

The Witness Tree

Veteran's Day: The Treaty of Versailles was signed on Saturday, June 28, 1919. The fighting of World War I had ended seven months earlier which was a temporary cessation of hostilities. The end took place on the eleventh hour of the eleventh month in 1918. Thus, November 11, 1918 is regarded as the end of the "war to end all wars."

In November 1919 President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed November 11 the first commemoration of Armistice Day saying in his reflections, "...the reflections of Armistice Day will be filled with solemn pride in the heroism of those who died in the country's service and with gratitude for the victory, both because of the thing from which it has freed us and because of the opportunity it has given America to show her sympathy with peace and justice in the councils of the nations..."

On September 25, 1971, because of the historic and patriotic significance of Armistice Day, President Gerald R. Ford signed Public Law 94-97 which kept November 11, regardless of what day of the week on which it falls, will be observed on that day rather than moving this national holiday to the nearest weekend for a three-day weekend. Veteran's Day is a day set aside to honor and remember our veterans for their patriotism, love of country, and willingness to serve and sacrifice for the common good. The fighting is over; for soldiers, and their families the war continues.

The Witness Tree: Is a ceremony to remind us, and raise awareness, that we have an obligation, and duty to not only welcome our veterans home, but also to carry the responsibility of their sacrifice, and in many instances, their suffering. Twenty-two veterans, on average, will take their life today. Many return, but are not home, and in need of a community to protect them.

November 1: On this first day of the Witness Tree we see the symbol of life – the Tree represents life. The tree is chosen for multi-faceted reasons: Trees provide clean air, shelter, shade from the sun's heat, a place of safety for nesting birds, wood for us to use in our homes. Trees are sacrificial, and, like veterans, have much that is unseen. In this unseen place is the depth of connection and stability. For some this unseen place is the unspoken, and most feared place where stability has been shaken. The first 22 dog-tags we place on the tree today is the start of the awakening, connecting us to one another, all living creatures, and creation – both here and far away. We share the loss, sorrow and grief for these 22 who died after action.

I offer this reflection from Rainer Maria Rilke titled “Ebb Tide”

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it; live along some distant day in to the answers.

(Invite attendees to hang a dog-tag, and if so moved, write the name of a veteran on the dog tag with the provided sharpie. Then hang the dog-tag on the tree.)

Blessing: Go this day in peace and live your life well.

November 2: Welcome to this, the second day of The Witness Tree. A truth is revealed; one day has to come to its end before another can begin. Like the seasons of the year, the hours of the day, the days of the week; the setting of the sun and the rising of the moon; an end and a beginning. We walk our life journey. For some the journey took them to serve in the uniformed services; for some their service meant waiting for their homecoming. The chill of the night hangs in the morning air awaiting the first ray of sunlight. May we lay down the weight of yesterday. We feel the heaviness cutting into shoulders already bruised, aching and sore from the weight. May we realize we do not carry this burden alone.

I offer this poem titled **“My Poem In Time Of War”**

**A poem should be light enough to carry; and strong enough to hold
The unbearable weight of sorrow, and the sadness of war:
The dead have no voice. Therefore, I carry them – the dead.
They fill the emptiness of the unbroken circle.
How can I speak for them? In their death is my life?
In their death and my life, do I find their truth?
For what purpose did you die, my friend? For freedom? For duty? For honor?
What is the measured value that would exact such a cost?
That will grieve a mother and father? Leave widowed a wife or husband?
Orphan a child? Is there a poem strong enough to hold these truths,
And remain light enough to carry? The burden is too great; I cannot carry this
alone.**

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Go this day in peace, live your life well and be a blessing.

November 3: Welcome to the third day of The Witness Tree. A day to remind us of new beginnings, new opportunities, and possibilities. One thing is for certain; the present is now – the future is arriving. We may be busy making plans for our tomorrows; for now, let us pause, and remember; allow our soul to catch up with our body. Tomorrow has not been promised to us – all we have is now. Remember those we hold in our soul-gaze, the sound of their voice, the heart that quickened in their company. The past is gone, but remembered: Things we have done; things we wish we hadn't done. Voices we have heard, feelings we have experienced. Words we have spoken; words we wish we could take back.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross: *The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen.*

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November 4: Welcome to this fourth day of the Witness Tree. There are 66 dog-tags hanging on The Witness Tree; the weight is heavier each day. The weight of responsibility increases. Shelly Rambo of Boston University and author of “Resurrecting Wounds” speaks the truth, she states that there are two stories of every war: One story is the public story that we want to hear, for it is noble, and the sacrifice is for a good cause. The other story is the one held by the veteran who fought in the war. That veteran’s story is tragic, horrific, hard to hear, and harder to tell. Part of our being here is to listen to the truth. A poem by Tom, a Vietnam veteran, two Purple Hearts, former public-school teacher and member of Warriors’ Journey Home. “The Path of Healing”.

