Reflection: Memorial Day 2024
Rev. Ron Phares

The Poet John McCray once wrote
“In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie,
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.”

I am not sure what faith McCray wants of me. I am sure that war dead do not want more company. The best way to honor the death of untold numbers of warriors by making no more of them! The memory of their bravery and sacrifice will galvanize me to make no more such memories. They were invited into hell. Some went with enthusiasm. And all were asked to do things that seem impossible.

But from their memory, let us fashion a new invitation, an invitation to fields of green whose honor is in their pristineness rather than their crosses. This invitation is no less daunting than the one those we honor this week accepted. For this invitation will ask us also to do what seems impossible… to decolonize our minds of the contagion of war.

There is a proud tradition in the United States - though not only the United States - of putting one’s life on the line in the name of national interests. It can be admirable. Can we recall with awe the bravery it summons while condemning its costs? For while the impulse is admirable, it is also tragic. And not just for the lives lost but for the follies of history that called for their sacrifice in the first place, like some blundering, insatiable demon conjured by the dreams of greedy, prideful, traumatized men.

Admirable. Tragic. Blundering. Demonic. And inevitable. In fact, unceasing.

For, before war is a memorial, before war is a body bag, before war is an assault, before war is a propaganda manufactured enthusiasm, before war is a failure of politics, before all that, war is a mindset. War is a way of looking at the world and oneself in the world. War is an inevitable

outcome of a worldview in thrall to the sense of separation. This mindset of separateness is costing us even now. And it is costing us everything.

Our sense that we are disconnected from one another, from the being of the world, and all the beings that together are the world - our sense of disconnection from them - which, be it the person next to you, a cricket, or a forest - will necessarily produce war… on forests, on crickets, on each other. To my mind the perception of separation and its outcome of war are so closely linked that they may be one and the same. If that is true then we are in a constant state of war.

The sense that we are separate beings in a world of separate beings gives rise to the impulse to grab what one can in order to protect oneself from a sociopathic universe. But no matter how much you grab, how much money is in your bank, how many likes on your facebook post, or lands in your empire, it will never be enough because the underlying sense of separation has not been addressed, resolved, or ameliorated.

Thus, we are in a state of constant war, a perceptual posture of never ending conquest and defense, a linguistic addiction to metaphors of violence, a spiritual state that begs for enemies. And while this ultimately manifests in weapons and tactics worshiping violence or being seized by violence in more personal relationships, it is more fundamentally *rooted* than politics or even passion.

The contemporary philosopher Charles Eisenstein points out that the sense of separation gives rise to a subtle and constant panic that has us warring on everything from drugs to poverty, from communism to weeds to fat to aging to climate change.

Eisenstein notes that the mind set of separation is isolating by its nature. The sense of isolation is the seedbed of depression. Worse, separation mindset often results in a sense of disconnect from not only others, but even from one's own self. Disconnection yields a war on self. Not the big bad ego-bully self either, but the delicate self we call our heart.

In war, propaganda is used to dehumanize and demonize the enemy. We do the same thing with ourselves sometimes. We look upon our bodies, our eyes, our abilities and responsibilities… as enemy.

We are at war with ourselves. And there are casualties. We are also waging war on that larger self we call earth.

Just like in a shooting war, the sense of separation demands all resources be mustered to fill its insatiable hunger and purpose. Everything becomes a thing to be used, rather than a being with whom to cultivate a relationship. A forest is a table waiting to happen, a buck waiting to be made, rather than a being, itself full of beings, that GIVES of itself so that we may have shelter and warmth and food. "The demonization and dehumanization of the enemy is little different from the desacralisation of nature on which ecocide depends."

But then to COMBAT that result, environmentalists wage war on climate change and pharmacists and therapists wage war on depression and on and on… war is rooted in a mindset, a

trauma response to separation. No matter what it is applied to, be it Gaza or autism, it will always leave a vacuum. And as a vacuum is an echo of the sense of separation, war will only create the need for more war to fill the vacuum.

But there is a solution. Though it will ask of us what seems impossible. It will ask us to change our minds, the very sense of how and who we are. It's not your fault that we have this sense of separation that becomes war mentality. It is something we have been taught, something we have learned. We can choose to learn another way.

We are being invited to imagine something new. Or reimagine something ancient, something fundamental, to rebuild our sense of what a self is, and thus to find ourselves in an entirely different world, a more accurate hologram… a more loving one anyway.

I have a little aphorism I like to call the carbon rule. Carbon rather than golden or platinum or some other lusty extraction from our mother. Carbon because that is the basic building block of life as we know it. The Carbon Rule is also not a piece of advice, it is a simple observation of a fundamental truth. The Carbon Rule is this: As you do unto others, so do you do unto yourself.

This is the truth of an interdependent web of being, a web of being in which I am of thee and you are of me. That is not to say we are the same being. I am not thee. But I am <u>of</u> thee and you are <u>of</u> me, unique parts and iterations of one being. Not the same being, but indwelling as part of one another.

I am of thee. You are of me.

As a mindset, it takes practice. It takes saying so often that when you aren't doing it, you're hearing it. It takes saying it so often that it becomes a default invitation to your every moment. It takes saying so often that you aren't thinking it, it is thinking you.

I am of thee. You are of me. To the person next to you. To the air between you. To our whole species. To every species and to each individual therein. To the trees that give us the air between us. To that one tree. To the light and earth and water of which we are made. To the war dead.

Like it says in that poem I read to open with. "We are the dead," it says. An imaginative bit of Point of View. But as such: written by a living person, read by a living person, it is a little spiritual trip. We are the dead. We are at least of them. And they; of us. Which means Memorial Day is not about some other. It's about us.

It is about what we do with what they have done. It is about remembering who we are and what our responsibilities are to each other, to history, to our ancestors and progeny, to our world. Let this then be our faith with the dead: that we will seek no nemesis, that we will not reduce complexity to enemy, that we will work toward a ceasefire in Gaza and an end to colonialism everywhere, that we will work to shift our self conception to one that is less in thrall to the demon war, that we will prevent all our wars by realizing that we are part of an interconnected whole. And that this, not by war, is how we save ourselves, our families, the land, the world.

The sacrifices made by men and women have been too precious to waste on adulations. The vacuums left by their absences carry through generations, they leave us high and dry, a persistent emptiness that begs for us to find a new way. But their courage to meet an impossible battlefield request may yet serve to inspire us.

Let their loss not be in vain. Let it be for more than the war that took them. Let it be to give us the courage to change our hearts, to change our minds, to understand that I am of thee… thee fallen soldier, thee earth that reclaims your bones, thee family left still breathing, thee who fired the round. I am of thee. And you are of me.