

The Processes and Purposes of Goodness
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North Universalist Chapel Society

Arriving at the Orpheum in Boston a few hours before things get started, you can enter without a ticket...which is a bit of a strange sensation. There were no lines, no merchandise, no concession stands and no security. There were no great crowds of fans who had travelled from all over the city or who had driven from all over the state or who had come from all over New England to see and hear the likes of Bob Dylan and Joni Mitchell, James Taylor and Robbie Robertson and The Band, the Allman Brothers, the Doobie Brothers, Joan Baez...and so many more. Tori Amos was playing The Orpheum that night but at 11:15am, two hours after the morning rush had end and almost an hour before the lunch crowd filled the downtown streets again, there were so few people around in the theater that had always been so crowded. I mean who goes to The Orpheum when there is no concert to enjoy?

I'll tell you who goes. The Roadies do...and all of the technical folks who make that magic happen every night so seamlessly. The lighting people and the stagehands, the sound engineers and the videographers... All the folks who clean the theater and keep it safe for us... The often forgotten and the barely remembered, the rarely revered and the taken-for-granted. They are heroes, really, privately building the scaffold of public dreams...because when the crowds arrive and the lights fire up and the sound goes live and the concert starts, we need them to have done their job in time and perfectly. Their precious to us and, for the most part, we don't even know them.

Jackson Browne wrote a song about these unsung heroes. He played the Orpheum, himself, some years ago, in 2008. He started that show with a song called Boulevard and he ended the night with his all-time classic, Running on Empty. He played Doctor, My Eyes in the middle of things and his encore was a song called I Am a Patriot

And I ain't no Communist and I ain't no Capitalist
And I ain't no Socialist and I ain't no Imperialist
And I ain't no Democrat so I ain't no Republican
I only know one party and it is freedom
I am a patriot and I love my country
Because my county is all I know
And the river opens for the righteous...someday

It's a powerful song...but the one that he wrote for the unsung heroes of the theater was called The Load Out. He wrote,

Now the seats are all empty
Let the roadies take the stage
They pack it up and they tear it down
They're the first to come and last to leave
Working for that minimum wage

They'll set it up in another town

Now roll them cases out and lift them amps
And haul them trusses down and get 'em up them ramps
'Cause when it comes to moving me
You know you guys are the champs
But when that last guitar's been packed away
You know that I still wanna play
So just make sure you got it all set to go
Before you come for my piano

Arriving at the Orpheum in Boston a few hours before things get started, these are the people that you meet. Good people.

I watched them as they worked, preparing the stage which was to be our chancel, preparing the stage for the event that was to come—placing the lectern in the center of things, flanked by speakers that had power to spare and getting the lighting just right and cleaning everything.

You know, they sound checked the empty theater with the Gettysburg Address. There was no, “Check, one, two...” business with these guys. They knew exactly what they were doing. They did not fill that beautiful and well-worn theater with the sounds of meaninglessness. They filled it with the words of Lincoln.

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men [all people] are created equal.

And they didn't stop there. They did the whole thing...from memory.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.

They did it all, ending with these words, of course...

The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- 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.

Abraham Lincoln—November 19th of 1863. Those words echo freshly in the Orpheum in Boston. There is such history there. William Lloyd Garrison was there...as was Harriet Beecher Stowe. Frederick Douglass was there back in 1863...when the Orpheum Theater was just eleven years old.

There's probably a plaque or a statue or a monument somewhere commemorating this history—Boston hosts and boasts so very much of it—but I'm not sure where something like that would be. If I still lived there, I might know...or at least, I could ask around and go looking for it.

There is a monument on the South Royalton Green that stands in honor of the many soldiers, Vermonters, who fought in the Civil War. A lone soldier rests his rifle on the ground before him—holding it by the barrel and looking out at the mountains as the morning sun gathers on the right side of his face. The base of the monument reads:

“A TRIBUTE TO THE BOYS WHO SERVED IN THE CIVIL WAR, 1861-1865”

More than 34,000 Vermonters served the Union war effort. Additionally, more than 28,000 Vermonters served in a voluntary capacity. Our brave, little state fielded 17 infantry regiments, 1 cavalry regiment, 3 light artillery batteries, 1 heavy artillery company, 3 companies of sharpshooters, and 2 companies of frontier cavalry.¹

In all, 1,832 soldiers were killed or mortally wounded in battle and another 3,362 soldiers died of disease, imprisonment or other causes. Their full measure of devotion is still with us—informing us, protecting, insuring us, ennobling us. Of course, we don't grieve these losses as we once did—time does afford us some grace—but these losses do still heavy our hearts that we could not find a more peaceful resolution in the making of our more perfect union.

