

## Grievable Deaths: Questions for Memorial Day

Roger Jones, Associate Minister  
Sunday, May 25, 2013  
Unitarian Universalist Society, Sacramento, CA

Hymns: #162 “Gonna Lay Down My Sword and Shield”; #159 “This Is My Song”; #163 “For the Earth Forever Turning.”

Special Music: “In Flanders Fields” (choral),  
“Goin’ Home” (soprano)

### Silent Prayers and Meditation:

Now I invite you to join me for a time of silent prayers and meditation. Feel free to settle your bodies in your seats or to close your eyes for a measure of stillness.

Amid our other sorrows, concerns, or joys, let us call to mind those we have known who died in the line of duty, or died later due to traumas experienced. Let us call to mind those we have known who suffered the pain of war and other forms of persecution. And let us hold in our hearts those countless ones we have not known, but whose lives and losses are tied to ours, in the ongoing life of the human family. Our time of stillness will be followed by music. Let us take this time of silent witness and contemplation.

### Reading:

“Shoulders” by Naomi Shihab Nye

A man crosses the street in rain,  
stepping gently, looking two times north and south,  
because his son is asleep on his shoulder.

No car must splash him.  
No car drive too near to his shadow.

This man carries the world’s most sensitive cargo  
but he’s not marked.  
Nowhere does his jacket say FRAGILE,  
HANDLE WITH CARE.

His ear fills up with breathing.  
He hears the hum of a boy’s dream  
deep inside him.

We’re not going to be able  
to live in this world  
if we’re not willing to do what he’s doing  
with one another.

The road will only be wide.  
The rain will never stop falling.

### Sermon

When I open the daily newspaper, I turn to the obituaries. I’m a big fan of obituaries. Not, as a humorist said, to confirm that I’m not listed there and am still among the living. Rather, I’m curious. I like to learn about people I’ll never be able to meet. Every now and then I read one about somebody I know, and more often about a famous writer, performer, public servant. Yet most of the deceased, I’ve never heard of.

An obituary is a precious little summation of a life. I think: look at the gentleness, the courage, the varied interests, the ups and downs... the near misses of that person’s early life. Look at what one person can contribute! I’m so moved to learn about the varieties of human life. Sometimes I shed a tear for a stranger, just from learning about their life and realizing that they are gone, their lives are over.

Obituaries remind me that every life has its unique richness and importance. They remind me that on any day of the year, somebody is grieving a loss, is engaged in the journey of mourning.

When we think about the particular experience of losing somebody, we can affirm our dependence on others. We share this in common. Our vulnerability to violence, death and the loss of others is what unites us as human beings. Vulnerability is our common bond.

Any death touches on a cascading series of relationships; and the loss will transform all who had some connection to the deceased, even the

many uncountable indirect relationships. Consider what it means when we gather for a memorial service. By coming together, we give testimony to a common humanity. People are tender at such services not just out of pain, I think, but also out of the sense of how connected we all are.

We feel tender and vulnerable and caring for one another.

In her poem "Shoulders," Palestinian American poet Naomi Shihab Nye writes of a father carrying his sleeping little boy across a wide street in the rain: "No car must splash him./ No car drive too near to his shadow." She gives an intimate image of the son's breathing in his dad's ear, a reminder that this little person is "the world's most sensitive cargo." Her conclusion is a plea and a challenge:

We're not going to be able  
to live in this world  
if we're not willing to do what he's  
doing  
with one another. (Nye 2012)

The poem does not say where the family is living or where they have come from, what street they cross, what ethnic background they might be, or the dad's occupation, if he has one. Thus, most parents and others can relate to the vulnerability of the situation and the father's determination, vigilance and care. The poem's spareness invites us into common feeling through common vulnerability.

Yet were this poem to include particular categories in addition to father and child, many of us would begin to find "reasons" to be more sympathetic, less sympathetic, or not sympathetic at all to this dad's plight. A widower or a wife beater. A drug dealer or an auto mechanic. An oil company executive or an anarchist. An undocumented immigrant or a border agent. We could begin to make exceptions. Begin to feel that some people's precarious lives matter more than others.

Such exceptionalism plagues our lives as individuals and families, and our public life as a nation. It is tempting and easy to live in the place

of exceptionalism, where limiting our empathy seems like the key to limiting our pain.

Memorial Day reminds us of the sacrifice and the violence of the many deaths caused in the line of duty, or later as a result of the traumas inflicted in the course of conflict. It honors members of the armed forces and mourns their passing. It reminds us of the connections we have to those who serve in zones of combat and violence, and connections to those who live in such places, living in fear, often with grief and physical pain.

Recently I was in Boston for a denominational grants panel on which I serve. The battle monuments there are so old, so grand and historic, that I can forget that every one of them stands for intolerable suffering and bitter losses. But my visit was three weeks after the Boston Marathon bombings. I was remembering stories of shredded bodies, lost legs, fear and pain. Three people were killed in the bombings, and one later in the week, and then one of the suspects. The region-wide manhunt and shutdown of area towns was fresh in the minds of my local friends. One person said that Boston's neighborhoods are so traditional, and Boston-area towns have such strong identities, that you can live there for years before lifelong residents stop treating you like an outsider. It's a long time before you feel like a Bostonian. Provincial, the word is. This person said that she now felt like a Bostonian. She sensed that the violence had brought people together with a new sense of belonging to one another

For them, it seemed, loss and suffering broadened the sense of who "we" might be. UC Berkeley professor Judith Butler says that loss makes "a tenuous 'we' of us all." Among the stories covered everywhere in the media, and seen over and over on social media, was that of Martin Richard, the eight-year old local boy who was killed and whose parents and sister were injured. Online you can see a sweet picture of him, smiling with two teeth missing. He's holding a handmade poster. "Peace," it says, "No more hurting people." And he's drawn two hearts and a peace symbol. Heartbreaking. On social media, people everywhere exchanged these pictures and their grief

and their strong reactions and opinions. Martin became an emblem, a symbol of that crime and our grief.

