

# "Objects in Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear"

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The Universalist Meeting House of Provincetown

## Opening Words: from Ecclesiastes

There are some of them who have left a name,  
so that men declare their praise.  
And there are some who have no memorial,  
who have perished as though they had not lived;  
they have become as though they had not been born,  
and so have their children after them.

## PRAYER:

Divine Spirit of Life, we are here to honor those who answered the call. We thank you for the courage of the ordinary person, the spirit of love and sacrifice that ennoble our hearts and makes their efforts sacred. We remember all of those who served their community, whether home or abroad, in peacetime as well as in conflict. We will not forget those who died, or take for granted those who had to live on, to return to us with memories of death and suffering, that we might know the truth about war. We hold in our hearts all of those who grieve. We respect their loss and we pray for their continued strength and courage. We pray for peace and understanding, for the compassion to listen to each other, and the wisdom to compromise. Perhaps if we do, we will learn words of justice and mercy and kindness.  
May it be so. Amen. Amen.

## READING from *The Language of Names* by Justin Kaplan and Anne Bernays

Devoid of religious or patriotic symbols and inscriptions, Maya Lin's starkly elegant Vietnam Veteran's Memorial has a transcendent power to arouse emotion and veneration, to console and conciliate, to heal the wounds of that war while making sure those who died in it will be remembered. Even visitors to the memorial who haven't lost anyone in the war, may have taken no part in protesting it, or were born years after it ended, feel this power. They say that as they walk the sloping path alongside black granite panels bearing the unadorned names of the American dead, their throats close up and they see a bruised look on one another's faces. According to scholars of religion and culture, the memorial has become a shrine, an altar, like Lourdes or the western wall of the second temple in Jerusalem: it's a place to which people make pilgrimages and bring candles, flowers, birthday cakes, wine, food, flags, letters, photographs, stuffed animals. Uniform caps and insignia, baby booties. Some visitors make rubbings to take home with them. Others claim that if they stand long enough in one place they begin to see on the polished stone a reflection of the man or woman who bore that name.

Peter S. Hawkins, who teaches religion and philosophy at Yale, said, "The common impulse of grief is the reiteration of personal names... ; it is to call out like King David, 'My son Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son.' "So that the voice may not fail, the names are written down...." If the names of young men killed in a war are not recorded, they are essentially lost forever except to the members of the families they were snatched from. Each man's name is his immortality....

Hawkins linked the [Vietnam Veterans] wall to the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial quilt: "impossible not to think of one memorial as a successor to the other, impossible not to find the origin of the Quilt's panels in the intimate tableaux that mourners continue to create [at the wall]." With its panels, hand-sewn with photographs, stuffed animals, wedding rings and relics, the quilt makes a political statement about a disease perceived by too many to be the result of aberrant, not to say antisocial, behavior and thus ignorable. The quilt, Hawkins wrote, "is most profoundly about the naming of names: the sight of them on the myriad panels, the sound of them read aloud. As with the Vietnam Memorial, the names themselves are the memorial."

**SERMON: "Objects in Mirror Are Closer Than They Appear" - Rev. Alison Hyder**

i.

This is the place  
you would rather not know about [writes Margaret Atwood, in her poem, "Notes Towards a Poem That Can Never Be Written"],  
this is the place that will inhabit you,  
this is the place you cannot imagine,  
this is the place that will finally defeat you

where the word *why* shrivels and empties  
itself. This is famine.

ii.

There is no poem you can write  
about it, the sandpits  
where so many were buried  
& unearthed, the unendurable  
pain still traced on their skins.

This did not happen last year  
or forty years ago, but last week.  
This has been happening,  
this happens.

We make wreaths of adjectives for them,  
we count them like beads,  
we turn them into statistics & litanies  
and into poems like this one.

Nothing works.  
They remain what they are.

iii.

The woman lies on the wet cement floor  
under the unending light,  
needle marks on her arms put there  
to kill the brain  
and wonders why she is dying.

She is dying because she said.  
She is dying for the sake of the word.

It is her body, silent  
and fingerless, writing this poem.

iv.

It resembles an operation  
but it is not one

nor despite the spread legs, grunts  
& blood, is it a birth.

Partly, it's a job,  
partly it's a display of skill  
like a concerto.  
It can be done badly,  
or well, they tell themselves.

Partly, it's an art.

v.

the facts of this world seen clearly  
are seen through tears;  
why tell me then  
there is something wrong with my eyes?