We did it with guns back then so we could do it with flowers today. Children play around this monument now, peering around its corners in games of freeze-tag and hide-and-seek. We all get one pass in life, one arc of time to make our journey. We choose paths of joy and pain. That part's up to us. As for the meaning of our freedom...its value... We shape the ends of that...but it's presence in our lives is something of a gift from those who came before.

Children play around the Civil War monument in South Royalton...and that seems to make good sense on this Memorial Day. It seems healthy to me somehow...because there's a way we do things around here...an American way and Memorial Day is an important part of this. It is a deeply important part.

Just how important, I didn't realize...not until I did some digging. I came across the words of David Ferriero. He's now the Archivist of the United States. When I met him in North Carolina, he was the head of the Perkins Library at Duke University and a colleague. I thought that his title was impressive but he's been promoted even further. He's in the nation's capitol now. I recently learned from him [and this, I quote] that...

Across the street from the National Archives Building in Washington, D.C. stands a monument to the Grand Army of the Republic (the GAR), the most important American veterans association of the 19th century. Memorial Day owes its origins to the GAR.²

I didn't know that. I read what can be described as the founding document of this holiday that we recognize. The document is called the Memorial Day Order and it was penned by John A. Logan. At the GAR, he was the Commander in Chief. On May the 5th in 1868, he wrote,

The 30th day of May, 1868 is designated for the purpose of strewing with flowers or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion, and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village, and hamlet churchyard in the land. In this observance no form or ceremony is prescribed, but posts and comrades will in their own way arrange such fitting services and testimonials of respect as circumstances may permit.

We are organized...for the purpose..."of preserving and strengthening those kind and fraternal feelings which have bound together the soldiers, sailors and marines who united to suppress the late rebellion." What can aid more to assure this result than by cherishing tenderly the memory of our heroic dead who made their breasts a barricade between our country and its foes?³

They made their breasts a barricade.

Their soldier lives were the reveille of freedom to a race in chains and their deaths the tattoo of rebellious tyranny in arms. We should guard their graves with sacred vigilance. [] Let no wanton foot tread rudely on such hallowed grounds. Let pleasant paths invite the coming and going of reverent visitors and fond mourners. Let no vandalism of avarice or neglect, no ravages of time, testify to the present or to the coming generations that we have forgotten, as a people, the cost of a free and undivided republic.⁴

We have not forgotten. We, as a people, remember. We do the opposite of forgetting. We memorialize. We commemorate. We actively honor the lives of those who came before.

But how do we do that now...and why should we try to do that today...in the tragic and too-soon aftermaths of Buffalo and Uvalde, tragedies that seem to me to be spectacularly unamerican?

[Laura Foley begins walking to J and C mic] You know, years ago, back in 1989, this pretty embarrassing thing happened to President George Herbert Walker Bush. In the words of the New York Times,

...networks covering the American invasion of Panama showed split-screen images: On one side, a military honor guard unloading coffins at Dover Air Force Base; on the other, a news conference where Bush, a veteran of World War II, was joking with reporters.⁵

The juxtaposition was embarrassing. So, a policy went into place. The Department of Defense instituted a ban against photographing flag-draped coffins returning from war. That ban was "prompted by what was perceived to be an inappropriate response to the homecoming of fallen soldiers" and the ban lasted for 19 years until Obama lifted it in 2009...but in those 19 years, we weakened that habit of honoring those we've lost. We learned to turn our eyes away. And yet, in those same years, we were forced to do otherwise. Oklahoma City forced us not to look away in 1995. Columbine did and Sandy Hook in Newtown... They forced us not to look away back then, just as Buffalo, New York and Uvalde, Texas are forcing us not to look away

right now. These tragedies are asking us to grow and squarely face ourselves...maturely face ourselves today. These impossibly regular tragedies are compelling us, imploring us to dream a way to end the days of violence. In a poem entitled "Tulips," the artist writes,

