



Auckland Unitarian Church  
Love beyond belief

## Leaving a Mark

Clay Nelson © 1 November 2020

Faded coat of blue by John H MacNaughton (1865)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1IB5ubp2CbA>

*My brave lad sleeps in his faded coat of blue  
In a lone solemn grave lies the heart that beat so true  
He fell faint and hungry among the valiant brave  
And they laid him sad and lonely within his nameless grave*

*He cried, "Give me water and just one little crumb  
And my mother she will bless you in the many days to come  
Oh! tell my sweet sister, so gentle, good and true  
That I'll meet her up in heaven, in my faded coat of blue."*

*No more the bugle calls the weary one  
Rest, lonely spirits in thy grave unknown  
I'll know you and find you among the good and true  
When the robe of white is given for the faded coat of blue*

*Long, long years have vanished, and though he comes no more  
Yet my anxious heart will start with each footfall at my door  
I gaze over the hillside where he waved his last adieu  
But no gallant lad I see, in his faded coat of blue*

*No more the bugle calls the weary one  
Rest, lonely spirits in thy grave unknown  
I'll know you and find you among the good and true  
When the robe of white is given for the faded coat of blue*

It might strike you as odd that I open these musings with a lamentation on what most of Christendom celebrates today as All Saints' Day. *Faded coat of blue* was a folk song written by J. H. MacNaughton following Gettysburg, the bloodiest battle of the American Civil War. I do so because it is about remembering. Ultimately All Saints', All Souls', Samhain, Dia de la muerte, the Buddhist celebration of Obon in Japan, Chuseok in Korea, Gai Jatra in Nepal, Pchum Ben in Cambodia, and Hungry Ghost Month celebrated by Taoists and Buddhists all centre on remembering the dead.

Antonio Porchia, an Italian ex-pat poet in Argentina once noted, "One lives in the hope of becoming a memory." I know that it is my hope. I think all of us hope to leave a mark in this life that might be remembered. But we live in a time when a virus can reduce our lives to a statistic. By today, 1.2 million people are projected to have died of Covid -- a number that is

generally accepted to be grossly under-reported. The sheer number washes away the human stories that the deaths represent. We just can't take them all in, much more remember them all. Some may achieve their hope to be a memory. How many others will reside in a nameless grave unmourned and unremembered?

These thoughts led me to Walt Whitman, the quintessential American poet famous for his collection, *Leaves of Grass*. The American Civil War deeply affected him. You never forget a pile of amputated limbs. Or, at least, Walt Whitman never did.

This grisly sign of war was one of the first sights that greeted Whitman in 1862, when he went to the Civil War battlefield at Fredericksburg, to look for his wounded brother George. As he later recounted it, he saw "a heap of amputated feet, legs, arms, hands, &c.," a pile so large he described it as "a full load for a one-horse cart."

For Whitman, this heap of limbs became a representative image of the Civil War, which he imagined as unnaturally cutting off states from the nation. Indeed, the fragmented republic and its piecemeal human bodies weighed heavily upon Whitman, who carried with him the memories of countless amputations and deaths he had seen while volunteering in military hospitals.

In his writings from during and after the Civil War, Whitman recalls the experiences of wounded and dying soldiers in order to restore their dignity and individuality. The massive scale and chaotic nature of the war made accurate record-keeping next to impossible. Countless men suffered and died anonymously, hastily carved up in field hospitals or tumbled into mass graves near the site of battle. By imaginatively recalling the individual experiences of the soldiers in his writing, Whitman could symbolically speak for the many sufferings that would otherwise remain forgotten and untold.

Whitman particularly felt the urgent need to recall the soldiers who suffered and died in the military hospitals, which he called "the Untold and Unwritten History of the War." Some of the men killed on the battlefield might be remembered in military histories, but the men who died in hospitals from dysentery, infection, and fatal but long-lingering wounds might forever remain anonymous.

