

We Remember Them
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UUMSB

Reading: Remembering Well - By Paul S Sawyer

The first time I ever played “Taps” was at summer camp when I was ten years old. That was the year I started playing trumpet, so I can only imagine how it sounded. I know there was no way that I could have hit the high note near the end.

The first time I played Taps in honor of those who died was in high school, when I was contacted by the local Legion commander. He asked if I would mind occasionally being called on to play Taps at graveside services for veterans. I agreed.

For the next couple of years, when there was a need, I would take my place with the Legion honor guard, wait for the three volleys of shots to ring out, and play the simple 24 notes of Taps as clearly and as best I could.

Each time, the Legion commander would quietly slip me a ten dollar bill — and that’s about all that Taps meant to me, for a while: it was easy to do, it got me out of school, and I earned a little money.

And then one day that changed.

The man I was called upon to play for that day was the father of one of my Boy Scout leaders. Back then, like most of the adults I knew, I thought my assistant scoutmaster was pretty old. But his father was a World War II veteran, so now, thinking back, that means that both my leader and his father were relatively young—too young—for their places there that morning, as the honored dead and as the grieving son.

That day, as I began to play Taps, this man—who I knew as wise, and kind, and relatively hard in the Old Boy, Boy Scout, wilderness leader sort of way— fell to his knees, overwhelmed with tears.

I’m not sure how I made it through the whole piece that day, but after that I thought I might never be able to play Taps again.

Today, whether I’m playing it or hearing it, Taps means something close to what it once meant, to the reasons for which it was written and originally used.

Once upon a time, Taps was a signal that the camp was relatively safe. It meant that you were not under siege, or under attack of any kind. It meant that you were reasonably sure that there were no enemy soldiers to worry about at least a bugle call’s distance away.

To a whole camp of soldiers, the notes of Taps meant that, unless you were on duty, you could close your eyes and you could sleep in peace.

I didn't know that story, or that sentiment all those years ago, when I played Taps for pocket money in the local cemetery. But in that meaning of Taps, something speaks to me in my heart and soul about dying, and, for those of us who remain, about remembering well.

Sermon:

In high school I was in the marching band, and we marched in Memorial Day parades each year. In a parade, there's lots of noise. Bands, bagpipes, fire trucks, folks yelling, and then we would arrive at the war memorial on the town green. I remember the elderly veterans managing the event, as 120 high school kids, melting in hot wool uniforms, stood at attention, and listened to a single trumpet, one of our friends, sounding Taps. It was a more powerful call to attention for me than any rifle shot, or yell. When Taps sounds, people get quiet. In "Remembering Well" Paul Sawyer concluded that Taps "speaks to me in my heart and soul about dying."

Taps was written and popularized during the Civil War and has been a part of military funerals and memorials since that time.¹ The story is that Union General Daniel Butterfield wanted a different bugle call for the end of the day than the "Lights Out" that was used at the time and worked with a bugler under his command to adapt a different call for this purpose. As Paul also wrote, "To a whole camp of soldiers, the notes of Taps meant that, unless you were on duty, you could close your eyes and you could sleep in peace." Its first use at a soldier's funeral was for a cannoner in 1862. The burial was happening on the heels of a truce, close to the Confederate line and the Union didn't want the traditional three volleys of fire to be misinterpreted as breaking the truce, so Taps was played instead, and this became part of military tradition.

In that same Civil War, in November 1863, President Abraham Lincoln shared the following at the dedication of the Soldier's National Cemetery:

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 are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate - we can not consecrate - we can not hallow - this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. 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

¹ <https://www.ausa.org/history-taps>

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.

In this short speech, Lincoln reminds us that the ground for the memorial cemetery is already consecrated by the struggle and devotion that happened there, which will not be forgotten. He also calls the living to action, that we should be so similarly devoted to the ideals of the founding of our country, to a government of the people, by the people, for the people. Part of the challenge of our great American experiment is the many different interpretations of this ideal.

