

Reflections on Memorial Day  
 Reading and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno  
 May 28, 2017

"The Young Dead Soldiers Do Not Speak" by Archibald MacLeish

*The young dead soldiers do not speak.  
 Nevertheless, they are heard in the still houses:  
 who has not heard them?  
 They have a silence that speaks for them at night  
 and when the clock counts.  
 They say: We were young. We have died.  
 Remember us.  
 They say: We have done what we could  
 but until it is finished it is not done.  
 They say: We have given our lives but until it is finished  
 no one can know what our lives gave.  
 They say: Our deaths are not ours: they are yours,  
 they will mean what you make them.  
 They say: Whether our lives and our deaths were for  
 peace and a new hope or for nothing we cannot say,  
 it is you who must say this.  
 We leave you our deaths. Give them their meaning.  
 We were young, they say. We have died; remember us.*

.....

Ten years ago on Memorial Day weekend, I shared the story of two young men who died in World War I. I learned about these two - Richard Mansfield and Jack Morris Wright - while exploring Gardner Cemetery over on Ocean Avenue. I love old cemeteries. On that day, now a decade ago, I am taking in the small cemetery's history and beauty when I decide to sit and rest beneath a tree at the way back of the cemetery. Underneath the tree I find a boulder that holds two tablets. They are beautiful. I am deeply moved when I read the testimonies engraved on each.

*This is my beloved son: Richard Mansfield, 2<sup>nd</sup>, who gave his life for his country. April 3, 1918 at the age of 19 years. "I did not enlist in order to be safe." He enlisted the same day that he heard that his best friend Jack Wright a boy of the same age, had fallen from his*

*plane in France. These two boys were artists. They left their books and their paintings to laugh at the "German Day". Comrades true, born anew, peace to you. Your souls shall be where the heroes are and your memory shine like morning star.*

The second tablet says the following:

*This table is in memory of Richard's dearest friend, Jack Morris Wright, First Lieutenant Pilot Aviator, who gave his life for his country in France – aged 19 years – January 24, 1918. "I gave my body and soul to the worship of an idea. Man's soul is the shrine of religion." "Cet enfant cette grande figure e'tat l'adol eternelle du beau – Il restera en nous tous une religion"\* Bourdello.*

And beneath these two tablets are these words:

*They shall mount on wings as eagles.*



Every Memorial Day since, I visit these two, now long, long gone. The boulder is so far back that the American Legion missed it when distributing Memorial Day grave markers the following year. I left them a note. The year after that, 2009, Jack and Richard were remembered; flags planted in the dirt beside the boulder.

Every Memorial Day since, as I make my way to the young artists, a painter and an actor turned soldiers, I walk past the decorated graves of soldiers who fought or died in all of the wars from the Civil War on, and I hear the poet's words:

*The young dead soldiers do not speak.  
Nevertheless, they are heard in the still houses:  
who has not heard them?*

.....

*They say: Whether our lives and our deaths were for  
peace and a new hope or for nothing we cannot say,  
it is you who must say this.  
We leave you our deaths. Give them their meaning.  
We were young, they say. We have died; remember us.*

Jack Morris Wright & Richard Mansfield have been so much with me these 10 years since, and as our country has been engaged in warfare these 10 years since, I thought I would revisit that sermon.

And then something interesting happened. At my study group last Tuesday Russ Gundlach happened to remember that very story and sermon to me. Kind of incredulous I shared that I was going to revisit the story this year. Our friend, Ron Steed, long time member of St. James right up the street (and now an ordained deacon in the Episcopal Church) was listening in on this conversation and with some excitement shared that there is a stained glass window in the sanctuary dedicated to the same two young men. Ron and I go back and forth sharing the details we each know and finally we conclude that indeed, it is the same two young men who are honored in Gardner Cemetery.

Designed by Louis Tiffany, the window – entitled "The Airmen" - depicts the two young men standing before the Archangel Michael with the same quote engraved in the window as is engraved in the memorial tablets: *They shall mount on wings as eagles.*



And not only that, Ron tells me, Jack Morris Wright's mother posthumously published the letters that he had sent her, his father, and grandmother from France. Ron generously forwarded a link to the book and I read through most of the letters.

