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Trying to Understand Memorial Day

Abstract

"On Memorial Day, we need to also consider the profound complexity—and sorrow—of any war."

Posting about a patriotic holiday from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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Trying to Understand Memorial Day

Howard Schaap

Let me confess that I have long been confused about Memorial Day. For starters, I wasn't clear who we were memorializing—soldiers who had died, loved ones who had died, or both. I also wasn't clear if it was really a patriotic holiday or not. Should remembering the dead spur something in me like Fourth of July fireworks did? Or was there room for lamenting bad decisions and misbegotten wars on Memorial Day?

So, I guess you could say my ambivalence about Memorial Day made me primarily shrug it off.

Now, I have come to think that my uncertainty wasn't far off. Memorial Day is a patriotic holiday that remembers those who died in war. It is an ambivalent sort of day, it seems to me, because the meaning of it produces mixed, even contradictory, emotions.

Let me back up.

At least one of the reasons I felt mixed emotions about Memorial Day and its twin of late fall, Veterans Day, was that they seemed aimed over my head, focused on the days of long ago. For one thing, the Memorial Day and Veterans Day events I attended as a kid all seemed to point back to World War II. That seemed to be the group with the best stories, the stories that we were intent on remembering as a culture. Now, I would also add that the WWII group was the last group that could resoundingly say, "We fought against evil and won"—not because we haven't fought wars since then, nor certainly that soldiers haven't died or suffered physically or mentally in service to our country's foreign policy, but just that foreign policy since WWII has not had such a clear end goal.

That is, after WWII, conflicts were complicated by the Cold War, leading us to ideological fights in Korea and Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Then, there was the malaise of the 80s, when I grew up. I remember watching skirmishes in Granada and Panama unfold like hour-long specials of the *A-Team*, while daytime drama was dominated by the Iran-Contra hearings. I think it was clear, even to young me, that something was rotten in the state of the union. We had our fingers in many pies all over Central and South America, and that the purity of such actions was roughly equivalent to Victor Newman's motives on *The Young and the Restless*.

Those dubious years were followed by more dubious wars in the Middle East that we have yet to extract ourselves from. In fact, our actions in Desert Storm seemed to have started multiple rebellions across the galaxy that point the finger back at us as The Empire.

Of course, what I've done here is bad history, a kind of improv sketch: "Fifty Years of American Foreign Policy in Five Minutes." As such, it leaves much undiscussed: the specter that Communism really was in the world (i.e., in the world it created behind the Iron Curtain); the complicated politics and dictatorships of Central and South America; the factions of Islam and the difficulty of maintaining stability in the Middle East.

But, before you dismiss me as one of *those* people who always undermines American actions in the world when no one else will step up for what's right, let me tell you a more personal story.

I'm named for a soldier who died in action. Howard Calvin Schaap died in action near Mundung-Ni in the Korean War on October 7, 1951. He was killed by mortar fire as he transported the wounded from the front lines as a litter bearer and medic. I've seen footage of the train that brought his body home to my grandparents, footage of the automobiles lined up along the road to my grandparents' farm as friends and neighbors remembered him. It is profoundly somber.

Three years ago, a letter that Howard Calvin Schaap wrote to his uncle just days before Howard died was rediscovered and brought to my parents. It brought fresh tears to my dad's eyes, and made Howard Calvin Schaap real for all of us in the next generation who never got to know him as Uncle.

On the one hand, Howard's letter is what you'd expect in a letter from the front. It told of transport: Howard "had a good boat ride and saw a good share of Japan." Then, it recounted in vague terms what it was like to be in battle: "They say, 'A guy is never a soldier until he was in his first battle.' Well, I guess I am a soldier because I was in it. I spent 11 days on the front lines...we slept in fox holes under the blue sky."

What had he seen? That, too, is understated: “Most of the guys that get wounded are not too bad, only a few with a foot or arm off. The amount of deaths were light compared to the fight we were in.”

Howard reports that “morale is high” and that every day enemy soldiers “come to us with their hands up.” He reflects on the people he’s gotten to meet—other people from his denomination, the Christian Reformed Church—and just a wide range of characters: “Sure met a lot of different people out here.”

Then there’s the foreboding, the sense soldiers have that going into action again may mean they will not come back: “I kinda hate to think of going back to the front after a couple weeks, or any time as far as that goes. With all the mortar fire a guy’s safe no place.”

