

The Good Memories
Roger Fritts
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Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church
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When I look at our memory wall and I see Anita Lay's name, I am reminded of a story. For many years before her death in 2003, Anita was one of our volunteer receptionists at church during the week. One weekday back in 1992 Anita was answering the church phone. Rev. Ed Harris was the interim minister at the church. I had not yet arrived to serve this congregation. Ed is a large, portly, heavysset, stout man. He left the church office for an appointment to meet someone at Borders bookstore. The church phone rang. Anita answered. The caller said, "I have an appointment to meet Rev. Harris over here at the bookstore. However, I have never met Rev. Harris, and I don't know what he looks like. Could you describe him for me?"

Anita said, "He looks like the Pillsbury doughboy."

The caller said. "Okay, I see him."

When I passed Anita answering the phone in the church, I always wondered how she might describe me to a stranger.

This is a good memory. It comes to mind when I look at the names on our memory wall.

The wall was completed in 1998. It is, in my completely objective opinion, one of the most beautiful church memory gardens I have ever seen. The credit for this goes in large part to one of our members, Diane Seiffert, a landscape architect who played a big role in the design.

At the end of the worship service on this Sunday for 11 years we have had a tradition of dedicating the new plaques that we place on the wall. On the wall there are now 193 names. I have personal memories, stories, about many of these people. Good memories. Consider, for example, Allen Dittmann.

Allen died in 1995. A few months before he died I was doing a service on the 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War and I asked Allen to write me an account of his experiences in Italy that I could use in the worship service. Now when I see Allen's name on the wall, I think of the stories he told me. Allen wrote, about the winter of 1944-45:

My job was in the Division Clearing Station, the first medical unit capable of keeping patients for up to 3 days. And the sub-part of the station I was attached to took care of psychiatric casualties, diagnosed "Exhaustion." They certainly were exhausted in the common meaning of the term, since living through the winter in fox holes and bombed-out farm buildings was wearing at best. I was lucky, in that we were living in a village school house that was only partially damaged.

Two features stand out in my memory. One I can't figure with the season: camped in farm land we would forage for corn growing in the fields—corn in April 1945? We

used sterilizers heated by a pair of Coleman stove units to heat up the water, then put the just-picked ears into the boiling water. Ideal!

The other was the experience of my two partners of the psychiatric unit and me personally liberating a small walled city by the name of Cittadella. It was perfectly round with gates through the wall in the four directions. The citizens eyed us with some suspicion, but finally figured we weren't Germans in disguise when they inspected our boots and saw they were made of real leather. The wine, hidden away from the Germans in secret cellars, flowed . . . like wine. It was a great time.

Now I look at Allen's name and think of him as a 23-year-old soldier in Italy, personally liberating a small Italian city. The good memories are helpful companions; they are friendly voices in my head that give my own life perspective.

Win DuMars died in 2000. She also shared with me her memories of the Second World War. She wrote to me:

The weekend before the Japanese cease fire, my sister-in-law and I went to New York City to see a show and visit my folks, events which were few and far between during WWII. Everywhere there were rumors of the about-to-be announced cease fire, and to protect property owners from the enthusiasm of the anticipated crowd in Times Square, just about every store front and similar buildings was being boarded up. There was a great air of excitement all about us. We waited around Times Square as long as we could, hoping to witness what was sure to be a great event.

Such was not to happen quite yet, so we went on our way. But on Monday as we headed back toward Washington, we stopped off in Baltimore to see some relatives. Just as we were greeted by our waiting cousin in the railroad station, there was an announcement over the loud speakers that the cease fire had come. What joy! What noise! But what I have remembered best from that moment was the complete relaxation on the face of our cousin, and the broad smile that replaced the strain. You see, he was an executive officer on an ammunition ship of the U.S. Navy, only temporarily assigned to relatively safe Baltimore where the ship was down for repairs after prolonged service in the Pacific. It meant a great deal to me to share that moment with him.

I can see Win's face as I remember that story.

I am drawn to the names of clergy on the wall. For example, there is the name of Rev. Andrew Kuroda, who died in 1997. I remember that while living in Oregon in 1942 Andrew and his Japanese-American family were forcibly removed to a relocation camp in Newell, California. In the camp when Andrew agreed to take a pledge of allegiance to America, five men whose loyalty remained with Japan beat him up. As a result he and his family were transferred to a relocation center in Colorado. Eventually, at the Army's request, Andrew became a Japanese language instructor at the Army Language School. His final military assignment was as a member of the United States Strategic Bombing Survey, working in Washington and Japan, which surveyed the morale of the Japanese whose lives had been affected by the dropping of the two atomic bombs.

I see his name on the wall and I remember that after the war Andrew returned to Washington to work at the Library of Congress, where he eventually became head of the Japanese section, and started attending All Souls Unitarian Church. In 1962 he became the first Japanese-American Unitarian Universalist minister, and he founded a Japanese-American Unitarian Universalist Church in Washington, which continued until 1976. When I see Andrew's name on the wall, I remember a quiet, gentle, private, and thoughtful colleague, who believed deeply in the value of Unitarian Universalism. My memory of Andrew inspires me to pursue his dream of a truly universal religion that reaches out to other cultures. The lives of loved ones continue in us, in our good memories of their lives.