So, this week's writing became much more than a revisit. It became a deep dive into who Jack really was and by extension Richard, who Jack called, "Dick," and why they were inspired to enlist.

Not surprisingly, through the lens of this narrative there are lessons to be learned.

First, let's begin with some context.

In a commencement speech in 2003, the author Wally Lamb called the call to war a devastating lack of imagination. This morning we honor those who have sacrificed their lives in war while we also mourn the devastating lack of imagination that is war. We are reminded that Jack Morris Wright and Richard Mansfield died in the war that was to end all wars. Such was President Woodrow Wilson's assurance to the American people. Now nearly 100 years and countless wars later, "the war to end all wars" seems like a naïve prediction. History describes World War I as particularly brutal. Although any and all wars might well be similarly described, WWI was a game changer; the first "modern war" for with it came the development of air power, the machine gun, and barbed wire. Previous combat strategies were rendered obsolete with the emergence of trench warfare.

The total number of military and civilian deaths and casualties in World War I was more than 38 million:

There were over 17 million deaths, 11 million of which were military personnel and about 7 million civilians

20 million people were seriously wounded.

These losses make WWI among the deadliest conflicts in human history.

Now let's turn our attention back to Wright and Mansfield.

To hear Jack's voice through his letters is to hear the voice of a generation that in some ways is not unlike the generations of young men and women that have followed.

Richard Mansfield and Jack Morris Wright "left their books and their paintings to laugh at the 'German Day.'" With the benefit of historical perspective, we know what horrors came in the wake of the war that was to end all wars. Jack & Dick, had no such perspective as the young rarely do.

Born in New York City, Jack was at the time of his enlistment about to graduate from Phillips Andover Academy and planned to attend Harvard in the fall. However, his mother writes in the preface of the book *A Poet of*

*the Air: The Letters of Jack Morris Wright* that "He was educated entirely in French schools; his playmates were the children of the artists and poets of France. French was his language." Therefore, Jack was thrilled that his deployment would be for him a homecoming.

The letters from this 18 year-old young man are a study in youthful romanticism that is tempered by a stark age-old realism. Here is an excerpt from his first letter to his mother dated May 18, 1917:

This P.M. I arrived at the instruction camp twenty miles behind the trenches near where I camped one Easter (with French Boy Scouts). I can detail no more.

The country is of such a May green and blossoming that war seems impossible and yet every night we can hear the guns and watch the distant rockets.

Good-bye for a moment. Lovingly, Jack

The war is anything but impossible, of course, and in a short time, Jack will come to know this. Astonishingly, he will never lose his deeply engrained *joie de vivre*. His steadiness is particularly illuminated in a letter that reveals his New London connection, actually. He writes in response to his mother:

Western Front - 20 July, 1917

MY VERY DEAR MOTHER:---

The letter you sent June 25th has greatly impressed me. Although in the midst of much joy it brought back souvenirs of America and New London with the most vivid colors. That you should meet those with whom I held delightful friendship and who were factors in the most perfect summer I have yet passed, is a great joy to me now that I am one year, three thousand miles away from them, and far from the pleasant smiles along the sunny beach or the cool night rides --- far isolated from them in a world of much suffering and of much sorrow.

But this is not entirely grief --- grief is but a half of my new world. As deep as grief lies buried on the one side, so much higher does joy contrast on the other. However, it is not the joy of the summer resort --- it is the gay little peasant street ... or yet the

hoarse singing of soldiers behind the lines covered with mud and fatigue, but finding in the twinkling red wine distraction from horrors men have never witnessed.

Dick is likely one of those whose company Jack's mother shares. Soon thereafter, in a letter dated June 7, we witness the quality of Jack and Dick's friendship.

