

In Memory of the Fallen from our Internal Wars
Memorial Day Homily Presented at Unity Church Unitarian, 5/30/10
Michael Orange

Like last year, Rob invited me to offer a homily to commemorate Memorial Day. Thank you for the honor, Rob. Last year, I described what Memorial Day is about—remembering—and I extended that responsibility from the traditional recognition of our fallen soldiers to include also the families and friends who share the soldiers' sacrifices. I also extended the responsibility to remember to the civilian dead, who now account for over 90% of war deaths. Memorial Day is a day for trying to grasp the imponderable atrocity that is war.

This year, I urge you to expand the scope of your sacred remembrance to other victims of war, to those lost in our internal wars. Our country has been enriched by the sacrifices of so many people, few of whose names grace our public facilities because they were not rich and powerful. So often, troops and police wearing a United States uniform killed and wounded them—Native Americans seeking treaty rights; women, minorities, and prisoners seeking civil rights; and workers seeking fair labor rights. They too deserve remembrance on this day.

I will focus on one such example, the case of students who exercised their right to protest against one of our most egregious wars.

A few weeks ago, my wife, Cynthia, and I made a pilgrimage back to my alma mater for the 40th commemoration of the shootings at Kent State University, a place that enshrines the memory of four students: Alison Krause, Jeffrey Miller, William Schroeder, and Sandra Scheuer ("shoer").

Forty years ago, I survived Vietnam and returned to my college campus to finish the degree the war had interrupted. I arrived at the start of a major anti-war protest sparked by President Nixon's announcement two days earlier that he had directed US forces to invade Cambodia, a neutral country in the war. Governor James Rhodes capitalized on this opportunity to issue a strong law-and-order response intended to help him with the Republican primary battle he was facing, so he ordered the Ohio National Guard to take control of the campus and squelch student dissent.

After two days of numerous futile attempts to disperse angry crowds of students, the Guard's Troop G regrouped at the top of a hill, took up firing positions at the order of "Guard, prepare to fire," and then opened up for thirteen seconds on a crowd of unarmed students. Most of their sixty-seven rounds went over heads, but fourteen found their targets, killing the four students I named and wounding nine others, one of whom never walked again.

We made our pilgrimage with our close friend, Nic, another Kent State alumni. On that fateful day, May 4, 1970, he was one of the students that Troop G was trying to disperse with tear gas and bayonets. Nic had to climb a fence to get away from the soldiers'

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advances, but when he heard the volley, he raced back toward the Guardsmen and helped Sandra Scheuer. A 30 Cal. round had exploding her neck. The bleeding was so profuse she died within minutes from loss of blood. Nic and others stayed with her until an ambulance came. A mutual friend described it this way, “Nic was just like a soldier. He wouldn’t leave his fallen comrade.”

During the three-day commemoration, we were struck repeatedly at the toll war takes—whether one fights it on the battlefield or on the streets of American cities. The keynote speaker for the anniversary events was John L. Lewis, a paragon of the Civil Rights Movement and long-term Georgia Congressman. He strikingly threaded the martyrdoms of the Civil Rights Movement to those of the Peace Movement. He honored names every American should know; names like Emmitt Till, Medgar Evers, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and the names of the four little girls murdered in the Birmingham, Alabama church bombing.¹ And then he linked them to the four names on the Kent State memorials and to the two black students, Phillip Gibbs and James Green, who police killed ten days later during the anti-war protest at Jackson State.

Lewis declared that, “War is obsolete as a tool of our foreign policy. . . . We’re in a struggle to redeem the soul of America and it is a struggle of a lifetime.” He went on to remind the audience that we have a mandate from the “spirit of history” to remember what happened at Selma and Birmingham; what happened at Jackson State and Kent State.

It is fitting on this Memorial Day to remember these fallen too, victims of the wars at home. May they rest. In peace.

Michael Orange is an environmental consultant and he teaches a college class on sustainability planning and another on the Vietnam War. He served as a Marine in Vietnam (1969-70) and published a memoir of his experiences, *Fire in the Hole: A Mortarman in Vietnam* (2001). He and his wife, Cynthia, have been members of Unity since 1991.

¹ Addie Mae Collins (aged 14), Denise McNair (aged 11), Carole Robertson (aged 14), and Cynthia Wesley (aged 14),