

The True Spirit of Sacrifice

A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

By Greg Monk

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Good morning to all of you. My name is Greg Monk, and it's a privilege and an honor to be with you, and in front of you this Memorial Day weekend. An especially poignant time for me as a former U.S. Marine, and the son of a Vietnam vet. For a lot of folks, this is a weekend to gather with families, have a picnic, and perhaps remember relatives and friends that are no longer with us. But for others, it's a time of reflection, and maybe a time to really consider the many sacrifices we and others have had to make.

And there's a lot – maybe now more than ever, to reflect on. Our theme this month has been liberation – but I'm not sure how free many of us feel right now. The senseless tragedy in Texas this week reminds me that we are certainly not free from violence. Problems of mental health and addiction are on the rise, and these people are not free; nor is our society from their ill effects. The freedoms of women, people of color, and those who fall under the LGBTQI rainbow are threatened daily. In this environment, it's easy to feel discouraged, to think, haven't we sacrificed enough? And tough to focus on the good, what our previous sacrifices have brought us. Sometimes it feels like one step forward, 2 steps back, especially in this country – especially here in Florida. I love this country, but even I, after watching the news for more than 5 minutes, have found myself thinking, "I hear Canada is pretty nice this time of year..."

So, maybe we need to be reminded that some sacrifices are still worth making.

For you history buffs, let me start with a small bit of history. Memorial Day was originally named Decoration Day, officially recognized in 1868, the year after the Civil War ended. It's widely believed that May was chosen as flowers would be in bloom most everywhere, making decorating the headstones an easier task.

But communities were recognizing the sacrifices made in that terrible war months before the Federal government did. One of the most moving stories I came across in my research came from Charleston, South Carolina – a story that was almost lost to history. Near the end of the Civil War, the Washington Race Course and Jockey Club was repurposed by the Confederate Army as a makeshift prison for captured Union Soldiers. But because of disease and exposure, over 260 of those Union soldiers died - and were quickly buried a mass grave behind the grandstands of the racetrack.

When the Confederates evacuated Charleston after the surrender, they left behind all the slaves that were now freed. One of the first things those emancipated men and women did was to give the fallen Union prisoners a proper burial. They exhumed the mass grave and reinterred the bodies in a new cemetery with a tall, whitewashed fence inscribed with the words: "Martyrs of the Race Course." Which, in my mind, has an eloquent double-meaning.

And then on May 1, 1865, something even more extraordinary happened. According to two reports found in The New York Tribune and The Charleston Courier, a crowd of 10,000 people, mostly freed slaves with some white missionaries, staged a parade around the race track. Three thousand Black schoolchildren carried bouquets of flowers and sang "John Brown's Body." Members of the famed 54th Massachusetts and other Black Union regiments were in attendance and performed double-time marches. Black ministers recited verses from the Bible. If the news reports are accurate, the 1865 gathering at the

Charleston race track would be the earliest Memorial Day commemoration on record.

For me, a normally pretty self-centered human being, that's an illustration of perhaps the highest form of self-sacrifice – willing to fight, even to die for, the rights and freedoms of other people – freedoms they themselves already have. But then, maybe even that kind of sacrifice is a bit self-serving, after all - as Emma Lazarus in 1883 said, and later quoted more famously by Martin Luther King – “Until we are all free – none of us are free.”

And perhaps, the sacrifices we honor on Memorial Day aren't just for those that have died. It seems to me, that causes are what people live for more than what they die for. I like to believe that people live in the hope their causes are good and universal – defeating tyranny, ending oppression, winning justice, adding understanding, giving care – working even if defeated for the moment. Life must have purpose for it to be meaningful, and purpose must have life for it to be fulfilled.

In my own journey, the word sacrifice has held different definitions at different times, as my experiences have shaped the meanings of words. Like most UU's, my spiritual path was hardly a straight path. Honestly, I don't do anything straight. But though I grew up Lutheran, I've attended services in a Jewish synagogue, a Buddhist temple, and a Wiccan circle. On a single bookshelf in my home, you'll find a bible, next to a book of Mormon, a book of daily meditations from Eastern religions, and a book on how to interpret my tarot cards. And amazingly, they all seem to coexist peacefully. So forgive me if I digress a bit into what might be considered “woo-woo land” for some.

In the Tarot deck of Major Arcana, the Death card is the one most uninitiated folks would fear – but it turns out, it usually isn't. It's a transformation card as well as a card of increased self-awareness – signifying a time of letting go, of sacrificing something that's time is already up – perhaps a dead-end job, a toxic relationship, or just a way of thinking that has kept us from reaching our true potential. It's only a problem when we are unwilling to sacrifice - or unable to see beyond what we are giving up - that it becomes painful.

