

A Fitting Memorial

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Memorial Day, the first holiday of the summer season--a time for family gatherings and picnics and pilgrimages to places associated with times past and lost loves.

Memorial Day, the holiday set aside to honor those who have died in the nation's wars, and by extension those who have given their lives in the service of ideas and causes and ideals which they allowed themselves to believe were larger and more important than life itself.

Memorial Day, a time when I find myself thinking about the larger issues of our existence--the meaning of the human venture on this little planet, third out from the star we call the sun, on what it means to live wisely and well, on what we might hope to be the consequence of all our living, and what, if anything, is the meaning of our dying. It is reflections on these questions I would like to share with you this morning.

In his novel, CUP OF GOLD, John Steinbeck describes a meeting between young Henry Morgan, who is preparing to leave his home in Wales for a new life in America, and a old sage, Merlin. Henry's father has sent him to Merlin hoping that the wise old man will talk the youngster into staying with his family and friends. Henry tries to explain what is driving him:

At last he said, "There is so much bother about me. I cannot seem to talk of this thing, Merlin. I will come back. Surely I will when this burning for new things is quenched. But don't you see that I must go, for it seems that I am cut in half, and only part of me here. The other piece is over the sea, calling and calling me to come and be whole...."

Merlin searched the boy's face closely. Sadly he looked up at his harps. "I think I understand," he said softly. You are a little boy. You want the moon to drink from as a golden cup; and so it is very likely that you will become a great man--if only you remain a little child. All the world's great have been [children] who wanted the moon; running and climbing, they sometimes caught a firefly. But if one grows to [an adult's] mind, that mind must see that it cannot have the moon and would want it if it could--and so it catches no fireflies."

"But did you never want the moon?" asked Henry in a voice hushed with the room's quiet.

"I wanted it. Above all desires I wanted it. I reached for it and then--then I grew to be a man, and a failure. But there is this gift for the failure; folk know he has failed, and they

are sorry and kindly and gentle. He has the whole world with him; a bridge of contact with his own people; the cloth of mediocrity. But he who shields a firefly in his hands, caught in reaching for the moon, is doubly alone; he only can realize his true failure, can realize his meanness and fears and evasions...."

Realizing that there is nothing he can say which will dissuade the young man from setting forth on his adventure and seeking his own greatness, the old man concludes his conversation with these words:

"Yes, you must go....Only remember that Merlin talked with you. And if you come on the Welsh folk anywhere, singing my songs that were made so long ago, tell them that you know me; tell them that I am a glorious creature with blue wings. I don't want to be forgotten, Henry. That is a greater horror to an old man than death--to be forgotten."

I read that story years and years ago. Most of the plot I no longer remember. By any standard, it was not one of John Steinbeck's best works. But the conversation between young Henry Morgan and old Merlin has remained with me even after time has leached away everything else about the story. I must confess, however, that as the years have hurried by, the central meaning of the sketch for me has shifted. In the beginning, I suppose I identified with young Henry. I, too, was young, in school, preparing to leave the familiar mountains and valleys which had been home to my family for over two hundred years. I wanted the moon to drink from as a golden cup. I wanted to make a mark on the world. And no one could dissuade me. Though friends and family counseled me to make a life in the world I knew, I heard an irresistible call. And I ran--long and hard and fast--from the world I knew to a strange world in which I would make my home and never truly be at home.

As the years continued on, I found myself identifying with the image of one who leaped and sometimes caught a firefly. And I understood what Steinbeck had conveyed in that image--the inner sadness and loneliness of someone who is counted successful for having achieved something but who knows in his heart that the emblem of honor is but a measure of how completely he has missed the original vision. One who sets out to leave a mark on the world is often caught up short by the realization of how modest even the greatest accomplishments are in the larger scheme of things.

And so, of late, I have found myself identifying with the old man, with Merlin, who had run and jumped, and caught a few fireflies, and who had failed his great dream, and had settled back into the sea of mediocrity and who had as his only legacy for the world a few songs and who hoped that because of those songs he might be remembered, not as he truly was, but as a "glorious creature with blue wings." But in the back of his mind, and of mine is the recognition that even that modest goal is unlikely to be realized.