To see clearly and without flinching,  
without turning away,  
this is agony, the eyes taped open  
two inches from the sun.

What is it you see then?  
Is it a bad dream, a hallucination?  
Is it a vision?  
What is it you hear?

The razor across the eyeball  
is a detail from an old film.  
It is also a truth.  
Witness is what you must bear.

vi.

In this country, you can say what you like  
because no one will listen to you anyway,  
it's safe enough, in this country you can try to write  
the poem that can never be written,  
the poem that invents  
nothing and excuses nothing  
because you invent and excuse yourself each day.

Elsewhere, this poem is not an invention.  
Elsewhere, this poem takes courage.  
Elsewhere, this poem must be written

because the poets are already dead.

Elsewhere, this poem must be written  
as if you are already dead,  
as if nothing more can be done  
or said to save you.

Elsewhere you must write this poem  
because there is nothing more to do.

Right now, says Margaret Atwood. We like to think that the genocides and terrors are over, that they belong to a history that we can bring out once or twice a year on national holidays and memorials. But the mass graves and the torture and death "did not happen last year or forty years ago but last week. This has been happening, this happens."

We are not responsible, of course. We didn't choose this government. None of us supports cruelty or feels indifferent to other's agony. We too must live our days daily, getting food on the table and taking care of our loved ones. We have our own demons to fight. And yet how do we keep from relegating today to history, to that unchangeable past? Are we giving up on ourselves too soon?

Albert Einstein remarked that "the distinction between past, present, and future is an illusion, although a persistent one." Scientifically, at least, time and space are a continuum. There is much more flow, more movement, than we realize. All of them influence who we are today - what we think we can achieve, our limits and failures, our grievances, our pride. The car side mirrors warn "Objects in mirror are closer than they appear." And it is true. The past is still with us, and catching up fast.

And that is why so many of us feel despair. We see the patterns, and we recognize the path that we are on from the lessons of our parents. It was not so long ago that this country saw repression, as ideologues like McCarthy and J. Edgar Hoover manipulated our fears. Fascism is always a danger when materialism predominates, because fascism requires complacency to succeed. Whenever people confuse freedom with pleasure, they are easy prey to conquest. In ancient Rome, citizens were given bread and circus, with gladiator fights and wild animals. Now we have outlet stores and bargain prices, and government-produced news programs waving the flag of nationalism. We recognize it, we even understand it, but how do we free this country from this tyranny of greed?

My colleague Emily Gage reminds us that "the truth is subjective." Her local paper, the *Sunday Joliet Herald-News*, she says,

*Asked people to rate the top ten stories of the [twentieth] century. Nothing earth-shattering. But then they broke the list down various demographic categories. More men, for example, chose the dropping of the atomic bomb in 1945 as their top story. More women, on the other hand, chose the 1928 discovery of penicillin. Eric Newton surmised in an accompanying article that, in general "Men are impressed by news stories about war and technology, but women name stories about medicine and social issues as more important." He also reflected that "Civil rights dominates the choices of black voters but does not make it into the top ten for white voters. Younger voters tend to be more influenced by the popular media. And, for the most part, people seem to define 'history' as the events they lived through.' In other words, we recall and honor the events that we feel have most affected our lives. Now this is no revelation [Gage comments], especially for Unitarian Universalists. We notice regularly that even those we love see the world differently. But it is always important to remember that every action and thought is framed by a person's experience. That there is a story behind everything. That everything deserves to be questioned. ["Rating the Top Ten," in CLF Quest, October 2001]*

We each choose our past, by highlighting those events that support our story of love or hardship, luck or courage. Lauren Slater discovered that when she went on Prozac and ended her deep and chronic depression, her memories changed, too. "I still vividly recall the whiteness, the fear, the cold, the cuts. But," she says "the lifting of illness, incomplete though it is, has brought other, more colorful glints as well." Walking through downtown Chelsea she suddenly remembered ice-skating on the pond, spinning and leaping, and her mother's unusual praise: "You are a girl with know-how." She loved wild grapes and horses, and was leader of the band. But only now is that past hers again. It is no longer buried in the pain. [Lauren Slater, *Prozac Diary*].

Some of us project an image of toughness and independence. So we mostly remember the times that we faced up to a challenge, got our first paycheck, maybe survived a difficult test. These events make up the story of our lives and bolster our claims. Others get stuck in periods of abuse or shame, and can't remember any other truth. Each choice creates our identity and makes us who we are.

