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 Arlington Street Church  
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## **The Healing Power of Memory**

Memorial Day was started in 1865 by formerly enslaved people in Charleston, South Carolina. Grateful for the fight for their freedom, they exhumed the graves of 257 Union soldiers who had been buried in a mass grave in a Confederate prison camp and worked for two weeks to honor them with a proper burial.

On May 1<sup>st</sup>, twenty-eight hundred African American children led a parade of 10,000 people, marching, singing, and celebrating.<sup>1</sup>

Three years later,<sup>2</sup> General John Logan, commander of the Union veterans' group known as the Grand Army of the Republic, issued an official proclamation designating the 30<sup>th</sup> of May “for the purpose of strewing with flowers or otherwise decorating the graves of the [more than 620,000] comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village, and hamlet churchyard in the land.” General Logan chose May 30<sup>th</sup> because it was a rare day that didn't fall on the anniversary of a Civil War battle.<sup>3</sup>

“President Ulysses S. Grant presided over [that] first Memorial Day ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery—which, until 1864, [had been]

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<sup>1</sup> “Memorial Day was started by former slaves on May, 1, 1865 in Charleston, SC to honor 257 dead Union Soldiers who had been buried in a mass grave in a Confederate prison camp. They dug up the bodies and worked for 2 weeks to give them a proper burial as gratitude for fighting for their freedom. They then held a parade of 10,000 people led by 2,800 Black children where they marched, sang and celebrated.” ~ Abstrakt Goldsmith

<sup>2</sup> May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1868

<sup>3</sup> The reason for this choice of date is in some dispute. Please see [history.com/news/8-things-you-may-not-know-about-memorial-day](https://www.history.com/news/8-things-you-may-not-know-about-memorial-day)

Confederate General Robert E. Lee's plantation.” Some 5,000 people decorated the graves of the 20,000 Union and Confederate soldiers buried there.<sup>4</sup>

It is impossible to imagine the scope of the carnage, to imagine the grief or the glory in its wake. But today, 151 years later, we pause to honor, to give thanks, and to remember.

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I’m thinking today about the healing power of memory — specifically, of happy remembering, the opposite of dismembering: re-remembering: to put back together again; to restore to wholeness.<sup>5</sup>

I invite you to let your mind turn to evocative memories. Perhaps

- \* The smell in the air before summer rain
- \* The twang of a basketball hitting the rim and bouncing away
- \* The color of cotton candy, and the smell, and sugar on your teeth
- \* The feeling of new shoes
- \* Something very soft
- \* The sound of the voice of your favorite person

Japanese film director and screenwriter, Akira Kurosawa, said, "It is the power of memory that gives rise to the power of imagination."

In July of 1798, English Romantic poet William Wordsworth returned to Tintern Abbey and the banks of the River Wye, having been gone for five summers

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<sup>4</sup> Please see [mentalfloss.com/article/27858/10-things-remember-about-memorial-day](http://mentalfloss.com/article/27858/10-things-remember-about-memorial-day)

“Some five thousand people attended on a spring day which, *The New York Times* reported, was ‘somewhat too warm for comfort.’ The principal speaker was James A. Garfield, a Civil War general [who had fought for the Union], Republican congressman from Ohio, and future president.

“‘I am oppressed with a sense of the impropriety of uttering words on this occasion,’ [he] began, and then continued to utter them. ‘If silence is ever golden, it must be beside the graves of fifteen-thousand men, whose lives were more significant than speech, and whose death was a poem the music of which can never be sung.’ [Unfortunately,] It went on like that for pages and pages.

“[When he finally finished,] some 5,000 people decorated the graves of the 20,000 Union and Confederate soldiers buried there.”