Tulips

The tulips keep blooming
on their dead stems
through the news,
as a schoolgirl's blood pools
beneath a desk,
her body cooling as you turn
to the orange-red orbs
bending toward you,
with beauty that commands
attention, for soon,
their stems will droop,
petals fall like minutes—
even now you may see
one letting go, wafting down
to a desk's sunlit surface
in time to catch your glance—
just as you once saw an apple
bathing in space, suspended from a limb,
before the hollow thud it made in meeting
its resting place among
drying leaves and grass
already merging with earth.
The tulips will not meld with the desk;
their final rest will take place
on the compost heap
of your garden's history—
but now you force yourself
to stay in the presence
of their unbearable tenderness
while they egress, caught
by gravity—but one, still so young,
translucent sunlight balloons her scarlet gown
and it's up to you
to appreciate her yellow depths
inside the bright circle,
black-tipped, gold stamens
rising like antennae,
bearing seeds of future beauty,
and through its nave,
the prism of a yellow sun,

celestial play of light and shade,
reflected by water
in the tall glass vase,
and the school girl's spirit—
for surely she has left that body,
discarded on the tiled floor—
soars through the tulips,
and now, by God, she's part of you.

The artist, of course, is Laura Foley. The fault-lines run through our very hearts.

So terribly, it falls as true that we must force ourselves—sorrowfully and unflinchingly—to stay in the presence of their unbearable tenderness...and breathe deeply, calling back the sacred...calling back the sacred in all things.

Arriving at the Orpheum in Boston a few hours before things get started, you have time enough to walk over to the Common, time enough to walk over its grasses and by its trees and time enough to come upon a view of the great, State House with its gold dome shining ostentatiously. And within its chambers, between the years 2007 and 2015, Deval Patrick, an African American man, governed the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

In March of this year, the former Governor gave a TED Talk that was quite impressive. He titled it provocatively. He called it "A Different Understanding of American Patriotism." He spoke without notes and he began casually. He said, Listen, I'm worried about our democracy. Nowadays, we have leaders who use division itself as a political tool. They downplay or even encourage, in some cases, a deadly assault to overturn an election. And a bunch of them are working really hard to make it harder to vote.

This was two months before we learned of the Supreme Court challenge to Roe v. Wade, which would have had an impact on the character but not the content of his presentation. Continuing, he said,

The retreat from these processes of democracy—you know, ballot access, legislative debate, judicial review—they are worrisome enough. But what's even more concerning to me is the retreat from the purposes of democracy. These old-fashioned notions of government of, by and for the people. The rule of law as superior to the rule of any one personality. Liberty and justice for all.

The retreat from the processes is one thing. The retreat from the purposes is another. Deval Patrick is deeply worried, so much so that he is concerned that the very model for American democracy, the model we cherish, might be "up for grabs." He said, "I'm worried, not just as a lawyer or a former public official, but also and mainly as a patriot." This is interesting because, as he explains,

...patriotism for Black Americans is tricky. It's tricky to love a country that doesn't always love you back. I think of the Black men who set off to fight for freedom in the world wars and then came home to be denied those very freedoms. Some of them

lynched while wearing their military uniforms. I think of the Black laborers who built great public universities, whose doors were closed to them.

This was the case also at a private university, at Duke, where David Ferriero and I used to be employed. In fact, the architect who designed the West Campus was an African American man named Julian Abele. Story has it that after West Campus was built according to his design, he visited without announcing his presence (which he feared would not be welcome).

Patriotism is strange these days. It got strange after 2001 and it got stranger during the Black Lives Matter campaigns which just seemed so baffling and unnecessary. It got stranger still with Charlottesville and then, with COVID-19 and the insurrection on the 6th of January. Patrick said,

I don't know when patriotism turned into...lapel pins and flyovers and silly arguments about pro football players taking a knee. My love of country is about national aspiration. America is the only nation in human history organized not by geography or a common culture or language or religion or even race, but by a handful of civic ideals. And we've come to define those ideals over time and through struggle as equality, opportunity and fair play. Why? Because that's what makes freedom possible. [] That's the America that makes me and countless other men and women from every race and background a patriot.

