

Memorial Day and Heroes
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At so it's Memorial Day, this day that marks the first day of summer, when our island fills up and so many beloved faces return to us and so much activity begins and with it comes that feeling that something is never done. This day that brings so much of what is long awaited and so much bustle alongside it so that what was only yesterday a sleepy island rolls over in its bed and becomes a rambunctious pup, ready to jump in the waves, bring sand into the house and eat everything in sight! There are things to be celebrated and things we leave behind with each new season, and Memorial Day is no exception.

Memorial Day is a unique day as it marks more than a beginning of the dog days of summer. It is a day left aside to honor those who have fallen in war; a day that asks us to reflect on those who strike out as individuals to join a war effort, for so many reasons. One of those reasons that I will reflect on today is the wish to distinguish oneself as a hero, as a leader, as willing to sacrifice oneself for the national common good. These can all of course, be noble pursuits.

Where do the models of what it is to be a hero hail from? Where do ideals of what it is to be an individual, that fuel so much of what it is to be a hero, come from? And if we understand them better, might we be able to offer more options of heroism to our people?

I have been talking about my 2 month sabbatical to Nepal and India with Gary, my husband, for some weeks now. This trip altered each of us, changed what we expect from each other and ourselves...we can't always deliver on those expectations but we are in the process of being rewired by what we experienced. Like all rewiring, it is complicated and there are power outages at times!

Part of what we noticed was that people seemed to operate on a different sense of time. At first, we thought that people were just not as up tight as we were as Westerners and then we started looking more deeply. We slowly came to realize that Time means something else to people in the East, not because it is not noticed, but because people are placed within time differently and experience what we call individuality from another perspective.

Like the 2 fish, Sam and Fred who were swimming along one day when Sam says, "Hey Fred, the water is so fine today" and Fred says, "What water?" Individuality is not something that we can take off and examine. It is the water we swim in.¹

¹ David Foster Wallace, "This is Water" <https://www.fs.blog/2012/04/david-foster-wallace-this-is-water/>

There are many philosophical treatises on individuality and its origins in Western culture from Augustine to Adam Smith and the development of the economic system of capitalism predicated on the theory individuals will act to increase their profit in all scenarios.

There are also many studies of how monotheism supports this type of individuality. A theory of one god that we are made in the image of who is omnipotent and infallible is a theory that can invite human beings into seeking omnipotence and infallibility as marks of godlikeness.

Though the economic systems in Nepal slowly but surely, and in India most surely, are also based on capitalism and therefore an individualism that is familiar to us, there are religious systems that have been longer in place that continue to inform cultural narratives or the stories people live through.

In Hinduism and Buddhism, time is not linear but circular. People think of themselves in terms of Life not individuality. We think of egos, not of epochs...we evaluate and set ourselves against nature, against the play of time. Hindus and Buddhists see themselves in terms of time, as within the play of time, not as outside of it.²

In Hinduism and Buddhism, god has aspects of creator, destroyer, preserver. God and Goddess are those who have faces of fear, love, hope, caution, beauty, love, and vengeance. Gods and Goddesses live among us, teach us, and are taught by us too.

A story from Hinduism might illustrate this.³There was once a god, Indra, who is the god of the heavens, lightning, thunder, storms, rains and river flows. He was declared a savior in the period of the supremacy of the dragon and decided to rebuild his mansions to reflect his grandeur. He employed Vishvakarman, the divine craftsman, to be the builder, who succeeded within a year in constructing beautiful mansions, gardens, lakes and towers. But as the work progressed, Indra became even more demanding and insatiable. He required more terraces, pavilions, ponds and groves. Whenever Vishvakarman tried to accommodate, Indra told him it was not right and to begin again. Vishvakarman soon grew tired of this and decided to appeal to Brahma, the creator god in Hinduism. Brahma took his concerns seriously and told him to go home and be at peace, soon his worries would be put to rest.

Early next morning, Indra was greeted by a beautiful boy carrying the staff of a pilgrim. The boy said to him, "O King of Gods, I have heard of the mighty palace you are building. What further feats of engineering will Vishvakarman be expected to accomplish? O Highest of the Gods, no Indra before you has ever succeeded in completing such a palace as yours is to be."⁴

² Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2017), 21.

³ Ibid, 3-8.

⁴ Ibid, 5.

