***Born of the Sun***

**A sermon for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation**

**By the Rev. CJ McGregor**

**Delivered on May 27, 2018**

Please join in Responsive Reading #722 *I Think Continually of Those* by Stephen Spender:

**I think continually of those who were truly great.**

*Who, from the womb, remembered the soul’s history*

*Through corridors of light where the hours are suns,*

*Endless and singing.*

**Whose lovely ambition**

**Was that their lips, still touched with fire,**

**Should tell of the spirit clothed from head to foot in song.**

*And who hoarded from the spring branches*

*The desires falling across their bodies like blossoms.*

 **What is precious is never to forget**

**The delight of the blood drawn from ageless springs**

**Breaking through rocks in worlds before our earth;**

*Never to deny its pleasure in the simple morning light,*

*Nor its grave evening demand for love;*

**Never to allow gradually the traffic to smother**

**With noise and fog the flowering of the spirit.**

 Near the snow, near the sun, in the highest fields

*See how those names are feted by the wavering grass,*

*And by the streamers of white cloud,*

*And whispers of wind in the listening sky;*

**The names of those who in their lives fought for life,**

**Who wore at their hearts the fire’s center.**

*Born of the sun they traveled a short while towards the sun,*

*And left the vivid air signed with their honor.*

When I read this poem weeks ago preparing for today’s sermon I kept coming back to the word “sacrifice.” It is Memorial Day when we honor and remember those who have served in the armed forces and have died. To serve in the armed forces is truly a sacrifice; the surrender of something for the sake of something else. The Rev. Marie deYoung, Unitarian Universalist minister and the first Unitarian Universalist woman chaplain in the U.S. Army, writes “War is never holy, yet the holy are called to do war's bidding.” Since its official inception in 1868, Memorial Day, originally called Decoration Day, for the practice of decorating the graves of soldiers with flowers in honor of their sacrifice. In the case of those who have served the sacrifices may have been family, peace, and life. These are sacrifices that must never be forgotten. This day is a time for reflection, for some prayer and thanksgiving, a special day on which we commemorate all those who, in conflicts large and small, made the supreme sacrifice in defense of this country. “Lest we forget” is an evocative phrase, but it should apply all the year round.

Maybe we’ve become ambivalent about military service and war in general. Maybe we’ve grown skeptical and uneasy around the idea of young adults, barely adults really, dying in foreign lands for reasons not quite clear to us. Maybe we distract ourselves with sales on grills and wading pools, 2 for 1 deals at the grocery and 0% down at the big car dealership because war itself seems so far away and unreal. Many of us haven’t a full understanding of what it means to live in war, to live with its reality day in and day out as they do in other parts of the world; where the explosions and gun fire and body count are a daily reminder of how precious and fragile our lives are; where the blood stains take days to wear off the streets or the walls of buildings take years to rebuild. We United States citizens, are, many of us, insulated from the gruesome truth of a soldiers’ sacrifice. I can think of one American that most certainly hasn’t a clue.

Thousands of American lives have been lost in wars, but those countries where these wars played out are a world away and, unless we personally know one of the soldiers, their deaths are abstract tragedies. Not that we feel no compassion or sadness or anger at the loss of them, but we are not in the desert with them, we are not hunting for a clear enemy through treacherous mountains, we are not there in the make-shift hospital tending their wounds, we are not there in their last moments of living. We witness their sacrifice only through the technology of our time. We may watch the caskets being unloaded, we may watch the funerals, but the grisly truth of their death has been cleaned up by the time we see it, it has been distanced by video and commentary and the political posturing of both sides. Author David Blight writes, *“The young dead soldiers do not speak. Nevertheless, they are heard in the still houses: who has not heard them? They have a silence that speaks for them at night and when the clock counts. They say: We were young. We have died. Remember us. They say: We have done what we could but until it is finished it is not done. They say: We have given our lives but until it is finished no one can know what our lives gave. They say: Our deaths are not ours: they are yours, they will mean what you make them. They say: Whether our lives and our deaths were for peace and a new hope or for nothing we cannot say, it is you who must say this. We leave you our deaths. Give them their meaning. We were young, they say. We have died; remember us.”*

What we have lost in the demilitarization of Memorial Day are the soldiers. We have been diverted into behaving as though this day of memory is more about hot dogs and egg salad than about remembering. Remember we must, for to do any less is a disservice not only to those who gave their lives but to what they gave their lives to protect and to support. We must also remember soldiers who need support; there are many veterans struggling to survive physical, psychological or financial challenges and we have a responsibility to help them. The nation and we mustn’t let that slip away from people’s minds.” Every single person in the military knows that he or she may be called on to make that ultimate sacrifice. They know it every day, and willingly put themselves in harm’s way. I have to say that it has astonished me when I’ve asked any soldier, sailor, marine or airman about this. Without exception, every single one I have asked has brushed it off as if they are embarrassed to acknowledge how important this is. It isn’t living in denial, and it doesn’t seem like fear either. It is humility. And acceptance that this is what they committed to. This is part of why we call them heroes.

Memorial Day is not about division. It is about reconciliation; it is about coming together to honor those who gave their all. We must go back to where it all began; back to remembering the brutality and the sacrifice; remembering that as Unitarian Universalists we believe, even when it is difficult to do so, that all life is sacred and worthy of remembering. No one deserves to be forgotten who gave their life to what they believed in and it is our duty to honor their deaths as the gifts to us they are. As told in our reading this morning, our soldiers gave something dear of themselves for us. We must rediscover a way to speak for them for they can no longer speak for themselves. We must separate our discomfort, unease and revulsion of war itself and those who send our young men and women to fight from our compassion for those who take up arms to defend their values even if they are not our values.

Memorial Day requires us to take a moment and pause in order to honor and remember all those, no matter which side of battle they fought on, who gave what Abraham Lincoln called, “the last full measure of devotion.” We are called to offer no less than our gratitude and our respect for lives ended on the battlefield regardless of whether we believed the war they fought was righteous or wrong. It is then left to us to give their deaths meaning by living a ‘new hope.’ “Let us rise up…” wrote Martin Luther King Jr. in his final speech the spring of 1968, “with a greater readiness. Let us stand with a greater determination…Let us develop a kind dangerous unselfishness…And let us move on in these powerful days, these days of challenge, to make America what it ought to be.” And to remember. Born of the sun they traveled a short while towards the sun and left the vivid air signed with their honor.

May it be so.