Nine days after that attack, a fire destroyed a factory building in Bangladesh. Hundreds of children worked inside, making garments there for export. Multiple factories of multiple owners occupied that building. The loss was horrific and heartbreaking and infuriating.

But I forgot how many. I had to look it up: 1,127 bodies counted. Each child with a story, each one with special moments captured in a picture or at least in their parents' memories, if they were too poor to afford a cell phone with a camera. We did read about one miracle: a seamstress named Reshma Begum survived under the rubble for 17 days on cookies and bottled water. But that leaves 1,126 other children who have not become a symbol of the crime of neglectful, unsafe working conditions--or the symbol of a global economic system which makes it inevitable for parents to put kids in factories instead of schools.

It's true: Their deaths are as grievable as Martin's and those of the others killed in Boston. But you cannot tell that from the attention paid on social media and regular media. Perhaps if we could say and feel how grievable their deaths really are, it would be too much. It would feel too painful to absorb.

Of course, I share the urge to look away from the painful reality of others' lives or deaths. So I try to tell myself: If they can go through it, if they must experience it, then at the very least, I can bear witness to what has happened to them. At least I can face the reality that they must experience.

"Peace. No more hurting people." Can we imagine a poster like that in front of every child? Every person?

Judith Butler asks: "Who counts as human?" Even if in the abstract we might answer that surely everyone counts as human, and every death is grievable, in practice we disprove that idea.

Are some lives more grievable than others? Whose lives are left unnoticed, or barely mentioned?

While visiting the Philippines a couple of years ago, I read a newspaper one morning at breakfast, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (March 15, 2011). On page A25, I read this headline: "Family of Four Killed in Fire." The article said a cardiologist and his wife, both in their 50s, were found huddled with their daughters (ages 17 and 21) in their master bedroom. Listing them by name, it said they had died in a fire that had started around 3:00 a.m., and which took an hour for firefighters to extinguish. A neighbor had heard the explosion of a van on the lower level, which may have started the fire. Escape was blocked by iron security grills on all the windows and the fire on the lower level.

Not until the seventh indented sentence did the article say: "Killed along with the family were their two housemaids. Lenlen de Leon, 30, and Anna de Leon, 27, were found just outside the master bedroom." (*Philippine Daily Inquirer*).

These grown sisters, domestic workers, were not quite invisible in their dying, but they were not counted in the headline's death toll or in the lead paragraph. There was no speculation about whether the women had been barred from the master bedroom, with the family huddling and afraid to open the door to the approaching inferno. Such speculation may be unfair, for in a moment of panic most of us can lose our senses of reason and mercy.

The offense to me was the segregation of the victims by the news report. I wrote this all down in my notebook right away. Yet I must confess that in my indignation I did not write the names of that affluent family. Their lost lives are no less grievable than those of their domestic workers.

If we limit our sense of loss and vulnerability to our own kind, or if we keep it in the safe compartments of our private lives, can we really mourn? If we keep our grieving within our own class or ethnic identity, inside our borders and our *national* identity, does that limit the transformation to which mourning leads us?

A key ingredient of exceptionalism in either the personal realm or the national realm is the clear separation of "us" from "the Other." Exceptionalism in feeling the pain of grief can keep us from showing curiosity about the plight of

others, the plight of any category of “Others,” even those who suffer violence that our nation causes. An entitled, private sense of our mourning, a sense of privilege to happiness, to safety, and to the grieving of our own losses will blind us from looking.

Are some deaths grievable and others ignorable, forgettable? No. Yet it is not easy to grieve so many deaths, to regret those caused by the actions of our nation, whether in self-defense, in a mission to protect refugees, or in a violent intervention in the politics and struggles of another nation. In an anxious and angry political climate, in a time of danger and violence in our own country, to have a larger embrace of grieving calls for courage and solidarity.

We must keep the heart open and build a shared commitment if we are to remember and mourn so many losses. It can feel overwhelming. Compassion fatigue, it’s called. Statistical overload, looking at the massacres of the last century, or the past month. A guilty feeling of helplessness. I am tempted often, to indulge my privilege. To indulge my North American adult white male privilege, and look away from all the danger, all the grief, all those deaths.

Yet at the same time I am longing to mourn them all, to grieve the destitution, the cruelty of war, the violence of poverty, the waste of so much life. I am longing to cry in lamentation, shake my fist at the heavens and the politicians, and crumple on the grass and sob. Sometimes what we need is a good cry. Sometimes it can help us to get up again and open the heart again. Help us to choose kindness and mercy, courage and honesty. Help us to sacrifice some of our own comfort.

What I need for this—and perhaps what many of you need—is to be able to gather with others... to grieve this reality of death even as we celebrate life. We gather to remember that we are connected, that we depend on others, that we are fragile. To remember this, and feel it in our bodies.

We are “the world’s most sensitive cargo”: Every life as fragile and precarious and valuable as every other life. We gather to feel this truth and give it voice and energy, and hands in service and

feet on the ground.

All human losses are grievable, as all human beings are worthy and valuable. All people deserve to be safe and cared for. All are worth guarding, protecting, nourishing and nurturing. All people deserve to be *seen*.

Death and loss bind us together as one human family. So does life’s beauty. Life’s *fragile* beauty. Let us remember this connection, this vulnerability.

Let us remember, that the life we share is a gift, an abundant, precious and precarious blessing. Let us remember, let us affirm the gift of life. Amen.

## Works Cited

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