

Guest commentary: Eying a better future this Memorial Day

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Our Memorial Day tradition of honoring military men and women who died while serving our country originated in the aftermath of the Civil War and became a federal holiday in 1971.

Each year, my wife and I attend the ceremony in the village where we grew up, smiling at the high school band playing songs we performed at their age, warmed by the remarks made by decorated veterans and touched by such time-honored rituals as the playing of taps, the 21 gun salute and the reading of names of those who lost their lives in battle.

This year there will be no parade and yet, it seems, we have so much to mourn including the recent loss of loved ones and those who have risked and, in some cases, lost their lives while caring for others.

In chronicling the history of Concord, my colleagues and I at the Concord Museum are guided by the words of Robert Penn Warren: “History cannot give us a program for the future, but it can give us a fuller understanding of ourselves, and of our common humanity, so that we can better face the future.”

Next Monday, we will be posting a special Memorial Day video program that we hope will provide solace and perspective to those who view it, uniting us in ways to better face the future.

The posting will feature our Curator David Wood’s keynote remarks last June at the rededication in Sleepy Hollow cemetery of the Melvin Memorial which honors the lives of three brothers from Concord who died in the Civil War. Their surviving brother commissioned his boyhood friend, Daniel Chester French, to create a sculpture later called, Mourning Victory.

David’s remarks were based on one of the brother’s diaries which include his account of being captured by the rebel forces ,where he would die in captivity, and of his brothers’ deaths from dysentery and a fatal charge in Petersburg.

While observing a different civil war in his native land in Ireland, the poet, William Butler Yeats, minced no words about the destruction it unleashed which, to me, are reminiscent of our recent experience of this pandemic.

“We are closed in, and the key is turned

On our uncertainty; somewhere

A man is killed, or a house burned

Yet no clear fact to be discerned.

Despite the destruction all around him however, outside Yeats’s window he notices a more hopeful natural phenomenon: honeybees building a home in a starling’s empty nest. Seamus Heaney once championed Yeats’ poetic observations for “satisfying the contradictory needs which consciousness experiences at times of extreme crisis, the need on the one hand for a truth telling and, on the other hand, to credit as a reality the squeeze of the hand and the actuality of sympathy and protectiveness between living creatures.”

We hope our special virtual Memorial Day observance will elicit such sympathies and our need to protect each other in this, our moment of collective crisis.

Tom Putnam