<sup>5</sup> Memory—the way we learn and metabolize our experiences — is comprised of three essential processes: encoding, storage, and retrieval. Encoding refers to how we learn from experience. Storage is how we retain what we learn. And retrieval is how we access that information. Everything we experience waltzes through encoding, storage, and retrieval. Please see [bokcenter.harvard.edu/how-memory-works](http://bokcenter.harvard.edu/how-memory-works)

and five long winters.<sup>6</sup> He stood in the shade of a sycamore tree and wrote of how the view before him had comforted him over the years since he last saw it.<sup>7</sup>

These beauteous forms,  
 Through a long absence, have not been to me  
 As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:  
 But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din  
 Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,  
 In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,  
 Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;  
 And passing even into my purer mind  
 With tranquil restoration:—feelings too  
 Of unremembered pleasure: such, perhaps,  
 As have no slight or trivial influence  
 On that best portion of a good man's life,  
 His little, nameless, unremembered, acts  
 Of kindness and of love. Nor less, I trust,  
 To them I may have owed another gift,  
 Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,  
 In which the burthen of the mystery,  
 In which the heavy and the weary weight  
 Of all this unintelligible world,  
 Is lightened:—that serene and blessed mood,  
 In which the affections gently lead us on,—  
 Until, the breath of this corporeal frame  
 And even the motion of our human blood  
 Almost suspended, we are laid asleep  
 In body, and become a living soul:  
 While with an eye made quiet by the power  
 Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,  
 We see into the life of things.<sup>8</sup>

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Wordsworth's works evoke the power of happy recollection — visiting a storehouse of joy.

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<sup>6</sup> William Wordsworth, *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798* (excerpt)

<sup>7</sup> For delivery: Close your eyes, if you'd like, and listen to a minute and a half lifted from this beautiful poem.

<sup>8</sup> William Wordsworth, *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour. July 13, 1798* (excerpt)

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Days after I arrived at college, a new friend came to my room one morning, distraught. His parents had just called to say that, in the night, his childhood home had burned to the ground. Everyone had escaped, but nothing had been saved.

He was in shock — completely disoriented. We went out for a walk, and he told me about everything he'd lost — his brand new high school diploma, the piano on which he'd learned to play, generations of photographs, the stuffed giraffe his beloved grandmother had given him when he was born but that he'd been too embarrassed to bring to college. We walked for a long time, as he slowly but surely reentered his body, and what was physically destroyed was recreated in his mind and in his heart.

Memory is like that. It restores to us what has been taken. French novelist Marcel Proust wrote that memory comes as a rope let down from heaven to draw us out of the abyss of non-being.

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When calamity was threatening his people, the great Rabbi Yisrael Baal Shem-Tov, founder of Hasidic Judaism, would go to a certain holy place in the forest, light a sacred fire, and recite a special prayer, asking for a miracle. And in this way, the miracle was accomplished, and tragedy was averted.

Many years later, when the Baal Shem Tov's disciple, the Maggid of Mezritch, had to intervene with heaven for the same reason, he went to the same place in the forest, where he told the Master of the Universe that while he did not know how to light the sacred fire, he could still recite the special prayer. Once again, the miracle was accomplished, and his people were spared.

Many, many years later, the people of the Maggid of Mezritch's disciple, Rabbi Moshe Leib Erblich of Sassov, faced near-certain catastrophe. The rabbi went to the holy place in the forest. But he did not know how to light the sacred fire, nor did he know how to recite the special prayer. "Yet, O G\*d, have pity on us," he prayed. And again, tragedy was averted.

And finally, many, many, many years later, the great-grandson of the Maggid of Mezritch, Rabbi Israel of Ruzhyn, found his congregation in the face of mortal danger. Sitting in his study, his head in his hands, he prayed to G\*d from the depths of his heart. "O, G\*d, I do not know the holy place in the forest. I cannot light a sacred fire. And I cannot recite the special prayer. All I can do is remember

and tell the story of miracles in times past. I ask that, once again, you show us mercy and deliver us from peril.” And once again, the miracle was accomplished.<sup>9</sup>

From memory ... a miracle.

