

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

In Our Youth Our Hearts Were Touched with Fire

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES JR.

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The final two selections in this chapter are included here because they deal explicitly with the problem and purposes of national memory. As personal memories of past wars fade, people—especially young people, and especially in times of peace—may wonder why Memorial Day matters. Just such a question is the point of departure for this Memorial Day address (excerpted) that Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. (1841–1935) delivered on May 30, 1884, in Keene, New Hampshire, before John Sedgwick Post No. 4, Grand Army of the Republic. In the first half of the speech, Holmes, a Civil War veteran and later a distinguished justice of the United States Supreme Court (1902–35), provides, as he puts it, “an answer which should command the assent of those who do not share our memories, and in which we of the North and our brethren of the South could join in perfect accord.”

What is that answer? Does it persuade you? “To fight out a war,” Holmes writes, “you must believe something and want something with all your might. . . . One may fall—at the beginning of the charge or at the top of the earthworks—but in no other way can he reach the rewards of victory.” What things, then, are worth fighting for? Dying for? Before his very moving tribute to the dead and our duty to honor them,¹ Holmes says we observe Memorial Day because it helps us, the living: “I believe from the bottom of my heart that our memorial halls . . . are worth more to our young men by way of chastening and inspiration than the monuments of another hundred years of peaceful life could be.” What does Holmes mean by this claim? Are you persuaded? What is the meaning of the title? What does it say about your own youthful heart?

Not long ago I heard a young man ask why people still kept up Memorial Day, and it set me thinking of the answer. Not the answer that you and I should give to each other—not the expression of those feelings that, so long as you and I live, will make this day sacred to memories of love and grief and heroic youth—but an answer which should command the assent of those who do not share our memories, and in which we of the North and our

¹ This speech, and especially the last part of it, should also be read with the selections in Chapter Four, “Honoring the Fallen Dead.”

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brethren of the South could join in perfect accord.

So far as this last is concerned, to be sure, there is no trouble. The soldiers who were doing their best to kill each other felt less of personal hostility, I am very certain, than some who were not imperiled by their mutual endeavors. I have heard more than one of those who had been gallant . . . officers on the Confederate side say that they had had no such feeling. I know that I and those whom I knew best had not. We believed that it was most desirable that the North should win; we believed in the principle that the Union is indissoluble; we, or many of us at least, also believed that the conflict was inevitable, and that slavery had lasted long enough. But we equally believed that those who stood against us held just as sacred convictions that were the opposite of ours, and we respected them as every man with a heart must respect those who give all for their belief. . . . You could not stand up day after day in those indecisive contests where overwhelming victory was impossible because neither side would run as they ought when beaten, without getting at last something of the same brotherhood for the enemy that the north pole of a magnet has for the south—each working in an opposite sense to the other, but each unable to get along without the other. . . . The soldiers of the war . . . can join in commemorating a soldier's death with feelings not different in kind, whether he fell toward them or by their side.

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But Memorial Day may and ought to have a meaning also for those who do not share our memories. When men have instinctively agreed to celebrate an anniversary, it will be found that there is some thought of feeling behind it which is too large to be dependent upon associations alone. The Fourth of July, for instance, . . . stripped of the temporary associations which gave rise to it, . . . is now the moment when by common consent we pause to become conscious of our national life and to rejoice in it, to recall what our country has done for each of us and to ask ourselves what we can do for the country in return.

So to the indifferent inquirer who asks why Memorial Day is still kept up we may answer, It celebrates and solemnly reaffirms from year to year a national act of enthusiasm and faith. It embodies in the most impressive form our belief that to act with enthusiasm and faith is the condition of acting greatly. To fight out a war you must believe something and want something with all your might. So must you do to carry anything else to an end worth reaching. More than that, you must be willing to commit yourself to a course, perhaps a long and hard one, without being able to foresee exactly where you will come out. All that is required of you is that you should go somewhither as

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hard as ever you can. The rest belongs to fate. One may fall—at the beginning of the charge or at the top of the earthworks—but in no other way can he reach the rewards of victory.