Some of the names on our wall are those of young people. Merit Clark Kimball died in 1998 at the age of 42 from breast cancer. When I see her name on our wall I have a picture in my mind of a smart, assertive, savvy, handsome woman standing on the lawn of the White House at the signing ceremony for the Kennedy-Kassebaum health care reform bill of 1996. I watched a video recording of the signing ceremony. Merit stood with President Clinton, Hillary Clinton, Senator Edward Kennedy and Senator Nancy Kassebaum. Merit spoke eloquently of how personal the problem of health care had become for her when she was diagnosed with breast cancer. It is a memory of obligation, suggesting that we who are alive today have a responsibility to continue Merit's good work.

Joe Kalbacher died in 2001. A former priest, Joe had grown out of the theologies and rituals of the Episcopal Church and become an accountant and a Unitarian Universalist. When I see his name on the wall I remember his strong support of my own ministry. And I remember his kindness to everyone. Back before we could block phone calls from people trying to sell us things, all of us would receive annoying sales calls several times a day. Most of us would just hang up. But when I see Joe's name on the wall, I remember that he had a different approach. When he answered the phone and a salesperson was on the line, he always politely listened to the sales pitch. No matter who it was, whether it was someone asking him to buy investments in Canada, or men from India claiming to be stockbrokers, he was always polite. At the end he always politely refused the offer. And he always ended the conversation by saying to the salesperson "thank you for calling."

I look at Joe's name and I recall that he had a quote over his desk that he often looked at. This is the quote: "Remember that when you leave this earth, you can take with you nothing that you have received—only what you have given: a full heart enriched by love, sacrifice and courage." The names on the wall give a wider view to the daily worries and complaints of life.

I see Ilse Fleischman's name. She died in 2002 after teaching children in our religious education program for 42 years. I remember her story about leaving Vienna, Austria in 1938. She was 16 years old. As a Jewish teenager she saw the crackdown. Places where as a child she had been able to go to swim were now marked "no Jews allowed." She told me that members of her extended family held conversations about what to do. Should we stay or should we go? One uncle and aunt decided that they would stay, and Ilse's family stored most of their valuables in the uncle's home. Her father got tickets on a flight to London. Carrying very little luggage, they flew out of Vienna. It turned out to be the last flight out of Vienna. After they departed the Nazis closed the airport. When she went back to visit after the Second World War, the home where her parents had stored their valuables was gone, destroyed by a bomb.

I remember Ilse's story of how her parents reacted to racism. After they finally were able to move from London to the United States, they took a vacation trip on a bus to see the Shenandoah National Park. They were shocked and angered when they discovered that African-Americans, persons of color, were required to ride in the back of the bus.

In addition to teaching in our religious education program, Ilse taught English as a second language, having herself learned English when she was a young adult, and identifying with those who were new arrivals to our country. In this spirit she approached our sexton Pedro and voluntarily gave him lessons in English.

When I officiate at memorial services I often say these words. "When we gather here in this formal way, we feel a need, not only to mourn, but also to recall, honor and celebrate." And then we share the accomplishments and the funny stories, and we laugh and smile. The good memories.

Anita said, "He looks like the Pillsbury doughboy."

Allen said "The wine, hidden away from the Germans in secret cellars, flowed . . . like wine."

Win said "What I have remembered best from that moment in August 1945 was the complete relaxation on the face of our cousin, an executive officer on an ammunition ship."

Andrew said "I cannot believe that truth can be shut up in the narrow confines of any system of thought. That is why I have decided to become a Unitarian."

Merit spoke eloquently of how the problem of health insurance had become personal for her when she was diagnosed with breast cancer.

Joe kept these words above his desk: "Remember that when you leave this earth, you can take with you nothing that you have received—only what you have given: a full heart enriched by love, sacrifice and courage."

Ilse said "Pedro, let me help you learn a little English."

Many names are on our wall. Each one has a story, each one inspires good memories in those who knew them.

Memorial Day was first enacted to honor Union soldiers of the American Civil War, celebrated near the day of reunification after the Civil War. It was expanded after World War I. Here at Cedar Lane we honor all those who have died.

Yet in general there is a nonchalant observance of the day. Instead of recalling those who've gone before us, people go to the beach, open their cabins, plant a garden, clean the garage, plan a picnic, or watch a car race.

I am all in favor of recreational activities this weekend. But it is also good to take a few minutes to celebrate and to be inspired again by the work of all the good people who have gone before us. So,

while I make my strawberry pie with Pillsbury dough, I will think fondly of Anita. And when I lift a glass of Italian wine I will remember my friend Allen.

Enjoy the holiday. Enjoy life. And celebrate those who came before us.