[] Do you know those 'Where were you?' games? "Where were you when John F. Kennedy was killed?" or "Where were you when Martin Luther King was assassinated?" or "Where were you when O.J. Simpson was in the Bronco with the LAPD 'chasing' him?" or "Where were you when 9/11 happened?" Well, here's one for you! Where were you on February 22, 1980...when the U.S. hockey team beat the Soviet Union "in one of the most dramatic upsets in Olympic history"? We were the underdog—we were college players, mostly—but we went on to win. We were victorious over the four-time, gold-medal-winning team from behind the Iron Curtain at the XIII Olympic Winter Games in Lake Placid, New York.

I was 15 years old and had boyishly boasted my way for seven hours on the road-trip from New Jersey up to New Hampshire for a ski weekend with family friends. I was cocky. I figured I had mastered most all of the slopes in the Poconos, north of Philadelphia. How different could it be in the mountains of New Hampshire? Obviously, I learned the answer to that question and my ego has never been the same. But after those two sets of bruising—those to my body and those to my pride—we all sat down around the woodstove and we watched the hockey game. I still remember how joyful I was. I remember how proud I felt. I remember how passionately I sang at the awards ceremony...

Oh, say, does that star-spangled banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?

What a question. I understand what Patrick Deval is saying about how patriotism is complex...especially with everything that's going on these days but it was also rather simple to that 14-year-old boy...and, in many ways, it continues to be simple...for the 14-year-old boy inside this 57-year-old man.

I wonder if it was the same for Deval Patrick. He was 23 when the U.S. Hockey Team won the gold in 1980. I wonder if it was the same for some of you...for those of you who are grey enough—and amazing enough—to have been around back in 1980. Deval Patrick said something that I liked, that was insightful and grounding. He said that...

...the founders, for all their flaws, designed America to be a nation of values...a country with a conscience. And we've struggled with and against that conscience from the start. But true patriots understand, given that context, that America cannot be great without also being good. So when we cage refugee children to discourage their parents from seeking sanctuary here, true patriots know we cannot be great without being good. When bullets fly in houses of worship or in schools or in nightclubs or in grocery stores, and our leaders choose the slogans of the gun lobby over the lives of innocents, patriots know we cannot be great without being good.

He said that,

Patriotism demands more than ceremony and sanctimony. It's about more than what you say you believe. It's about living the values of equality, opportunity and fair play.

It is absolutely incredulous to him—just as it is to me—that things have become so completely inverted in our time, with all of our hyperpartisanship and our entrenched unwillingness to compromise. He asked,

When did we learn to shout our anger and to whisper our kindness? It's completely upside down. I don't know if that's the reality TV culture we live in or what, but it's totally backwards. It's time we learned again to shout kindness, to shout compassion, to shout justice. That's the purpose of American democracy and the source of our greatness.

And he closes by saying,

From all those lawyers who showed up at polling places in 2020 or at airports after the so-called Muslim ban, demanding respect for the rule of law. Black Lives Matter. Time's Up. Black Girl Magic. Occupy Wall Street, Families Belong Together. At any given time on any given issue, they may make any one of us uncomfortable. But they have taken to the legislatures, to the ballot boxes, to the courtrooms and peacefully to the streets to lay claim to their democracy, its purpose as well as its processes, and ultimately to affirm the American conscience. They are shouting kindness. If American-style democracy is to have a chance, more of us had better put our own cynicism down, summon up our own patriotism and join them.

Arriving at the Orpheum in Boston a few hours before things get started, you can enter without a ticket...which is a bit of a strange sensation. There are no lines, no merchandise, no concession stands and no security. There are no long lines of fans. There is just you and there is just me and there's this fragile dream we share, this fragile dream that we've inherited, this fragile dream of which we are only temporary stewards. During this Memorial Day weekend, how will we nurture our

dream? How will we honor those who gave their lives in defense of it, those who made their breasts a barricade between our country and its foes? How will we strew with flowers the memory of those who are just as beautiful as we are?

In these good days, these warm days, may we give and take the blessings of this, our country and our home...and may we spread its light like blazes across the sky.

May it be so. Blessed be and amen.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vermont_in_the_American_Civil_War#:~:text=More%20than%2028%2C100%20Vermonters%20served,2%20companies%20of%20frontier%20cavalry.

² <https://www.archives.gov/news/topics/memorial-day>

³ <https://www.cem.va.gov/history/memdayorder.asp>

⁴ <https://www.cem.va.gov/history/memdayorder.asp>

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/14/magazine/media-bodies-censorship.html>