Memory, Memorial Day, and Monument Wars

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg
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Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Frederick, Maryland
fredericku u.org

Memorial Day is a holiday intended to honor and remember all who have died while serving in the U.S. Armed Forces. Last year on Memorial Day Weekend, I preached a sermon titled "**Becoming a Congregation Where All Bodies Count**" in which I invited us to reflect on the ways that we need to remember the full consequences of war, which includes both our fallen soldiers and the loss of human life on all sides, including civilian casualties. And recent headlines this past week about our broken Veterans health care system have served as a tragic reminder that the aftermath and responsibilities of war continue long after the last shot is fired.

For this Memorial Day, I would like to invite us to reflect from a different angle on how we are invited to remember our war dead. And given our geographical proximity to Washington, D.C., I want to consider how we are invited to remember the effects of war in such different ways by various monuments on the National Mall in D.C. In particular, I will focus on the four different ways we are invited to remember by the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and the World War II Memorial.

First, I invite you to begin to remember the various different times, occasions, and reasons when you have visited the National Mall as well as the various different circumstances in which you have visited those four spots in particular: the Washington Monument, the Lincoln

Memorial, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and the World War II Memorial. Can you picture yourself, in turn, standing in front of, around, or inside each of those monuments?

I've heard it said that the difference between a tourist and a pilgrim is that, "A tourist passes through a place, but a pilgrim allows a place to pass through them." Begin to consider the different ways you have experienced the monuments on the National Mall: as a tourist taking pictures, a commuter or exerciser passing through, and perhaps other times as a pilgrim to one or more of these sacred sites within the landscape of American Civil Religion.

And it is significant to consider that the National Mall as we known it today is quite recent in terms of our nation's history. The Washington Monument was not completed until 1885, two decades after the end of the Civil War and almost a century after our first president's death. And historian Kirk Savage in his important 2009 book ***Monument Wars*** notes that at that time in the late 19th-century, the National Mall was almost nothing like what we know today. Back then, the Mall was "a series of leisure zones offering meandering walks amid well-tended groves and gardens fringed by working operations such as railroad stations, greenhouses, arboretums, and even brothels." The clear cutting that created the space for the Mall as we know it today did not happen until the first third of the twentieth-century, from 1904 to 1935 (64). From our perspective in the early twenty-first century, the Mall's basic shape can seem "timeless," but Kirk writes that, "Even as late as the 1920s, when huge memorials to Ulysses Grant and Abraham Lincoln were finished at either end of the Mall's long east-west axis, the space in between still remained filled with flower gardens and old shade trees in curvilinear patterns," which lasted until the mid-1930s (7). My favorite monument — that of our Unitarian forebear Thomas Jefferson — wasn't completed until 1943 (244).

Turning to the first of our four focal monuments, I invite you to imagine yourself standing before the **Washington Monument**. Now, I don't intend to be disrespectful, but if you take a metaphorical step back, one question that might come to mind is what this towering blank white obelisk has to do with George Washington. The land on which it is built does not have any special significance to Washington's life or death (111). And you can probably guess what Freud or Jung would say: that archetypally speaking, it is no coincidence that our young nation chose to

commemorate its first President, the general who led us to victory in the War of Independence, with — *ahem* — a giant phallic symbol. But I don't want to dwell on that.

Of course, there are famous obelisks the Washington Monument was imitating from Egypt and Rome. But when considering the Washington Monument in its late nineteenth-century context, one would have expected the choice of monument to have been a giant statue of Washington or at least to have some famous quotations from the great general and first president. Instead, "The Washington Monument has no images, ornaments, or words anywhere on its exterior, except for the tiny inscriptions crediting the builders on the nine-inch-tall aluminum apex, 555 feet above the ground." The choice seems odd when you stop to think about it. And, indeed, the design might have been otherwise: "dozens of ideas and detailed designs were proposed, everything from a triumphal arch to a neo-Aztec tower" (107). And even after the Washington Monument was completed, some critics went so far as to proposed designs to use it as a base around which a more elaborate structure might be built, such as one that proposed to make it into richly-ornate, Italian-style Gothic bell tower (120-122).