On Memorial Day we remember those who made “the ultimate sacrifice” to lay down their lives for another. Sacrifice is a complicated idea and has a lot of meanings, most simply to give up something for the sake of something else. A sacrifice is not just a compromise, but is something hard. In the Hebrew Bible, when folks were making sacrifices to their god, it wasn't burning old clothes, or things that they didn't need anymore, but their food, and ability to grow more food, to show their devotion. Sacrifices hurt. Sometimes we choose them because we believe that the outcome for another person is worth that hurt. We make sacrifices for our kids, our families, our friends, our country, and our world. We give up some things for the greater good. Right now, we are giving up a lot of things with the hope and expectation that it will save lives in our communities, and perhaps in our homes. There are some in our country who believe that the restrictions on their choices are too severe, and that these restrictions are against the ideals of the United States. However, our country's motto is not ‘I get whatever I want, even if it kills you.’ Though as a side note, that has certainly historically been part of the practice and implementation of law for white men. But in terms of the ideals, no. Our founding motto was *Pluribus Unum*, ‘out of many, one,’ or ‘one from many.’

This brings me back to a question I asked earlier when we were talking about the song “Will the Circle Be Unbroken,” What does it mean to have our ancestors in our circle, and how does that impact how we live our lives? When we remember that we are rooted in a history made up of people--people who have sacrificed and struggled to help the generations who would follow, people who did terrible things in the name of progress and greed--people in all their complications. How does that influence our own choices? For some in this pandemic it has led to acts of courage and kindness, of sacrifice in order to serve others. On Memorial Day, I think of those who died after they raised their hand to serve because they believed it was the right thing to do, or because they wanted to be part of fighting for something they believed in. I also think of all those who were forced by circumstance, policy, or lack of options into the high risk work of the military, and who did not come home. Another understanding of the word sacrifice, is that some of our young soldiers have been offered as a sacrifice to support political gain and greed in the world. Today we also remember and honor their loss, the loss to our communities of their light and experience, and the loss of our friends and family in service. This same shameful dynamic is part of our experience in the pandemic today, as we are asked to sacrifice the most vulnerable in order to save the economy, rather than taking the radical step of changing our economy to save lives.

Another meaning of sacrifice is to make sacred. Like the cemetery at Gettysburg, those who have died do not need us to consecrate this day of remembrance for their memories to be holy and important. However, when we remember, when we remember the circle of people living and dead who are part of our lives, and our history, we honor their place in that history, and can be dedicated to making meaning and taking action. Do we work for peace? For justice? For the people? For equality? What are we willing to give up for the sake of others?

When I was a kid, on Memorial Day weekend we would head up to my grandparent's house in Vermont to see the extended Noyes family, and on the way, we would stop in a small town in New Hampshire to tend to some family gravesites. We would get out of the car and hustle to clear the plots and plant geraniums as fast as possible before we were carried away by the black flies that swarmed us in clouds. Whether they are military dead or not, Memorial Day is also often an opportunity for folks to connect with all their ancestors, to remember their deceased relatives and friends, and to tend to the physical places where they are laid to rest - a vestige of an antecedent to Memorial Day, Decoration Day, a day to place flowers on the graves of the military dead. This day we also acknowledge that many people who have recently lost loved ones are not able to publicly grieve and honor them in traditional ways. Whoever might be on your heart today, whoever you may be remembering, please join me in a Litany of Remembrance, your repeated response is "we remember them"

In the rising of the sun and in its going down, we remember them.

In the blowing of the wind and in the chill of winter, we remember them.

In the opening of buds and in the rebirth of spring, we remember them.

In the blueness of the sky and in the warmth of summer, we remember them.

In the rustling of leaves and in the beauty of autumn, we remember them.

In the beginning of the year and when it ends, we remember them.

When we are weary and in need of strength, we remember them.

When we are lost and sick at heart, we remember them.

When we have joys we yearn to share, we remember them.

So long as we live, they too shall live, for they are now a part of us as we remember them.²

[Play Taps]

Amen, and so may it be.

² By Roland B. Gittelsohn (Adapted from original poem by Sylvan Kamens & Rabbi Jack Riemer)