As we move along this path of healing, may we become aware of a process; A process of reconciliation, a process of forgiveness of ourselves, that of restoration, the restoring of our soul with our body, that of inviting our Higher Power, our own Spirituality to join with us so that we may each become one with the others here today. We have come to this path searching, some of us searching for ourselves, or a part of ourselves that has been lost. We come to reconcile as a result of the effects of war or as the Strong Hearts who wait in suffering because of a loved one’s soul which has been lost; or simply to help those affected as a result of war’s trauma. Please, may we work today and tomorrow so as to live in peace and harmony. Let the journey down this path be an initiation into a new life, a life of continual recovery, of restoration with our Higher Power, a healing of our souls, of our minds, of our complete self.

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November 5: Welcome to this, the fifth day of eleven. The tree is carrying the weight of our veterans, their families, our prayers, and thoughts. The Greeks understood their returning warriors are Tragic heroes; they knew that war was about destruction and those who participated in that destruction were the most vulnerable, experiencing wounds that are invisible. For us, we want to bring our veterans home, all the way home – in body, mind and spirit. Yet when they arrive, they have been changed; some in body, all in mind and spirit – the journey home is difficult. They are not the same as when we sent them. We are not the same when they return. We want our veterans to be redemptive heroes – someone who sacrificed and suffered to protect us, save us, redeem us. Can we listen to their stories of war? Can we welcome the Tragic Hero home, and make a place for them in our community?

A few thoughts: Walking Wounded. John Schluep

Women, men. Young, old. Those who went. Those who didn't. Those who waited. Everyone served. We listen to stories that make us laugh. We listen to stories that bring tears of sorrow. Stories that touch us; heart and soul. Broken hearts, wounded souls, lost and wandering through life. Finding one another we find hope. We may feel life return. Realize we have been affected; wounded by war. Wounds will close, life knit back together; the separated, violated, traumatized flesh. The heart fragile. Pain. Despair. Fear. Sorrow. Loss. Affection. Compassion. We are a band of wounded healers.

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November 6: Welcome to this 6th day of the Witness Tree Ceremony. In the military it is instilled within the heart, soul, and mind of a soldier, sailor, marine, airmen and airwomen, that the individual never works alone, never suffers alone, never takes risks alone. We are all connected in the web, and by the web. It is a spiritual connection. As civilians, or as we name you, "The People of Strong Heart", your task and responsibility; your duty, is to provide a safe place. As this tree holds and carries the weight of remembrance, and the stark reality of death after action, we must find ways to carry the burden of responsibility. The pull-out from Afghanistan on August 30, 2021 triggered memories for veterans who had served in the recent conflicts; and those who served in Viet Nam. The Viet Nam pull-out began on March 29, 1973, with a complete withdraw in 1975. In the mind of those who served; there is an abandonment, and a betrayal of the promise to "Leave no one behind." That is a wounding of the soul and spirit.

Thoughts from our Strong Heart, Judy Lacey, read in her memory. As a Hospice Nurse she served veterans at their end of life:

The Steps of Healing.

With each step and every step, you take along this path, let every step fill you with peace as you touch the earth of God's creation. As this ground along the path will provide you with a piece of release from the pain, and the demons from within, a place of healing. You are one of God's creations. God, known as, "My Higher Power", "The Great Spirit", "Jehovah", "Allah" has given us this place. My brothers and sisters let go, let go of the hurt within; know God and I take these steps along this path with you.

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November 7: Welcome to this seventh day of the Witness Tree Ceremony leading us to Veteran's Day Remembrance. As one of the veterans informed me, "The hardest part of deployment is coming home." Our intention is to not only raise awareness to the issues of coming home for our veterans; but more importantly what we can do and become as the community they have served. We can learn to listen with hearts open and share the weight of responsibility. Listen to their stories without comment, criticism, or judgment.

I offer this poem as a point of reflection:

Soul & Spirit by John Schluep

**Etched in to my soul's memory are the names and faces of those I have met.
Companions on the journey home from service and war.
The sacrifice made for reasons known only to them.
Personal and private remembrances. Sometimes shared.
With their youth, they left their innocence behind on the battlefield.
In the backwaters of my soul
Where things are deep, and unseen
I See their faces;
I Hear their voices.
I Share their tears; hold their sorrow,
I Rejoice in their smile.
Take comfort in knowing them
They enrich us.
They teach us, when we listen.**

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November 8: This is the eighth day of The Witness Tree. We will add 22 dog-tags bringing the total to 176. On hundred and seventy-six individuals; one hundred and seventy-six families; friends, classmates, comrades. Many served willingly, some served un-willingly, some went to war, and some did not. The families lived with their loved one overseas in far away lands; absence accentuated at graduations, anniversaries, weddings, birthdays, holidays. The absent father, mother, wife, husband, brother, sister, friend; acute shadows in their absence. A poem written in 2010 on the return journey to a former war zone.

The Daily Repair of God's World by John Schluep

The guns are silent, the time to kill is over.

The time to heal, is here.

For many this is a most difficult return.

They were so much younger then; they are older now.

Memories remain.

Some good. Some toxic. All have value.

I feel small in this enclosed world with fellow travelers

The world has become larger; expanded. Diverse.

The people look different from me. Their language, skin tone, mannerisms.

People I never understood.

Attendants at 38,000 feet with gentle voices ask questions

Their words float like butterflies as I return to the war-zone.

