

## **Revival: Memorials and the Gate to the Human Heart\***

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It is our sorrow. Shall it melt? Then water  
Would gush, flush, green these mountains and these valleys,  
And we rebuild our cities, not dream of islands.

From *Paysage Moralisé*, by W. H. Auden,

When I was a child growing up in the South, I found religious services boring. But I once sneaked into a tent revival meeting. People were laughing, crying, shaking, dancing, and rolling around on the floor. I was delighted because I had never seen anything like it, especially not in my own family. Like many families, we seemed to have a no-emotion rule.

My father's anger was the only exception. Now I realize it was the only socially acceptable emotion for him to express. It hid his heart from me. As suggested below, acting out anger almost always turns out to be a way of hiding other emotions, such as grief, fear, and embarrassment. This note concerns the revival of those hidden feelings, even with respect to war and peace.

I think that like most of us, my father hid his heart behind a mask of social acceptable faces that cover over his deep feelings. Perhaps public rituals, like the revival tent and war memorials, and even private rituals can help us unveil the best and truest parts of ourselves.

### **A War Memorial**

For the last six years I have been helping at an Iraq War Memorial that my group, Veterans for Peace, sets up on the beach on Sundays. We install what looks like a cemetery, now 3000 crosses, in the morning and remove it in the evening, as per city ordinance. The pier is heavily traveled on Sundays, mostly by tourists. What happens between us vets and some of the visitors who stop is like a little revival meeting.

In my early days at the pier, I was puzzled that most of the strollers would go past the memorial with a sidelong glance, at most. How could they ignore a vast mock graveyard, especially since most didn't even know that it was there? After a few weeks, however, I realized that I had done the same thing. One of my friends who had worked at the memorial from its beginning, ignoring my excuses, had to invite me many times. What could I learn? As it turned out, I had a lot to learn.

Finally, to stop the pestering, I went to the pier on a Sunday morning. To my surprise, I was overcome with feeling when I saw the memorial. I cried for some 15 minutes. Now I understood why I had avoided the visit for so long: I didn't want to feel. The number of dead, or any other fact, for that matter, has little meaning until we discover that a feeling that underlies it.

I have seen resistance to feeling repeated hundreds of times among the visitors to the pier. The ones who stop to talk are overcome with surprise and grief when they realize the emotional meaning of what before was “just a number” to them. The difference between me and the thousands who go right past the memorial is that they don’t have a friend to cajole them into stopping.

### Hidden Emotions and War

Ancient wisdom has told us KNOW THYSELF. But we don’t, especially our feelings. It is possible that most of us are asleep to our deepest feelings. Perhaps knowing feelings has meaning not only in our personal lives, but in the realm of politics as well. We are a nation asleep if we just think and act. We wake up when we find the feelings that we have been hiding.

Perhaps the main reason that there was support for the unnecessary Iraq war and the unwinnable Afghanistan war is that the public prefers to cover up their fear, grief and shame with self-righteous anger. We will probably need many years of mourning and atonement for the death and destruction that our silence allowed. Public rituals of forgiveness would allow us to feel our hidden emotions. Private rituals could also play a part. We need to acknowledge that we are afraid, angry, sad and ashamed in a way that revives feelings that are hidden from us. Sharing these feelings openly with those that are dear to us is way to become deeply connected with them.

In the ancient Hebrew tradition, it is the custom to mourn the loss of parents for the rest of one’s life. Now, as Iris Dement’s song puts it, there is No Time to Cry.

Prayer for Peace rather than War: **Let me know my own emotions.**

I want to cry bitter tears for the loved ones I have lost, and for the immense loss and destruction that has been going on in the world.

So that I will be less reckless, let me feel fear for the danger and death that we all face.

I often feel weak, helpless, inadequate, or humiliated. Let me feel shame or embarrassment instead of ignoring them or hiding them behind anger and resentment.

Help me to express my anger verbally, rather than suppressing it or acting it out, and encourage others to do the same.

Help me to tolerate authentic expressions of emotion in my family and workplace, rather than continuing the suppression of feeling.

Even if following this prayer leads to fits of crying, shivering, sweating, and laughing in myself or others, I am ready.

Public monuments like the Vietnam and Arlington West memorials are just a beginning. Perhaps we could create everyday rituals in our families, offices, schools and churches so that we sleepers can awake. Reviv1-952june30-10

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