Full of the wine of triumph, the king of gods was entertained by the presumption that there were earlier versions of himself. With a fatherly smile he said, "Tell me child, are they many, the Indras you have heard of before me?"⁵

"O King of Gods, I have seen the dissolution of the universe. I have seen all perish, again and again. Everything then goes back into the fathomless, wild infinity of the ocean. Ah, who will count the universes that have passed away, or the creations that have risen afresh, again and again, from the formless abyss of the vast waters? Who will count the Indras in them all..."⁶

Just then a procession of ants made its appearance in the hall in a column four yards wide. The boy noted them and started to laugh. Indra suddenly realized that he was with one of the greatest gods of all, Brahma, and bowing before the boy god, asked to be told what the ants meant. Brahma answered, "Each ant was once an Indra. Like you, each by virtue of pious deeds once ascended to the rank of a king of gods. But now, through many rebirths, each has become again an ant."⁷

Indra realized his arrogance in building his many mansions and rebuilding and building again. He understood his place in the world and in time, time that is an ever flowing cycle of life and rebirth in which the universe is built and dissolves again and again. He stopped building, dwelled in peace and he took his place as a god among many gods and considered how he could distinguish himself by noticing what was needed in this time and becoming a meaningful part within it.

What would it be to realize that we are important, holy iterations of who we are, part of an epoch but that our worth and dignity is tied to connectivity as part of its very meaning and purpose? Not that we are at the center of the circle but that we are only part of a great circle that is formed and unformed with time, that comes and goes and comes and goes? What would that do to our sense of individuality and heroism? Might we learn that to become who we are we need to lift others up with us, recognize the time and place within which we travel and do our part to uplift it and the worth and dignity of those within it too?

As we return to Memorial Day, I wonder if we offered our young men and women more access to heroism within a larger cause that was yet rooted in connectivity *and* the inherent worth and dignity of all beings, without having to risk their lives on battlefields that may or may not be a just, more contexts in which they might be noticed as good and contributing to a common good that had room for us all, participating in an epoch as valuable meaning makers- what might shift? I know there will be wars again that must be fought, but might they be much fewer employing this ethic? I wonder if we could declare that we are all part of something that is sacred rather than that we are and/or our nation is the most sacred center of all that is-what might shift?

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid, 5, 6.

⁷ Ibid, 6-7.

Could we create meaning that offers heroism and community built on an understanding that we are special but not the only special people on this earth and perhaps not even unique in our specialness though still holy in our specialness; and that we are connected in ways that are timeless and eternal that make us beholden to one another beyond borders?

I have been reading about young people who are moving into these kinds of understandings, building these kinds of bridges. A group of youth in this country filed a constitutional climate lawsuit called *Juliana v. U.S.*, against the U.S. government in the U.S. District Court for the District of Oregon in 2015.⁸

Their complaint asserts that, through the government's affirmative actions that cause climate change, it has violated the youngest generation's constitutional rights to life and liberty as well as failed to protect essential public trust resources.

The fossil fuel industry initially intervened in the case as defendants, joining the U.S. government in trying to have the case dismissed. In April 2016, U.S. Magistrate Judge Thomas Coffin recommended denial of both of motions to dismiss. U.S. District Court Judge Ann Aiken upheld Judge Coffin's recommendation, with the issuance of an historic November 10, 2016 opinion. When the defendants sought an appeal of that order, Judge Aiken denied their motions and wrote in part "Exercising my 'reasoned judgment,' I have no doubt that the right to a climate system capable of sustaining human life is fundamental to a free and ordered society."⁹

The trial is set for October 29, 2018 for *Juliana v. United States*. The plaintiffs in this case are now 10-21 years old.

Is this an example of fighting for something beyond the concerns of a nation, climate change, that yet honors one's place in time and country? An example of showing up and fighting for what is right for self in community while honoring the worth and dignity of all people? Are the youth showing us the way?

Let's recognize individuals who gave their lives believing they were sacrificing for the good of their country. And let's honor those who come back after being willing to make those sacrifices by giving them proper VA benefits too so that they can heal and go on. Let's recognize those who see themselves as part of a collective and know whether the results of their actions come in this lifetime or another, what matters is the weight of their common courage, strength, hope and effort they give to the common good so that all people can live with more dignity. Let's also recognize those who stand and say no to conflict and war, who risk their own security for making of peace.

Ours is a story where god has many faces. The face of love and struggle. The face of hope and anguish. The face of known and unknown hope. A face that cannot be written and a face that changes as we change, a face that is not written in time for all time but that grows

⁸ <https://www.ourchildrenstrust.org/us/federal-lawsuit>

⁹ Ibid.

as we grow, that learns as we learn, that becomes as we become, that offers more as we offer more to one another.

This is the face of love and we know that there is so much more to learn. May we have to courage to learn it together.

Amen.