

We Remember Them

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UU Church of Akron

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I want to begin by thanking you for joining us for worship this morning. As you already have heard, today is Remembrance Sunday – a day in which we take time to remember and honor our loved ones who have died. In a few minutes we will share in a ritual in which you are invited to place an object or photograph on our altar of love that honors someone you have lost. And no worries if you did not bring an object or photo today. We also have these blue slips of paper and pens. Please feel free to use one of the slips of paper we have provided to write a name or a message or perhaps to draw a picture. This ritual is for everyone and we want all present to feel welcome and invited to participate.

We hold our Remembrance Sunday service every year at this time because in a number of religious traditions and cultures, this is a time when the veil between the living and the dead, the visible and invisible, the material and the spirit worlds is believed to be very, very thin. This is a time of memory, of mystery, and of love.

Although there are undoubtedly many diverse religious and cultural explanations for this thinness between the living and the dead, I think one of the most important and one that has long resonated in Unitarian Universalism is the power of memories and of remembering. As the litany of remembrance you just heard makes clear, memories of those we have lost can be stirred at any time and at any moment – by the blueness of the sky and in the rustling of leaves, by a particular sight or sound or even smell, and when we are feeling lost and when our hearts are filled with joy. It is through those memories that our loved ones live on for, as the reading reminds us, they are part of us.

I don't know if many of you have heard Roland Gittelsohn's litany of remembrance before or if you are familiar with him. I'd like to take a couple of minutes to tell you about him because I think his story is an important and powerful reminder of the role love and memory play in our lives as we struggle with loss and grief.

Before his own death almost twenty years ago, Roland Gittelsohn was a well know rabbi and writer on religious and other issues. He led several large reform Jewish congregations, was a vocal advocate for social justice and religious tolerance, and took a very strong interest in helping families navigate the challenges of our contemporary world.

But Gittelsohn is most often remembered for something he did long before he became a famous religious leader or author of numerous books. Roland Gittelsohn served in the United States Marine Corps during the Second World War. In fact, Gittelsohn was the first Jewish chaplain ever to serve in the Marine Corps and he was present at one of the most important and deadliest battles in American History – the Battle of Iwo Jima. Here is a picture of Rabbi Gittelsohn at Iwo Jima.

Over the course of five brutal weeks of fighting between American and Japanese forces, almost 50,000 soldiers on both sides were killed or injured. Out of necessity and a need to honor those Americans who had died, an American cemetery was established not long after the fighting had ended. Roland Gittelsohn was asked to preach the sermon at an interfaith service dedicating the cemetery. Unfortunately, religious bigotry got in the way as several Christian chaplains threatened to boycott the ceremony because they felt it was inappropriate for a Jewish chaplain to preach over the graves of Christians. So a separate, Jewish ceremony was held at which Gittelsohn preached his dedication sermon although a fair number of soldiers and chaplains chose to attend Gittelsohn's service in spite of the objections.

What a shame it is that Roland Gittelsohn did not have a larger audience at the service because on that day he preached what has to be one of the greatest and most stirring sermons in American history. In that sermon, he made an

impassioned plea not simply for victory in war but also for a just and lasting peace and for a world that was free from racism and oppression, hatred and fear.

Gittelsohn also spoke eloquently about the sacrifices made by those who had lost their lives. I would like to take a moment to read you a very brief excerpt from that sermon for I believe Gittelsohn's words speak not only to the memory of the soldiers who were being honored that day, but to all human beings who have shared their lives with another and who have developed lasting bonds of trust, friendship, and love. Here is a small part of what Rabbi Gittelsohn said that day.

This is perhaps the grimmest, and surely the holiest task we have faced since D-Day. Here before us lie comrades and friends. Men who until yesterday or last week laughed with us, joked with us, trained with us. Men who were on the same ships and went over the sides with us as we prepared to hit the beaches of this island. Men who fought with us and feared with us. ... To speak in memory of such men as these is not easy. Of them it can be said with utter truth: "The world ... can never forget what they did here. Thus do we memorialize those who, having ceased living with us, now live within us. Thus do we consecrate ourselves to carry on the struggle they began. Out of this (struggle), and from the suffering and sorrow of those who mourn, will come—we promise—the birth of a new freedom for the sons (and daughters) of men (and women) everywhere

This brief excerpt does not do justice to the beauty and the majesty of this sermon, and I encourage you to read the complete text, which can be easily found on the internet. But what does come through in these words, and in the litany of remembrance that we read earlier, is Gittelsohn's belief that when human beings are connected by bonds of friendship, loyalty, trust, and love, where those bonds exist death cannot and will not be the end. For through the power of memory and of love, those we have lost and those bonds that have been formed live on inside of us, shining a holy light through our lives and beyond.

And it is this understanding of the close relationship between love and death and the power of memory to keep our beloveds close to us that brings comfort and peace to so many Unitarian Universalists. As the late Unitarian Universalist minister

Forrest Church pointed out, death may be the end of life but it most assuredly is not the end of love. The love we feel for our beloveds who have died does not die with them and that love lives on in our lives and in our memories. When it comes to love, the veil is always thin between the living and the dead. We carry their love, their beauty, their blessings – their very spirit in our lives.

So let us now join together to love and to remember. In a few moments, I will light two candles, one for the love we feel for those we have lost and one for those memories which give us comfort and hope. Then beautiful music will fill this space. Once the music begins, you are invited to come forward in silence and place a photograph or object on the altar to honor the memory of a loved one or loved ones who have died. As you place your object, please take your time. This can be an emotional moment, and sharing our emotions is one of the most important things we do in religious community. And feel free to use the paper provided to write a name or a message that you can leave on the altar. After we have finished placing our objects and papers and the music concludes, you will then be invited to call out the name or names of your beloveds who have died. And please feel free to call out names even if you did not come forward to place an object. This ritual is for all of us.

And now, as we enter this time of sharing and remembering, may we experience the power of love and memory to offer us comfort and healing.