When it was felt so deeply as it was on both sides that a man ought to take part in the war unless some conscientious scruple or strong practical reason made it impossible, was that feeling simply the requirement of a local majority that their neighbors should agree with them? I think not: I think the feeling was right—in the South as in the North. I think that as life is action and passion, it is required of a man that he should share the passion and action of his time at peril of being judged not to have lived.

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If this be so, the use of this day is obvious. It is true that I cannot argue a man into a desire. . . . But, although desire cannot be imparted by argument, it can be by contagion. Feeling begets feeling, and great feeling begets great feeling. We can hardly share the emotions that make this day to us the most sacred day of the year and embody them in ceremonial pomp without in some degree imparting them to those who come after us. I believe from the bottom of my heart that our memorial halls and statues and tablets, the tattered flags of our regiments gathered in the Statehouses, and this day with its funeral march and decorated graves, are worth more to our young men by way of chastening and inspiration than the monuments of another hundred years of peaceful life could be.

But even if I am wrong, even if those, who come after us are to forget all that we hold dear, and the future is to teach and kindle its children in ways as yet unrevealed, it is enough for us that this day is dear and sacred.

Accidents may call up the events of the war. You see a battery of guns go by at a trot, and for a moment you are back at White Oak Swamp or Antietam or on the Jerusalem Road. You hear a few shots fired in the distance, and for an instant your heart stops as you say to yourself, The skirmishers are at it, and listen for the long roll of fire from the main line. You meet an old comrade after many years of absence; he recalls the moment when you were nearly surrounded by the enemy, and again there comes up to you that swift and cunning thinking on which once hung life and freedom—Shall I stand the best chance if I try the pistol or the sabre on that man who means to stop me? . . . These and the thousand other events we have known are called up, I say, by accident, and, apart from accident, they lie forgotten.

But as surely as this day comes round we are in the presence of the dead. For one

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hour, twice a year at least—at the regimental dinner, where the ghosts sit at table more numerous than the living, and on this day when we decorate their graves—the dead come back and live with us.

I see them now, more than I can number, as once I saw them on this earth. They are the same bright figures, or their counterparts, that come also before your eyes; and when I speak of those who were my brothers the same words describe yours.

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I see a fair-haired lad, a lieutenant, and a captain on whom life had begun somewhat to tell, but still young, sitting by the long mess-table in camp before the regiment left the State, and wondering how many of those who gathered in our tent could hope to see the end of what was then beginning. For neither of them was that destiny reserved. I remember, as I awoke from my first long stupor in the hospital after the battle of Ball's Bluff, I heard the doctor say, "He was a beautiful boy,"² and I knew that one of those two speakers was no more. The other, after passing harmless through all the previous battles, went into Fredericksburg with strange premonition of the end and there met his fate.³

I see another youthful lieutenant as I saw him in the Seven Days, when I looked down the line at Glendale.⁴ The officers were at the head of their companies. The advance was beginning. We caught each other's eye and saluted. When next I looked he was gone. . . .

There is one who on this day is always present to my mind.⁵ He entered the army at nineteen, a second lieutenant. In the Wilderness, already at the head of his regiment, he fell, using the moment that was left him of life to give all of his little fortune to his soldiers. . . . I observed him in every kind of duty, and never in all the time that I knew him did I see him fail to choose that alternative of conduct which was most disagreeable to himself. He was indeed a Puritan in all his virtues without the Puritan austerity; for, when duty was at an end, he who had been the master and leader became the chosen companion in every pleasure that a man might honestly enjoy. In action he was sublime. His few surviving companions will never forget the awful spectacle of his advance alone with his company in the streets of Fredericksburg.⁶ In less than sixty seconds he would become the focus of a hidden and annihilating fire from a semicircle of houses. His first

² Lt. William L. Putnam, 20th Massachusetts Regiment.

³ Cpt. Charles F. Cabot, 20th Massachusetts Regiment.