He’s a man I’d have like to have met, especially because of his humble, calm demeanor as it shows up on the page of his letter.

It was Howard’s letter that has finally made Memorial Day more real for me.

Yet, when we think of the deaths of individuals like Howard on Memorial Day, it’s hard not to get caught up in the rhetoric, and this is a further reason for my continued ambivalence about the holiday. It’s on days like Memorial Day that we’re told that soldiers like Howard “paid the ultimate price,” or “made the ultimate sacrifice.” Certainly, those words are among the most dangerous, idolatrous words we use in America. They are religious words, suggesting as they do that death in war leads to its own kind of immortality.

But, the man I’m named for died the way many soldiers die—forces beyond his control determined that he would serve in a war of ideology, and the technology of that war, mortar fire, killed him impersonally as he tried to transport the wounded from the battlefield.

Maybe I’m finally coming to understand what those who have lost loved ones to war have long felt about Memorial Day—that it is a deeply ambivalent day. Maybe for all of us, understanding Memorial Day should mean embracing the ambivalence of the day, and doing away once and for all with the religious rhetoric of war.

Putting away rhetoric on Memorial Day is not to say that Howard or others died “in vain,” which is just more rhetoric. Nor am I saying that the Korean War that took Howard’s life was necessarily an unjust war. My dad had a chance to visit South Korea with a group of Korean War Vets, and it was an event that gave him some peace in the

loss of his brother as a country said thank you, and as he considered life across the demilitarized zone in North Korea.

No, a review of history has determined that Howard fought in a war that preserved democracy for South Korea, a war that stood against something darker. The North Korean regime turned out to be repressive, one that severely limits human flourishing down to this day, misshaping the image of God in many ways through its policies and actions.

But, on Memorial Day, we need to also consider the profound complexity—and sorrow—of any war. Recently, I came across a reprint of Reinhold Niebuhr's reflection on V-E day, 75 years ago. In it, Niebuhr reminds Americans of the necessary complexity of war, that every war is beyond us, that we had best not reduce any war down to victory and defeat or any other easy clichés: "However we measure the conflict," Niebuhr says of V-E day:

...whether in terms of the evil we opposed, or the evils we had to commit in opposing it, or the destruction of the vanquished or the price of the victors, the dimensions of the drama in which we are involved are staggering. It is well that we should be shocked into sobriety by the magnitude of historical events and should be prompted to humility and piety by a contemplation of the tasks which still confront us. All of them are really beyond our best wisdom.

So, on this Memorial Day and ones that follow, let's do away with rhetoric like "the ultimate sacrifice" and instead let's embrace ambivalence.

As Howard Calvin Schaap returned to action at the front, he had a horizon beyond war in mind. After mentioning his fear and after commenting on the very weapon that would take his life, Howard's letter turns to his faith: "But Uncle Franklin," he writes, "one thing about us we can go to our Savior and he will be with us...[W]hat a privilege it is to be brought up in a Christian home...and still we don't live near close enough to our Lord. But how thankful we can be that we have such a faith and trust."

Howard had a fiancée back in the States. Howard, as the oldest son, was slated to take over his father's dairy farm. I'm not sure how a person does it, how a soldier leaves behind his hopes and dreams for life—life as it should be—to go into the hell of the front lines of war. I'm not sure how one finds the will. For Howard faith enabled him to do what he did.

"It happens every week that some guy shoots himself because he gets so nervous and scared," Howard writes, perhaps consciously turning away from his own fear toward a

greater comfort. "But don't start worrying about me. I have all the faith and trust in the Lord a person can have."

I believe in ideals, in things like freedom and justice. I also believe that we as a human race have never actually reached those ideals, or that we only reach them momentarily; we must reach for them again and again, in every moment, in preserving justice and freedom in the Korean peninsula, in preserving justice and freedom for black men like Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia. I believe that there can be such a thing as a just war; I believe that most aren't.

So, I'm ambivalent about Memorial Day. That means I'm moved by the scores of individuals who have lost their lives, men like Howard whose stories are told in lost letters, or left untold; that means I'm sad and angry about living in a world always at war, which always takes life and never gives it.

Maybe that means I finally get what Memorial Day is all about.