started. The final verse, which I will read in a moment, is seen as controversial by some. In fact, some Canadian school administrations edit it out, believing its words to be too encouraging of vengeance and war for students to recite. The final verse reads:

*Take up our quarrel with the foe:□  
To you from failing hands we throw□  
The torch; be yours to hold it high.  
If ye break faith with us who die□  
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow□  
In Flanders fields.*

Upon my first few readings of this verse, I, too, believed it to be a call to arms, a call to continue the battle that took the life of McCrae's

friend. Why wouldn't he be advocating revenge, writing the very day after his friend was laid to rest amidst the other crosses and poppies that "mark our place". However, after hearing Stephanie's stories this week, I believe McCrae's words may not be asking us for vengeance on behalf of the vanquished at all. And even if they are, if we are taking them literally, we may be missing a more important point. Maybe McCrae's encouragement to us to hold high the torch is a request that we acknowledge that our wars and the human losses they represent will have truly been for naught if we don't remember and honor those who have died, living, in a sense in their place, wringing all that we can out of the life that they did not get to live, reminding ourselves in the process that to be alive is a privilege and a responsibility. My interpretation may be stretching it a bit, but it sure seems like a good message to me, certainly one I have taken from the story of Michael and Stephanie Deustch.

So this Memorial Day, I will remember those who have given their lives in service to their countries the world over, not because they were heroes, necessarily. Some no doubt were, and some, perhaps were not. War is far too complicated to explain in simple labels like victory, and enemy, and hero.

I will take some time to remember those who have died because they were brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, fathers, mothers, cousins, neighbors, friends.

I will remember those who have died because they were human.

And that is reason enough.

Won't you join me now in a time of meditation reflection or prayer?  
Creative spirit, spirit of life,  
We take these precious moments of our shared lives  
to consider the appreciation owed to those who have served and who  
continue to serve in our nation's armed forces.  
We know that many of our veterans continue to carry physical and  
emotional scars from their wartime service. So we keep them in our  
minds and hearts this day.

War by all accounts is a horror. May we never use Memorial Day as a time to glorify militarism or the destructiveness of this human aberration we call war. We yearn for peace and we hope and pray for the day when nations pursue understanding instead of resorting to violence in resolving disputes.

Let us take a few moments to honor the lives of those who have died with a naming ritual. In the time of silence to follow, I invite you to name either aloud or silently the names of those from your own family or circle of acquaintances who have given their lives in service to their country, the names of those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice, the names of those who we are called to remember this day.  
(silence/names)

As we remember these names, and the lives they represent, may we also be inspired to reach out in love to our living veterans and their families, for they have their own empty places, and their own deaths of the spirit, so their sacrifices, too, are significant. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> (including an adaptation of “Memorial Day Tribute” by Col. F. Vernon Chandler with 32 years experience as a UU chaplain)