On a sloping hillside in Northern Virginia, overlooking the Potomac River south of Washington, D.C., there is a small open meadow--a tiny remnant of a once grand

plantation. This open meadow had once been wooded; then the trees had been cleared and for years the land was plowed and planted and crops sowed and tended and gathered, in the seasonal round of the year. Then the land was allowed to grow up in grasses, and cattle and horses grazed the sloping hilltop. Finally, in the fullness of time the great estate was sold, broken up for suburban housing tracts, and the little meadow came into the possession of a Unitarian Universalist Congregation, which referred to that piece of ground as "the playing field." There picnics were held, and outdoor weddings; there kites were flown and baseball and volleyball games played and races run. And at night, sometimes people sat on blankets and looked up at the stars in the dark sky.

In the middle of this open space, two trees grew, and around them a thicket of vines and shrubs. Little boys and girls used to climb the tree to get a better view of the river valley below, and birds and squirrels made homes in the trees and chipmunks lived in the tangle beneath. And on hot days, when the sun beat down on that hill-top, the trees offered a place of cooling shade.

I found myself wondering why, given the history of the use to which the land had been put, those two trees had been allowed to grow in that place. So, on a bright autumn day when I had little else to do, I investigated the area under the trees. There, in the tangle of weeds and vines and bushes, I found pieces of gravestones. Carefully I removed them, and pieced them together. Some pieces were missing, but enough was there to tell me that on that spot had been buried one General Buckner Stith. Stith, I later discovered, had been an aide to General George Washington, and a friend of the builder of the original estate, which had been called Hollin Hall. Stith was a mover and shaker during the period of the revolution and immediately afterward. He moved in high circles and knew all the important people. And when he came to die, he requested that he be buried at Hollin Hall, on the hill top, "a stone's throw from the spinning house."

The trees had grown over his grave. In time, the marker fell over or was knocked down and broken and eventually obscured by the tangled undergrowth, and Buckner Stith became an obscure footnote in the dramatic history in which he had participated so fully. But because he lived and died and was buried, two trees grow on a hilltop overlooking the Potomac River and birds and animals are sheltered by those trees, and generations of children who have never heard of General Buckner Stith climb those trees and play at their base and are grateful for their cooling shade on hot summer days. The world is different because Buckner Stith lived and died. Those trees are not the monument planned for him; undoubtedly his friends would have thought he deserved better. But he lived, and engaged in the events of his time, and he died and left as the living legacy of all his busyness two trees and a tangle of undergrowth which, for decades has sheltered life and brought joy. Who is to say it is an inadequate memorial?

Driving down a narrow road in Cornwall, one gray spring morning, I negotiated a curve and saw on the horizon, outlined against the mist a small circle of stones, carefully placed on the crest of a small rise. Stopping the car, I climbed up through the field to examine

the circle more closely. the stones were small, as standing stones go, but obviously selected and placed to give an impression of thoughtful design and careful execution.

As I stood there in the quiet of that moment, it was obvious to me that the ancient people who had labored to create this structure had a religious purpose in mind. This was not a utilitarian creation. This was a silent monument to the human spirit, a wordless expression of the sacred relationship between the human tribe and the great world of which we have arisen. Slowly, quietly, almost reverently, I walked into the middle of that ancient circle, and there, in the very center of the ring of stones, someone had left a garland of fresh spring flowers.

I do not know who built that circle of stones; I do not know who twisted spring flowers into a garland and left them as a silent offering to the sacred spirit which broods over that place; in my heart I understood the meaning of both--a meaning too deep for words, but real and inescapable, nonetheless. There in that place I felt a sense of rootedness in the world, a world which is everywhere sacred and holy. There, in that place, I felt a sense of continuity with human beings of every time and every place, people who have sought with stone and with clumsy words and with perishable flowers to give shape to the sense of awe and wonder and mystery which is our little lives on this planet.