In a letter to his mother written in 1864, Whitman describes first hand a heartbreaking example of this kind of personal erasure. While volunteering at the local war hospital, he had witnessed the death of a newly arrived soldier:

*they took him into the ward, & the doctor came immediately, but it was all of no use—the worst of it is that he is entirely unknown—there was nothing on his clothes, or any one with him, to identify him—& he is*

*altogether unknown—Mother, it is enough to rack one's heart, such things—very likely his folks will never know in the world what has become of him—poor poor child, for he appeared as though he could be but 18....*

Apart from a doctor's brief medical notes—if indeed there were any—Whitman's letter may very well be the only record in existence of the passing of that young man.

Whitman reacts against this in his poetry, by working to memorialise and recall to his readers the countless forgotten soldiers such as this one. He does this by creating an imaginary personal encounter with them. In his poem "The Wound-Dresser," Whitman describes just such an unknown wounded soldier, dramatising a moment of human connection and recognition that some of the lost soldiers never had:

*"One turns to me his appealing eyes—poor boy! I never knew you, / Yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if that would save you."*

In flashes like these, Whitman's verse struggles to leave a record, to recall the individual dignity and suffering of men in the war, and to link a face and a person—symbolically, at least—with their unchronicled stories. For Whitman it was about re-membering the dis-membered with the intention of healing and restoring not just the nameless soldier, but the country. It is why Arlington Cemetery overlooks the US Capitol where boys in faded blue and faded grey coats lie together and where the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is honoured 24 hours a day, every day with great respect.

It was not an accident that Whitman entitled his memoirs of the war *Memoranda* --which means "things to be remembered".

I have lost count after nearly 40 years of ministry of all those for whom I had the privilege to preside at the celebration of their life before returning their remains to Mother Earth. During that time of loss and celebration many of the bereaved have described the loss of a spouse, parent, child, close friend as feeling like they have lost a limb. Amputees describe that loss as a ghost limb. It is not there, yet it is. Our rituals around death are about re-membering, maintaining the connection between the deceased and those who love and cherish their memories of them.

I have learned there are important reasons to do so:

- To acknowledge the reality of death. It is a reality we fear, deny, and rarely welcome, while seeking the courage to face it.
- To acknowledge the emotions associated with the death. We must claim our grief if it is to heal. Healing from our loss does not wipe away our memories.

- To acknowledge that the relationship with the person who died has shifted from physical presence to memory. To do so allows for celebration of the gift they were to us.
- To acknowledge changes in personal self-identity. Those we are connected to define who we are. Accepting redefinition is difficult but necessary if we are not going to be stuck in the past.
- To ponder and search for new meaning in life. Honouring the memory often points to new possibilities for our lives.
- To receive the loving support of remaining family and friends. Remembrance is a community event connecting the deceased to the web of life of which we are all a part.

Sadness at the loss of a loved one may never entirely go away, but remembrance lives on.

The desire to be remembered lives within our genetic makeup. It is the age-old reason people carve their initials in trees, place their hands in cement, and chalk their names on rocks. They want to leave their mark. They want to be remembered. But for the living, the real marks the dead leave are the ones they've left on us. A hug. A smile. A timely word of advice. We want to remember those we've loved and lost, not only for them, but also as importantly for ourselves, to mend, to heal, to live, and never to forget.

To that end I offer you this All Saints' Day a poem by Patrick Cunningham entitled "Remembrance".

We talk openly of life.  
 Of the joyful times we had.  
 And the joyful times we will have together.  
 Death gives no joy.  
 It has no voice.  
 We have muted it because there are no more  
 times to have together.  
 While the remembrance of death is painful,  
 the remembrance of those who lived,  
 those we loved, is joyous.  
 They have left footprints implanted in our minds,  
 in our hearts, and in the very essence of our being  
 that shall remain forever.  
 Death is sad.  
 Remembrance is not.  
 So let us remember their lives.  
 Forever.