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Neuropsychologist Dr. Michelle Bengtson writes, “... I repeatedly, [unexpectedly] come upon ... a tiny torn scrap of paper ... with [my mother’s] writing scrawled on it.... That in itself makes me smile.... I’m grateful for my memories of her.... I don’t recall when she wrote it or why, but it was important enough to me when I received it that [I’ve] kept it for over a decade. [It says, simply,] ‘G\*d gives us memories so that we may have roses in winter.’”<sup>10</sup>

“For Augustine,<sup>11</sup> [the sainted fourth century philosopher, Catholic theologian,] our human capacity to remember means that time both passes and is preserved....” Unitarian Universalist Robert Manning is speaking. “[Because of memory,] we are somehow ... connected not just to the present, to what is happening now, but to all that has been [but is] never entirely gone.... Memory, for Augustine, is ultimately about connection; ... it is through ... memory that connection doesn't end. Augustine even believes that our human power of memory connects us in some mysterious way with ... the divine, ... [by giving] us a little glimpse of ... eternity.

“But of all the amazing things Augustine says about memory,” Robert Manning concludes, “this is my personal favorite. [In Book X of the *Confessions*], when he is explaining how amazing memory is and how it transforms our experience of the present, he says, [essentially, and with deep gratitude,] “I can remember the difference between the smell of lilacs and the smell of violets even though, at the moment, there are no violets or lilacs.”<sup>12</sup>

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My own war dead are those who lived and died with AIDS.

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<sup>9</sup> There are many, many versions of this story. I first learned it from Elie Wiesel, *The Gates of the Forest*

<sup>10</sup> [drmichellebengtson.com/the-gift-of-memories/](http://drmichellebengtson.com/the-gift-of-memories/)

<sup>11</sup> Note: The *Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary* lists aw-GUS-tin as the single recommended pronunciation of Augustine.

<sup>12</sup> Please see Robert J.S. Manning, *What Mean These Stones? Cultural Memory and the meaning of the past*, [uuquincy.org/talks/20001111.shtml](http://uuquincy.org/talks/20001111.shtml)

On this Memorial Day, I'm remembering my Provincetown parishioner, Paul Richards — a big, blonde, boyish midwesterner with the energy and exuberance of a Labrador Retriever. On his own initiative, with his Baptist heart, Paul recruited new church members by inviting groups of six friends at a time to Sunday brunch in his home. The hitch was that the invitation started with the church service from 11 to noon; if you planned to eat, you had to meet Paul in his pew. He was shameless; he was charming.

One late summer Sunday afternoon — a beautiful afternoon — the last wedding party of the day was being photographed on the front lawn of the church. Paul popped in to my study and said, "My boat's at the pier — Let's go!"

Like many of my male parishioners then, Paul was living against the relentless clock, the Kaposi's Sarcoma erupting on his left calf. I was exhausted, but I went; I knew we didn't have much time left together.

Paul motored way, way out into the bay, until the leaning steeple of the meeting house took its place in Provincetown's silhouette on the horizon. He threw the anchor and we sat there, in silence, imagining, perhaps, that we were a little distance from all the dying and death and grieving.

Then Paul said to me, "Even if it kills every single one of us, even if there is no one left to tell the stories, it matters that we care for each other in all this madness. It matters that, even in the face of death, we love each other well."

Paul died, but I lived to remember, and to recall him to you, now, more than 30 years later. Paul's last words were inscribed on his gravestone. They say,

*Speak from your heart.*

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Beloved spiritual companions,

“Memory comes as a rope  
let down from heaven  
to draw us out of the abyss of non-being.”

May the healing power power of memory  
give rise to the power of imagination,

And through memory,  
in our minds and in our hearts  
let us recreate what can never be destroyed.

As we pause to honor and to give thanks,  
may we remember and so restore to wholeness  
beauty and joy  
and acts of kindness  
and love.

Amen.