Our identity is formed not only in the mind, but in the body, in behaviors learned, in habits and skills. And so we often repeat the only reactions we know, however unaware. We buy into our culture, recreating unhealthy relationships over and over, or somehow replicating the family history of secrets or abuse or abandonment. Often you can trace these patterns through the generations, an addiction showing up in a grandfather as alcoholism, in a cousin as gambling, a daughter as obsessive overworking or drug abuse. These family systems have incredible force to compel behaviors because they are embedded in the way people relate and remember and plan for the future. As William Faulkner said, "Not only is the past relevant, it's not even done." Our ancestors live on in us.

And, of course, the same is true for this community. That is why our history is so important. Each story tells us something about our values and who we emulate, and why. If we remember wisely we will learn from our conflicts as well as our achievements, and grow from them instead of falling into the same old reactions and fears. We have to be open and we have to be honest about our own pettiness and avoidance and our issues around authority and control. We have learned to take responsibility for our culture, and the signs of health are clear. We can honor the past without living there. It is hard to admit to our mistakes, even when they are shared. Yet it is the only way to avoid repeating them in the future.

The only way that we can resist the forces that control us is to speak the truth, clearly, honestly, and insistently. It is the only power we have to change our future and our present, because real freedom depends on knowing the truth about what is possible, the consequences of our actions to ourselves and other beings, what other people need and dream, and who benefits from our ignorance. And that is why poets and journalists are the first to be silenced by despotic rules, why corporations want to control the media. People believe what they know, and tyrants learn quickly to spin the facts into glistening bubbles that enchant and distract us, while they bury the bodies. We are happy to be amused - and just as ready to be outraged- as long as our own hands are clean.

But we can never be clean, for we are holding hands with power. They act in our names, and claim our compliance. Our only choice is to roll up our sleeves and start slinging mud right back into the face of hatred and greed. Drown out the voices that would speak for us by telling our own stories and remembering our dead. Let everyone's life be counted, every name recalled, recited, and reflected back.

In Bobby Mason's novel *In Country*, a kid named Samantha goes to the Vietnam memorial with her grandmother and her uncle Emmett, a Vietnam veteran badly damaged by the war. She is "sick with apprehension," but tells herself that "the memorial is only a rock with names on it. It doesn't mean anything except they're dead. It's just names." They see themselves mirrored in the shiny black granite, one with all the dead. And then they find who they are looking for: Sam's father. Dwayne E. Hughes. Mamaw wants to touch her dead son's name chiseled into the black granite, but she's too short to reach it. Someone brings her a stepladder. [Mason writes:]

"Mamaw reaches toward the name and slowly struggles up the next step, holding her dress tight against her. She touches the name, running her hand over it, stroking it tentatively, affectionately, like feeling a cat's back. Her chin wobbles, and after a moment she backs down the ladder silently." As the novel ends, Emmett is "studying the names low on a panel. He is sitting there cross-legged in front of the wall, and slowly his face bursts into a smile like flames." ... In seeing and touching a name they are touching the person they belonged to, making palpable contact with the dead. [Justin Kaplan and Anne Bernays, *The Language of Names*] When we unfold a quilt panel we reveal more than names. We bring souls into the light of love and compassion.

People are dying right now, innocent civilians and fuzzy-cheeked soldiers in a war without borders: victims of torture and genocide, of drugs and poverty and hatred. Who will read their names, and tell of their childhood exploits and the shape of their smile?

Ecclesiastes 44 states, "There are some of them who have left a name, so that men declare their praise. And there are some who have no memorial, who have perished as though they had not lived; they have become as though they had not been born, and so have their children after them."

Whose face is that in the mirror? Whose story cries to be told?

As we sit in silence together, let us call out the names of the dead, that they may live in this house of memory and hope, and guide us in the light.

What should we remember?  
What should we do about the past?  
What should we do about the future?

Each time we ask ourselves, we start again -  
To challenge our assumptions,  
To challenge our hearts.

May we have the courage to look back.  
May we see clearly.  
May our remembering teach us to be just.  
May our remembering teach us to be kind.  
May our remembering teach us the wisdom to choose well.  
May our remembering help us to be whole. by Rev. Orlanda Brugnola

### **CLOSING WORDS by James Kirkup "Meeting With a Stranger"**

You, through whose face  
all lovely faces look,  
and are resolved for ever  
in your soul's mirror:  
you, in whose unspoken words  
the irrevocable voices speak again...

O you who are myself and yet another,  
who are the world, and yet unknown...  
here is my hand, and with it let all hands  
be given, and be held, in yours and mine.