I stood there in the silence and a half-formed thought floated across my mind: Perhaps this is the real significance, the true meaning of our lives--not our obvious achievements, not the hoard we accumulate, not even all of our busy doing, but that we carry through time this inchoate sense of mystery and wonder, and find ourselves driven to give it voice. Something not mine to control moves through me and lives in me and, despite all the external changes, that something remains unchanged from the earliest moments of human history. Our challenge in each generation is to give voice to the mystery and wonder we are, and our success, our monument is the silent stones, the gathered flowers, the songs and words we use in our effort to speak the truth at the core of our beings.

Once, many years ago, I found myself walking alone along the beach in Delaware. It was early Autumn. We had come to this place for a Board of Trustees retreat. The meeting had grown heated and stressful; suddenly, board members were shouting at each other. I decided to take a few moments to recover my equanimity. I wandered down the beach, thinking about the meeting, and how I could respond to the surprising rancor which had been generated. I was depressed and tired.

I don't know how far I walked. The tide was coming in; the surf was sounding louder and louder off to my left. After a while I stopped and looked up. There was no moon, but the night sky had erupted in a bright rash of stars.

As I walked I glanced down at the sandy beach. There I saw something which stopped me in my tracks. As I stepped on the wet beach, my footprint was outlined by a myriad star-like lights. For the briefest second they twinkled and then went out. I didn't really

believe what I had seen, so I tested it. I took another step. Again the myriad little stars outlined my foot-print, and then, winked out. I took another step and another and another, unable to decide what to make of this strange event.

When I told them about it, back at the meeting, our resident physicist assured me that it was "just phosphorescence, a natural phenomenon created by small one-celled sea creatures. Nothing remarkable about it." And I was sure he was right. Except I could not shake the feeling that there was more to this than a scientific explanation, however accurate, would satisfy.

As soon as I was able, I went back out to the beach. There, in the dark autumn night, I stood looking at the sky with its myriad stars stretching across the heavens, stars so distant that the light reaching my eyes had begun its journey aeons and aeons ago. Indeed, some of those stars might no longer exist. Looking into that night sky, I was looking deep into the past.

And then I looked down at my feet, where I was standing amid stars, a myriad stars whose life-span was less than a minute. And I was overwhelmed by the certainty that the stars over my head and the stars under my feet were expressions of the same vast force, and middling creature that I am, I too, am an expression of that same force, caught and held between the infinitely old and the immeasurably new, between the aeons and the instant, between the stars above me and the stars beneath me, held for a brief time, and then, just as the stars of the heavens blink out and the stars of the sand blink out, I too, shall return to the source from which all emerges. What is more, I knew that it was as it should be. Caught as we are between the finite and the infinite, between time and eternity, we live in multiple worlds simultaneously, and the meaning we seek so assiduously is largely a matter of scale.

What does all of this have to do with anything? I'm not sure. But perhaps Memorial Day is as good a time as any to recognize that while there is nothing wrong with wanting the moon, the real gift may be the firefly we capture while reaching for the moon, the thing we accomplish on the road to the unattainable. Perhaps Memorial Day is as good a time as any to affirm that because we have lived, the universe is forever changed, that we are part of that process by which things forever move from what they are to what they will be, and that the true significance of our lives, when seen from a distance, might surprise us, that the things of which we are most proud and would choose to be carved on our tombstones may pass quickly from memory, while little things we never planned--like two trees on a sunny hilltop--may last to bless succeeding generations. Perhaps Memorial day is as good a time as any to voice the conviction that the meaning of our lives cannot be understood apart from the sense of mystery and wonder and awe which we share with every generation that has ever lived and which will abide so long as the human tribe remains.

"To be forgotten is a greater horror to an old man than death," said Merlin to Henry Morgan. Increasingly, I wonder if that is true. Increasingly I am captured by the conviction that all our striving for the moon, and all our singing lest we be forgotten, and all our longing to be remembered are but signs of our persistent immaturity. Increasingly I am lured by the suggestion that real maturity is to be found in seeing ourselves as part of an eternal process which brought us into being, which sustains us in all our doing, and which receives us back when life has used us up. Increasingly, I suspect and that willingness to return without regret to the great, silent ocean of being maybe the true sign that we have succeeded.