Nevertheless, the final design as it stands is impressive. At 555-feet, it is taller than the Egyptian pyramids. And one reading of its meaning is that it honors Washington's memory through being a "a skyscraper monument to engineering skill and industrial power." And it is "radically out of scale with the picturesque landscape below it, and aesthetically jarring" (108). And although we know now that its height was topped five years later by the Eiffel Tower, which is 900 feet higher (133), the Washington Monument remains the tallest unreinforced masonry structure in the world (107).

Regarding the meaning of the giant obelisk, our Transcendentalist forebear Walt Whitman wrote a poem titled "**Washington's Monument, February, 1885**" the first line of which protests the design. Whitman writes, "Ah, not this marble, dead and cold" as his way of protesting the failure to capture essential element of Washington character — in Whitman's words: "Courage, alertness, patience, faith, the same—e'en in defeat / defeated not, the same." Whitman concludes that in regard to President Washington, "Wherever Freedom, pois'd by Toleration, sway'd by Law, / Stands or is rising thy true monument" (142).

But as you picture the Washington Monument in your mind, the first main point is that this towering blank white obelisk — that we know only through tradition to call the *Washington* Monument — reminds us to remember the life of George Washington: Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army during the American Revolutionary War, one of the Founding Fathers of the United States, first President of our nation. But there is no mention of all the soldiers or civilians that died under Washington's leadership and made his achievements possible. No monument would name an ordinary solider until the first World War I monument in 1924 (239).

Let us turn now in your mind's eye to the **Lincoln Memorial**. If you are particularly familiar with the Mall perhaps you can imagine yourself first with your back to the Lincoln Memorial, looking out over the reflecting pool to the Washington Momument in the distance. Then picture yourself turning 180 degrees to face the Lincoln Memorial, that image so familiar to us from the back of every penny.

And just as we went ahead and named the elephant in the room — that the Washington Monument, archetypally speaking is a phallic symbol — we should also name the obvious that the Lincoln Memorial is a neoclassic Greco-Roman Temple with Lincoln divinized at the center as the martyred hero who saved the union but paid with his life (5). Indeed, in oversized letters above the gigantic, seated Lincoln we read: "In this *temple* / as in the hearts of the people / for whom he saved the union / the memory of Abraham Lincoln / is Enshrined Forever" (220).

And as with the Washington Monument, there is no significance of this location to Lincoln's life or death: "The site of the Lincoln Memorial…did not even exist in Lincoln's lifetime; it sits…on mud dredged up from the Potomac River bottom in the late nineteenth century by the Army Corps of Engineers" (5). But the Lincoln Memorial has become a sacred space in our nation's civil religion.

And unlike the stark blankness of the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial commands us to pay attention to two seminal speeches, carved into the wall of the Temple in five-inch high, all-capitalized letters. And the earliest, the Gettysburg Address, does explicitly remind us to remember the sacrifice of Civil War soldiers. In President Lincoln's words:

> It is for us the living…to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced….. that we here highly resolve

> that these dead shall not have died in vain — that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom —and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Those words point beyond President Lincoln to remind us to remember the sacrifice of lives made first in the Revolutionary War and then in the Civil War for freedom, equality, and democracy.

It is also worth noting, regarding the Lincoln Memorial, that, "The Mall designers thought they had created a vast space of national unity in which any expression of political or social differences would be out of place." But, as we know — from the Civil Rights Movement to Vietnam War protests, and from the Million Man March to Promise Keepers to Jon Stewart's "Rally for Sanity" — the Mall has become "the nation's premier setting of political assembly and protest" (252).

I know that some of you have vivid memories of being swept up amidst the teeming masses in that stretch of the mall that runs from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to the Washington Monument — or from the Washington Monument to the Capitol. But now I want to invite you to recall a very difference experience: visiting the **Vietnam Veterans Memorial**. The giant scale and vast open spaces around the Washington Monument and Lincoln Memorial make them both "tourist magnets" and ripe for use in political protests. But the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is almost the exact opposite. Instead of towering, white, majestic stone we find an intimate setting built of dark reflective stone, partially sunken below ground (269). Instead of the five-inch high lettering of the Lincoln Memorial which forces you to stand at a distance, the 5/8ths-of-an-inch-high letters on the Vietnam Memorial demands that you move close, see your own reflection in the polished granite, and trace your hands over the names of these lost lives (272-273). "Some relatives of the dead…have said that they feel the presence of their lost loved ones more at the wall than at the actual grave" (275). Jung would say that the architecture of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial — dark, reflective, interactive, intimate, below ground level — is a trigger inviting unconscious, repressed feelings about the war to emerge, be confronted and hopefully begin to be healed.