I don't know their language.

Much is spoken in the silence of a smile and a kind gesture.

Tears form in my eyes and spill down my face.

A baptism from within. A cleansing of wounds begun.

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November 9: On this ninth day of the Witness Tree Ceremony we are reminded that “to witness” means to bear testimony to truth. The truth we have been bearing witness to is the reality of military service, and war that is destructive. There are the war dead, those killed in action; there are those killed after action; the twenty-two veterans who are not statistics; they are the husbands and fathers, wives and mothers, sons and daughters – they are our sisters and brothers. Today there will be 198 dog-tags on the Witness Tree, a living memorial and testimony that life continues and we are summoned to live fully, with honor, integrity, and with a duty of caring.

On October 17, 2010 a group of Vietnam veterans stood and knelt for a healing ceremony at a 1970 battle area in Vietnam. We were joined by a young Vietnamese woman named Quen (pronounced Quinn) who's family fought in the American/Viet Nam War she wrote an essay titled: **Journey To Our Hearts:**

I am the girl who never believed in miracles because I thought it meaningless to just stay still and pray for a miracle to happen to change the world. I joined this journey (with these Americans) to know these people, and to witness the healing of their hearts, it is more than a miracle for me: A miracle is when a man who was hurt so badly that he thinks his soul has left him, can smile the smiles of healing and happiness again. A miracle is when I see two men who used to fight on opposite front lines hug each other tightly and make fun of themselves, about the past: “If I met you forty years ago you would have died for sure. Now the war is over and we become friends.” Yes, it’s over, the war and obsession with it. Today all hearts are healed! A miracle is that you and I were born into this world to witness all of these miraculous things. Pham Ut Quyen (pronounced Fam Oot Quin)

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November 10: Our tenth day of The Witness Tree. We recognize that all creation is sacred and connected. In the ten days we have been conducting this ceremony we have attested to the truth that we are all touched by military service and war. Today, as we gather, the Ukraine is besieged by Russian forces. We have many of our military on alert in Eastern Europe and elsewhere, ready to answer when and if needed. Today let us look to the promise of peace for which our daughters and sons serve to secure.

I offer a prayer by Episcopal Priest Steven Charleston:

In these troubled times I know a place where fear and uncertainty cannot come, where confidence and hope still shine brightly, where there is room for every person of every condition to gather in safety and strength. It is my heart. The princes of power who strut their moment upon the stage may rail against the others, the many others, who they seek to shun from the embrace of freedom, but in my heart is sanctuary for each forgotten soul. No truth will be swept away, no justice lost, no mercy gone ungiven, for I keep them all here, in my heart, secure until once they are released, to join what I know is in your heart as well, a great outpouring of love, a fulfillment of the prophecy you already read in these few simple words.

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November 11: Veteran's Day. This day is set aside each year to remember and to acknowledge that we are the beneficiaries of others service. We are also made aware that we have a shared responsibility, a duty, an obligation, to bring our sons and daughters home. We place 22 dog-tags on the Witness Tree as a reminder that we need to remember their service, and our responsibility. We are a nation of diversity, a democratic republic, still becoming what was dreamed of decades ago. May we dream with clarity. We must capture the dream that has grown over the generations. A nation where all are equal, as we are, in the eye of The Creator. Please join me in the Pledge of Allegiance:

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the Untied States of America, and to the republic for which it stands; one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

I want to express my gratitude for all who have been a part of organizing this eleven-day ceremony. May this ceremony move us in the spirit of healing and uniting in the common cause of bringing our veterans all the way home.

The Old Man by John Schluep

The old man slowly shuffles

In front of me,

Slowing me down.

Shirt stained, faded jeans too long,

Drooping and dragging,

Urine stained.

A day's growth of whiskers, maybe two days,

Or more.

Food trapped in the stubble – dried, crusty at the mouth's corner.

His ball cap bears the patch of the "Screaming Eagles"

101st Airborne Division

Master Parachutist badge, known as a "Master Blaster" a Jump Master.

Who are you? I wonder; more curious than annoyed.

Sir, are you a paratrooper? I ask

He gazed at me with jaundiced eyes.

A sliver of a smile crossed his face

"I jumped at Normandy, D-Day 1944."

Our veterans come in many shapes, sizes, religions, colors, faiths, ethnicity, gender, cultures. They are among us – we remember them this day and we remember that today there are many who are living in quiet isolation and loneliness. Let us learn *how* to be their companion to listen, to speak and to bring healing. In the words of Kate Forsyth, author of “The Witches of Eileanar.”

May my heart be kind, my mind fierce, my spirit brave.

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Invite attendees to form two circles. An inner circle of veterans facing out; the Strong Hearts form an outer circle facing in (encircling the veteran’s circle.) Ask the participants to make contact with one person across from their place in the respective circle.

Veterans speak: I served to protect you.

Strong Hearts reply: I am grateful. Welcome home. I am here to protect you.

Taps (Sung)

**Day is done,
Gone the sun,
From the hill,
From the sea,
From the sky.
All is well,
Safely rest,
God is nigh**

Go this day in peace, live your life well and be a blessing,

The Witness Tree

