

“Remembering Those We Love, Loving Those We Remember”

A Communal Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull and Others Present

First Parish Unitarian Universalist

Cohasset, MA

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Ghosts were everywhere on that rainy June morning that my daughter, Shana, and I passed through the entrance of *Père-Lachaise*. *Père-Lachaise* is the Paris cemetery that holds the remains of some of the most illustrious personages of the last many centuries, along with many whose names we'll never know. Shana and I were amid a celebratory trip to Paris, a splurge in honor of Shana's college graduation a month earlier. Neither of us had ever been to the City of Light, as Paris is known, and we had spent the last several days breathing glorious museums, cathedrals, and gardens and ingesting glorious food! We had prepared well with guide books and maps and in no time had mastered the Paris metro, so much more logical than the New York subway system, but most are.

For this particular day I told Shana she was completely in charge – no negotiating, no compromising, no divergence of routes. I had even waived the power of veto. What did she choose for our destination but the *Père-Lachaise*. And I don't think it was just because that's where the rock star Jim Morrison is buried.

I don't believe it was a morbid choice, but the weather thought so. We wound our way through the Metro on a morning that can only be described as dismal, cloudy, rainy, with a chill in the air. How perfect!

Out of the Metro, map in hand, we headed first for the tombs of those 11th century lovers, Abelard and Héloïse. He had been a priest, she, a nun. They had been madly in love, and mad was the word, for their passion betrayed their faith and their faith, their passion. I wished only that with death, they miraculously discovered the liberty to do more than rest in peace.

Our map went from damp to drenched. We fished out our raingear and were off to the resting place of Frédéric Chopin, 1810-1849. Chopin's monument serves as a posting site for love letters of the living, perhaps in tribute to the romanticist character of his music.

It was pouring by the time we found the Sphinx-like tomb of that high-controversy writer, Oscar Wilde, 1854-1900. Wilde's extravagant tomb was coated, simply coated, with red-lip kiss marks.

We flipped up the hoods of our rain jackets and put to rest our useless umbrellas. Passing the tombs of Balzac and Delacroix, I couldn't miss the grave of Marcel Proust, whose simple black marble memorial is routinely adorned with a solitary rose. *Remembrance of Things Past*, of course. And we soon rounded a bend into a view of the still celebrated even then flower-strewn shrine of yes, Jim Morrison. I couldn't be sure that this wasn't the reason Shana had chosen this site, but by then, Shana and I were captivated by the quiet drama of this sacred space. And just in case anyone this morning is drawing a blank on Jim Morrison, he was lead singer for the Doors and OD'd on drugs in the early 1970s.

Why, you might be wondering by now, do I speak of this trip on a morning when the promised sermon was communal – and it still will be – with the promised topic, “Remembering Those We Love, Loving Those We Remember?” Back to Shana’s and my sojourn: We rounded a bend and headed uphill. On the outer edges of this cemetery rest a series of monuments to the hundreds of thousands of French Jews who perished in the Nazi Holocaust and to those who perished resisting the Nazis and the Vichy regime that enabled Hitler and his henchmen to wreak their havoc in France. The haunting power of these gaunt sculptures – skeletal, ghost-like, wielding symbols of oppression – moved and chilled us. Like souls who wouldn’t let us forget, these memories in stone rose larger than life to remind us, to remind us of many we had never known, never had the chance to love, would never have the chance to remember were it not for these stark tributes on the margin of a cemetery in a City of Light.

It seems we are always amid a time of war, and those lost to war’s folly are what primarily inspires Memorial Day. It seems that we remember primarily those lost to war who fought in war, but war’s casualties are primarily non-military folk caught in its crosswinds, and in the case of these Jewish dead, those intentionally targeted. Yes, we extend our remembering to family and friends we have loved and lost. We extend our remembering perhaps even to those whose fame has qualified front-page obituaries, such as some I have cited who rest in this Parisian cemetery. But I ask, as we remember those we love and love those we remember, that we consider also those millions, yes millions, who have perished all but nameless, all but loveless – those downwind of Nazi horrors, those downwind of the carnage of the Khmer Rouge, those downwind of the *mujahadeen* of Darfur, those downwind of the relentless fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan.

For family and friends I hold dear and no longer can hold, I cannot think of a more fitting way to honor them than to honor the miracle of life in remembering with my own life the anonymous dead. Little could I realize that when my daughter chose this unlikely place for a Parisian sojourn on this celebratory trip, its spiritual force would stay with me, even unto this morning.

As we remember those we love and love those we remember, let us light a candle of heart and mind for all the nameless who have perished and continue to perish until we embolden our reverence for life to engage relentlessly in the making of peace. May all who have perished rest in peace, and may we who are alive, live for it.

And so I would now invite you to come forward and share your memories of those you love and hold dear even though you can no longer hold them close.....