And in contrast to the Washington Monument with invites us, for the most part, to remember only the great leader — General Washington, President Washington — or the Lincoln Memorial which (in the words of the Gettysburg Address) invites us to remember the war dead generally, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial "was the first — and still is the only — war memorial in the capital and the nation that claims to include the names of all the U.S dead" (266). And there is "nothing to identify them as heroes who have fought to uphold national and cultural ideals" (276). Instead, as pilgrims to this monument, we are confronted with the simple, stark reality of remembering war's high cost of human life.

The paradigm shift is similar to the difference of reading history as it is often told (focusing on individuals and leaders) in contrast to Howard Zinn's powerful book *The People's History of the United States*, which tells "America's story from the power of view — and in the words of — America's women, factory workers, African Americans, Native Americans, working poor, and immigrant laborers." And there are unfortunately tragic gaps even in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial: "only those U.S. soldiers who died from hostilities or accidents in the combat zone have their names engraved on the wall; soldiers who died from exposure to Agent Orange or from suicide do not" (280).

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial is so different that it is surprising in some ways that it was ever built. And it is fascinating that with the World War II Memorial, we get what can be see as an overcompensation to balance the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. In contrast to the Washington Monument, which lacks any inscription even of the first President's name, the WWII Memorial has at its entrance a "prominent inscription of the then sitting president George W. Bush's name…more conspicuous than on any previous monument in Washington (297). In the words of Savage:

> The [WWII] Memorial is a rejoinder particularly to Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial — white granite instead of black, plaza instead of park, loud instead of hushed, overflowing with words and images instead of stripped down and minimalist. Whereas the VVM lists the names of the dead, the WWII Memorial lists names and places of battle. Although both memorials feature walls below grade that honor the war's dead, the WWII "Wall of Freedom" (with a field of

> more than four thousand gold stars, each one representing one hundred dead) is inaccessible, behind a semicircular pool and out of reach. Personal offerings — still an important aspect of the experience at theVVM — are impossible at the wall of stars and discourages elsewhere at the monument. The VVM avoided rendering final judgment on the war; the WWII Memorial splashes its messages of righteous force and moral triumph from one end of the space to the other. The VVM suggested the limits of American military power; the WWII Memorial nostalgically celebrates the nation's military supremacy. The WWII Memorial is decidedly not a psychological space, not a place for reflection and reckoning. The roar of the fountain fills the space, and the inscriptions trumpet their messages of determination and rectitude. (298)

There is much more to be said about other monuments on the mall as well as events in our nation's history that we have not memorialized (282-295) — as well as about the new **9/11 Memorial** in New York City.

For now, on the Memorial Day Weekend, I invite you to consider planning a pilgrimage sometime in the next few months to the National Mall. Experiment with what it feels like to try to visit that the mall again as if for the first time. Don't just pass through the place as a tourist; allow the place to pass through you. But don't stop there. Take a step back and also consider at each point how the monuments on the National Mall are inviting you individually (and us collectively) to remember — as well as how you and we perhaps *want* and *need* to remember our nation's history in ways different than the moments sometimes allow.

I will conclude with this Memorial Day meditation from the late William Sloan Coffin, former minister at the historic Riverside Church in New York City:

> Grant…that they may not have died in vain. May we draw new vigor from past tragedy. Buttress our instincts for peace, sorely beleaguered. Save us from justifications invented to make us look noble, grand and righteous and from blanket solutions to messy, detailed problems. Give us the vision to see that those nations that gave the most to their generals and least to their poor were…to fall.

Most of all, give us the vision to see that the world is now too dangerous for anything but truth, too small for anything but love.…

For Further Study

"The Right of Conscience and the Crystallization of Conscience," available at http://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2014/06/the-right-of-conscience-and-the-crystallization-of-conscience/