

Op-Ed: On Memorial Day, recognizing that some things are still worth dying for

By John F. Gilligan

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“What are we? Where did we come from? Where are we going?” Auguste Gauguin entitled his most famous painting in 1897 with these questions. It was a novel and shocking work of art.

On the other hand, the questions themselves have been haunting mankind since the emergence of consciousness. Memorial Day rituals trigger disturbing personal questions about our own lives and the life of the nation: Who am I? Who are we as a people? What does it mean to be an American?

But who likes to think about these things? Enjoy the day, have a burger, a beer or two and relax. Tomorrow, it’s back to work. Why kill your day by trudging out to some cemetery or a Memorial Day ceremony?

Yet there’s a great price to pay for an unreflective nation. If the life of America is only about things and entertainment, we are doomed. This is what our enemies see: a purposeless and superficial America. They lick their chops while waiting to strike our playgrounds.

Humans need rites and rituals as much as bread and water to live. Memorial Day is that sacred day of national life. It feeds our spirits and glues us together in a common identity.

The word sacred is used in its fullest sense: reverence, inviolable, holy and sacrosanct. It’s a place, object, event or day set off for veneration. So we don’t step on graves, we walk around them. We kneel, pray, set flowers and insert flags or stand for the Pledge of Allegiance and the singing of the National Anthem.

These are rituals — the things we do — that are associated with sacred rites and never with the profane. Memorial Day is a national rite. It’s governed by the sentiments of love, affection and care. It nourishes the American soul, strengthens our identity and rejuvenates apathetic and feeble patriotism.

There's nothing abstract or cerebral in these rituals; they're loaded with passion. Memories are recalled of lives once lived and the heart is stirred. There may be no laws against stepping on a grave or burning the flag, but when someone does it's experienced as a personal assault as well as one against the nation.

Memorial Day is like a funeral. No one is ever eager to attend, but we do so out of love, duty and respect. Don't those who gave their lives that this nation might live deserve some remembrance?

Of course, yet in reality they don't need us. It's us who need them.

They serve as inspirations and models of a purposeful life: commitment, steadfastness, grit and courage in the face of death itself. There are things worth dying for. And a nation without a clue as to what they may be is on a slope to extinction.

The voices of the past remind us of the need for an ordered life. Yet we live in an increasingly fragmented if not atomized society. All of which makes the current sociopolitical culture seem surreal.

Memorial Day is a wake-up call from the beyond. It reminds us that "We the People of the United States ... have established" a Constitution for our life in common. We have joined together for a six-fold purpose: "to form a more perfect union, to institute justice, to insure domestic tranquility, to provide for the common defense, to promote the common welfare, and to secure the blessing of liberty for ourselves and our posterity."

But this takes work, locally and together. Making America is always a product of blood, sweat and tears. It's what they who lie in the sacred grounds across the nation have died for.

So here's the Memorial Day question: Is this our purpose too and is it still worth dying for?

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