

**We Were Young. We Died. Remember Us.
May 24, 2009**

Memorial Day, simply put, is a complicated day. First of all, it is not simply an opportunity for a three-day weekend. Much more than that, it is meant for us to stop, and to reflect upon and memorialize those who have died in war.

But what does it mean to memorialize? It's not merely about mourning with our heads bowed. It's not simply about honoring with our backs straight and our chests out. It is not—or is it?—exclusively about those who died while serving in war, though traditionally those who died serving in this country's armed forces are at the forefront of this day, and deserve both our thanks and our sorrow.

Still, this memorializing is complicated, for what is service in times of war? Who serves? What does honoring the

war dead mean? Who are the war dead? Whom do we mourn on this day, and how?

And whom might we turn to, to help us explore such questions? This morning we've shared three readings—"The Young Dead Soldiers," by American poet Archibald MacLeish, which we read together; and the poems Anna read—"Dedication," by Polish writer, Czeslaw Milosz; and "Facing It," by American poet Yusef Komunyakaa. All three writers experienced war firsthand. MacLeish, born in Glencoe, Illinois, served in World War I, first as an ambulance driver then as an artillery captain. During World War II he served as Director of the War Department's Office of Facts and Figures, and as Assistant Director in the Office of War Information. Milosz, born in what was once part of Lithuania, lived and struggled from 1940-1944 in Nazi-occupied Poland, clandestinely writing anti-Nazi poetry. Komunyakaa, born in Bogalusa, Louisiana,

served in the Vietnam War during the late 1960s. This morning, I turn to these three poets in my search for meaning in Memorial Day.

At first glance, Yusef Komunyakaa's "Facing It," seems simple enough: a black man—perhaps the poet himself, perhaps simply a persona—stands at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall, observing what he sees. As he observes, he struggles to be tough: "I said I wouldn't/ dammit: no tears."

Upon more careful reading, however, we see that the struggle is not just in facing his tenderness, his disobedient tears—but in facing where, what, and how he actually *is*: "My black faces fades/ hiding *inside* the black granite," he says. "I'm stone. I'm flesh." "I turn/ this way—the stone lets me go..." he says. "I turn that way—I'm *inside* the Vietnam Veterans Memorial." The speaker's very existence shifts between being among the living—flesh—and being among the

dead—stone. He even notes, “I go down the 58,022 names,/ half-expecting to find/ my own in letters like smoke.”

If not finding his own name, he does find the name of someone he seems to know. And when he touches “the name Andrew Johnson” he *sees* “the booby trap’s white flash.” He doesn’t just remember; he *sees*: He is *with* Andrew Johnson in that moment—though all he can touch of Andrew Johnson now is his name on a wall.

And then, shifting his gaze again, the speaker sees the names “shimmer on a woman’s blouse/ but when she walks away/the names stay on the wall.” So liminal is the speaker’s perspective—“I’m stone. I’m flesh”—that it seems he too remains behind, within the wall, when the woman turns away.

But is he in the wall? Is he among the dead? Or does he stand right in the threshold between the dead and the living? While Komunyakaa refers to the wall itself as a mirror—and it

is through this mirror that he seems to be catching reflections of other glimpses of life—he refers to *himself* as a window: “A white vet’s image floats/ closer to me, then his pale eyes/ look through mine. I’m a window.” In this moment the speaker seems to serve as an entry point from the present into the past. Once the speaker proclaims himself as a window, whether figuratively, through the poem he’s written, or more immediately in that moment when the other, white vet’s eyes look through his eyes, the veil between life and death, between those who remain and that which is lost, seems to lift again. Of the other vet, the speaker says, “He’s lost his right arm/ inside the stone.” I can almost see the white vet try to reach through that window of the speaker, into the stone in an effort to retrieve his arm—just as perhaps the speaker himself is reaching in to be among the dead—the 58,022 names, Andrew Johnson’s included.

And then there are the last lines of the poem: “In the black mirror/ a woman’s trying to erase names:/ No, she’s brushing a boy’s hair.” While the poem began with the speaker fading “inside the black granite,” into the thousands of names that represent those United States service men and women who died during the Vietnam war, and while in the penultimate line the speaker believes he is seeing someone trying to erase all that he too easily remembers and sees and identifies with, the final line is a remarkably defiant, remarkably tender, remarkably ordinary gesture of life in the here and now: “No, she’s brushing a boy’s hair.”

And there the poem ends. The speaker doesn’t step away or out from the wall. He himself doesn’t step back into the present moment, free of the war that haunts him. But he sees something new. Amidst all this death, all these 58,022 names, he sees an act of love and care and, in the image of the boy, he

sees not the inerascable past, but the possibility of a different future.

Of course, the poem doesn't tell us enough to know whether the boy is just a tourist, or perhaps the child of one of those 58,022 names. We don't know if the child will someday be a man fighting in a different war, or fighting against one. But the poet Komunyakaa has provided us with enough sorrow, enough ambivalence of personal location, enough identification with the war he once experienced, that we can't help but face the complexity of memorializing those who've died in war, especially if we are among those who have survived it.