Turns out, that's why the Tower card in Tarot is really the card to fear. We've spent time and energy building up something important to us, the foundation of our lives, or so we think – then some calamity happens, blasting the tower apart. Then the transformations, and the accompanying sacrifices - are forced upon us, making them so much more traumatic. Perhaps it's an unexpected illness of our own or someone we love, driving us from a place of taking our continued health somewhat for granted, into the scary world of navigating a hostile health care system, and having to fight for rights we didn't really realize aren't guaranteed. Maybe it's a comfortable, tenured position at work suddenly threatened by a new policy – Don't Say Gay - that forces us to confront the harsh choice of going back into the closet, or into the unemployment line. Or maybe it's the election we can't believe the other side has won, threatening the freedoms we've just begun to enjoy after others fought so hard to win. These are the truly tough sacrifices, the ones we weren't prepared to make, the ones we cry out, "it's not fair!" And we're not wrong. It isn't fair.

As I've matured – and my sweetheart will tell that I'm a work in progress on that front – I've become more aware that many people face these unfairnesses every day. And that brings for me, another definition of sacrifice for me – to sacrifice my comfort level, my time, my talents, my energy, maybe a bit of my financial

security – to try a bit to tip the scales back the other direction – not just for myself, but for those around me, who might need my help. And that’s hard. We recently heard a great message about intentions. I often have the best of intentions... but the follow-through requires I have to give it time, thoughtfulness, a pause in my own agenda, to make it happen.

Boy, my own agenda is a tough one to look past, sometimes. Even in conversation, I’m often only listening with one ear to what’s being said to me – while the other one is listening to my rehearsed, well-thought out brilliant reply. Maybe that’s why they call it “Paying attention” – because to really give something or someone our attention costs us something – maybe our pride, or our time, our ideas of how we think things are, instead of the reality that is less pleasant. One more lesson in the meaning, the real spirit of sacrifice – one of humility. That though I do have a small, but important part to play, I might need others as much or more than they need me, and to sacrifice my ego, my sense of individual accomplishment, for the betterment of all.

I think that maybe, that’s the meaning behind a phrase I first encountered during my time as a U.S. Marine – esprit de corps. It’s French, literally translates as “the spirit of the body” – but it doesn’t mean my body, in this sense. It’s the body of people who believe as I do, who strive for the same goals I find worthwhile, and when connected to, I can find strength in unity. It’s one of the things that continues to draw me here, to All-faith’s – the sense of community, of being with like-minded people, willing to give of themselves in the same struggles. And given the magnitude of our battles, maybe the sacrifice of individual acclaim isn’t always a sacrifice, after all.

Guess that brings me to the last thing I’ve learned about sacrifice – at least, so far on my journey. Some of the men and women I served with, truly loved their

country, and believed we were going the right thing – for them, they were willing to sacrifice everything, without complaint. I have watched friends become parents, and, in love with their children, set aside their earlier dreams to focus on the family, not looking back, and setting their own self-interest behind their child's. People who have found a new lease on life through recovery, volunteering many hours helping others, taking time away from family and other commitments to help the sick and suffering, often thanklessly, since the ones they were helping were often, like children often are, too self-absorbed to notice, taking the help for granted. And people, absolutely committed to a cause, give up many hours of free time to fight for that they believed in, facing the treats of scorn, and violence, even incarceration and loss, without reserve – because they knew it was just. In all these cases, the sacrifices given out of love, out of a deep sense of doing the right thing – well, they stop feeling like sacrifices at all.

And in that place, in that moment, I've seen the most profound changes take place. Hearts and minds can change. Divides can be crossed. We can be liberated, if not from the situation, then from our own sense of fear and frustration and powerlessness. And we can find new strength, new determination to soldier forth, once more.

So, this Memorial Day weekend, as we honor those who have sacrificed so much to gain the fragile freedoms that we, for the moment, still enjoy, perhaps we can spare some time to reflect on what we do to carry the fight forward, for the freedoms we have yet to fully secure. For the freedom of women to have control over their own body, for people of color to feel free from being targets of fear and hate, for people of every gender identity and sexual orientation to be free to openly express who they are, and who they love – for our children to be free from fear and violence in the very institutions we send them to learn how to get along.

The fight is far from over. So it's a good thing we have ammunition of our own. We have our voices, minds and hearts. Our pens and keyboards. Our votes. And we have each other, and the pooled resources to make a difference still. Let's use them.

Under the U.S. insignia for Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard, a small boy was staring at the names on the wall, of an old church for a long time when the pastor noticed him. "What are you looking at?" asked the clergyman. "All those names. Who are they?" the boy asked. The pastor nodded, and said, "They are the reason we have Memorial Day. They are those who died in the service." The little boy considered that, then asked quietly, "The 9 o'clock service or the 11 o'clock?"