⁴ Lt. James T. Lowell, 20th Massachusetts Regiment.

⁵ Henry Abbott, 20th Massachusetts Regiment.

⁶ The legendary suicidal charge of the 20th Massachusetts Regiment occurred on December 11, 1862.

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platoon had vanished under it in an instant, ten men falling dead by his side. He had quietly turned back to where the other half of his company was waiting, had given the order, "Second Platoon, forward!" and was again moving on, in obedience to superior command, to certain and useless death, when the order he was obeying was countermanded. The end was distant only a few seconds; but if you had seen him with his indifferent carriage, and sword swinging from his finger like a cane, you would never have suspected that he was doing more than conducting a company drill on the camp parade ground. He was little more than a boy, but the grizzled corps commanders knew and admired him; and for us, who not only admired but loved, his death seemed to end a portion of our life also. . . .

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I have spoken of some of the men who were near to me among others very near and dear, not because their lives have become historic, but because their lives are the type of what every soldier has known and seen in his own company. In the great democracy of self-devotion private and general stand side by side. Unmarshaled save by their own deeds, the armies of the dead sweep before us, "wearing their wounds like stars. . . ." I speak of those whom I have seen. But you all have known such; you, too, remember!

It is not of the dead alone that we think on this day. There are those still living whose sex forbade them to offer their lives, but who gave instead their happiness. Which of us has not been lifted above himself by the sight of one of those lovely, lonely women, around whom the wand of sorrow has traced its excluding circle—set apart, even when surrounded by loving friends who would fain bring back joy to their lives? I think of one whom the poor of a great city know as their benefactress and friend. I think of one who has lived not less greatly in the midst of her children, to whom she has taught such lessons as may not be heard elsewhere from mortal lips. The story of these and of their sisters we must pass in reverent silence. . . .

Comrades, some of the associations of this day are not only triumphant but joyful. Not all of those with whom we once stood shoulder to shoulder—not all of those whom we once loved and revered—are gone. . . . On this day, at least, we still meet and rejoice in the closest tie which is possible between men—a tie which suffering has made indissoluble for better, for worse.

When we meet thus, when we do honor to the dead in terms that must sometimes embrace the living, we do not deceive ourselves. We attribute no special merit to a man for having served when all were serving. We know that if the armies of our war did

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anything worth remembering, the credit belongs not mainly to the individuals who did it, but to average human nature. We also know very well that we cannot live in associations with the past alone, and we admit that if we would be worthy of the past we must find new fields for action or thought and make for ourselves new careers.

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But, nevertheless, the generation that carried on the war has been set apart by its experience. Through our great good fortune, in our youth our hearts were touched with fire. It was given to us to learn at the outset that life is a profound and passionate thing. . . . [W]e have seen with our own eyes beyond and above the gold fields the snowy heights of honor, and it is for us to bear the report to those who come after us. But above all, we have learned that whether a man accepts from Fortune her spade, and will look downward and dig, or from Aspiration her axe and cord, and will scale the ice, the one and only success which it is his to command is to bring to his work a mighty heart.

Such hearts—ah me, how many!—were stilled twenty years ago; and to us who remain behind is left this day of memories. Every year—in the full tide of spring—at the height of the symphony of flowers and love and life—there comes a pause, and through the silence we hear the lonely pipe of death. Year after year lovers wandering under the apple boughs and through the clover and deep grass are surprised with sudden tears as they see black veiled figures stealing through the morning to a soldier's grave. Year after year the comrades of the dead follow with public honor, procession and commemorative flags and funeral march—honor and grief from us who stand almost alone, and have seen the best and noblest of our generation pass away.

But grief is not the end of all. I seem to hear the funeral march become a paean. I see beyond the forest the moving banners of a hidden column. Our dead brothers still live for us, and bid us think of life, not death—of life to which in their youth they lent the passion and glory of the spring. As I listen, the great chorus of life and joy begins again, and amid the awful orchestra of seen and unseen powers and destinies of good and evil our trumpets sound once more a note of daring, hope, and will.