Now, for me, who's never lived or fought on the front lines, never lost a sibling, a parent, a partner, or a child to war, it can be a little tempting for me to judge as hyper patriotic those who stand with backs straight and chests out

as they memorialize the war dead. It can be. But. I have to remember: I wasn't there. I have to remember: I don't know what it's like to fade into the black granite and half expect to see my own name among the war dead.

Which takes me to Archibald MacLeish's poem, "The Young Dead Soldiers." If Komunyakaa asks us to face with him his connection with the war dead, MacLeish demands we hear the voices of the dead themselves. Beginning his poem with an acknowledgment that in actuality, "the young dead soldiers do not speak," (for how could they?) MacLeish insists, "Nevertheless, they are heard in the still houses.... They have a silence that speaks for them at night and when the clock counts." With that asserted, MacLeish then proceeds with a litany of statements from the dead soldiers beginning with, "They say..." "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.”

And with that, MacLeish places right at our feet the fact of just how complicated Memorial Day is. “We have done what we could,” say the young dead soldiers, “but until it is finished it is not done.” The question for me arises in reading that statement, what is “it”? Is the “it” that is not done a particular war in which “we” are the good guys and “they” are the bad guys, or is “it” the engagement of any person in any and all kinds of war? MacLeish himself served in the “War to end all wars,” World War I, which preceded, as you know, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the First Gulf War, the war in Afghanistan, the Iraq War, and dozens of others that the United States was not even (at least overtly) involved in. During World War I, according to one biography, MacLeish “became embittered toward the war, when his brother Ken, a

fighter pilot, died in combat, but this disillusionment,” the note continues, “would not prevent [MacLeish’s] appreciating the need to oppose fascism in the thirties.” In fact, during World War II, much of MacLeish’s work in the War Department was to write war propaganda.

If he worked for the War Department, was MacLeish himself for or against war? Whatever we know of MacLeish’s own views, “The Young Dead Soldiers,” published in a collection in 1948, begs the question, should we memorialize soldiers purely for the sacrifices they made in order to win a particular war? Or should we memorialize them because we owe it to them never to create or perpetuate conditions of war again? MacLeish writes, “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.”

Well, what do we say? The notion of “peace and new hope” takes me back to the young boy in Komunyakaa’s poem, getting his hair brushed, and I think, there it is. There’s that possibility of peace and hope. The irony, however, is that it is because of yet another war, the Vietnam War, that MacLeish’s wish for peace and hope after World Wars I and II, is made manifest in the young boy of Komunyakaa’s poem. The young boy may be hope for peace, but peace itself is not yet here.

Peace itself is not yet in Iraq or Afghanistan. For that matter, it is not yet in the recruiting offices of Austin or San Antonio, Lubbock, or Amarillo. It’s not in the streets, the public schools, or employment agencies of major American cities or small farming towns, therefore forcing young men and women to see the military the best promise for a way out.

So, again, what do we do to honor this day? What do we do to honor and memorialize the war dead—soldiers, sailors,

marines, airmen and women, citizens, children, pacifists, nationalists, Muslims, Christians, Jews, Unitarian Universalists, all? What do we do?

In his poem, "Dedication," Czeslaw Milosz places the speaker, the survivor, at the grave of a person, or graves of a people, he could not save. The speaker speaks to the dead of poetry, says that "poetry that does not save nations or people" is merely a "connivance with official lies." He says that he has discovered, late, the "salutary aim" of good poetry and that "in this and only this I find salvation."

And so, although he does not say explicitly what kind of book it is, he places upon the grave a book of what I believe must be poetry. "They used to pour millet or poppy seeds/ to feed the dead who would come disguised as birds," he says. "I put this book here for you, who once lived/ so that you should visit us no more."

In this act of dedication—in placing poetry upon the grave, whether literally through the speaker leaving an actual book there, or figuratively through Milosz’s act of composing the poem itself—the poet places his very salvation there. And he prays that the dead, even if disguised as birds, never return to a world riddled with war.

Here in South Austin, and within this community of Wildflower Church, it’s fairly easy to forget how riddled with war this world is. Yes, we can read about it in the paper or online, or hear about it on the radio or TV. But without much effort, we can fold the paper shut, turn the computer off, switch the channel, point our attention elsewhere, and forget within moments that that world we hear about and this world we live in are one and the same.

If that easy forgetting rings true to you, pay attention to this: according to one website, as of a year ago, over 400 men

and women from Texas alone have died in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. While I wasn't able to find more updated totals, just thirteen days ago, Army Major Matthew P. Houseal, of Amarillo, died in Iraq. As did a woman, tending to her work in Afghanistan. As did an old man in Pakistan, struggling to provide for his family. As did a child, anywhere, while just being a child.

And so Memorial Day remains a complicated day. A day of grief and thanks; a day of honoring those who served in the armed forces, and those who served in life, merely by writing a poem, or brushing a young boy's hair. The war dead—the young soldiers and all who didn't fight but who were nonetheless thrown into war—they “do not speak./ Nevertheless, they are heard in the still houses.../they have a silence that speaks for them at night and when the clock counts.”

As the clock counts on this day, may we seek poetry in it, and may we share that poetry with others. Sharing the poetic wisdom of those who have both survived wars and lost their beloveds to it, may we, all of us, walk away from fearful divisions, and together toward our salvation.

Amen.

Please rise in body or spirit and join in singing hymn #160 Far
Too Long by Fear Divided