My dear Dick:

Excuse all, --- paper, wit, and brévit , --- for I am at war --- at least I am vaguely concerned with it. You see I have written to no one but mother. What I am doing takes up all my energy and strength; it consists of driving a five-ton Pierce-Arrow truck full of five more tons of ammunition up to the batteries on the firing line. I am on a trip of adventure and am therefore rushed with new adventure every minute of my life. As a result, I am becoming more as ye ancient adventurer who rode the moonlit highways long ago with a rapier by his side and a swear-word for a bible. I have become rash, indifferent, brutal, and impatient. I never touch my pen or my pencil. I never woo nor pine: I just take; I never drive: I race; I never stand still: I am in action; I never think or dream: I just do.

It is a life I had thought unrealizable in such modern times, but I have found out that war brings with it all the barbarism of the past and the wars gone by that had lain in a grave during peacetime. ...

The firing lines are awful and it takes all the grit you've got to stand them. You must be ready for Hell as well as Paradise when you come here, but if you do come, you'll find them both, and at their highest pitch. I sincerely hope you do come and honestly believe you will. I want you with me very much, for your influence helps me and gives me a laugh to work and woo with. In fact you would be a great companion for my present six months of adventure, and you would perhaps help me formulate and accompany me in carrying out of vague desires for wandering and further adventure beyond the distant horizon line.

Are you coming, then?

Are you coming with me?

Or will you spend your years of youth and adventure in conventional America that any one can see at any time?

With my best wishes to you in any case, and my fondest  
love to your dear mother, --  
Je te serre la patte, Jack

"*Je te serre la patte*" I am twisting your leg, Jack writes to Dick. In a letter he writes to his mother that same week he says:

Tell Dick he'd better come over here before I go fetch him --- that if the submarines don't duck him, I will, for he's a naughty boy to remain so far away from the world that's the only one for him.

How do you want to spend your youth, the time for great adventure? Certainly not in conventional America! Despite the brutality to which he alludes – all from the point of view of “ye ancient adventurer with a rapier by his side” – he intensely encourages his friend to join him in the adventure of a lifetime. The enticement is always framed in this way. Indeed, in this letter and in the many, many letters included in this collection, there is far less emphasis on the war's cause or the desired outcome than on Jack's bliss in being part of what he considers this great adventure. He is careful to always balance the war's inhumaneness with all that he experiences as life-giving and beautiful. Tellingly, in another letter to Dick, Jack says that the war is for him a “constant spring of Youth, Adventure, and Romanticism...”

In her Forward to *Poet of the Air* Jack's mother speaks of noble causes as does Jack's principal of Phillips Andover Academy in his Introduction. The principal writes with full confidence about Jack's inspiration to enlist.

*No one can remain deaf to duty's call as it rings its challenge throughout the world. Youth has heard that call and youth has been the first to respond. The superficialities of life have fallen in swift confusion. ... Youth has caught the vision of the higher values of life and with enthusiasm and unselfish devotion has answered the challenge to protect and establish these values for the youth and manhood of a later day.* Alfred E. Stearns, Phillips Academy Andover, MA

The principal's thoughts are poetic but I'm not sure they're Jack's whole truth. Jack was a young man excited to return to the country of his childhood in all its beauty and cosmopolitanism. He sought to defend France's honor. By much of what he relays in his letters, letters that, by the way, his mother was preparing to publish; letters that Jack himself had hoped would bring comfort to other mothers and wives whose sons and

husbands were also in Europe; by much of what this thoughtful man writes of his experience, this young man who had all his life enjoyed comfort and privilege it seems that by enlisting he more sought adventure and the opportunity to prove himself a man than he sought to take up the “*challenge to protect and establish high values*”, however pleased he may have been to do so on France’s behalf.

In late July Jack applies for and is finally accepted to be in aviation, as he calls it. To his mother he explains that he thought long and hard about this decision, that he did not do so for “the allure of glory or prestige.” He can hardly contain himself as he found his previous duties hardly worthy of a true soldier. He expresses his desire to make her proud, as he was now able to claim his manhood.

Consider the event not as regrettable, but as the glorious realization of all the hopes you had placed in me and the nobility you had prayed to see reflected within me. I think, en plus, that I have at last a right to call myself a Man. ... When I come back to you, you will find in me, I hope, not the statuette of a child and a mother's son, but the monument of a man and a mother's protector.

These questions are begged:

What might be manhood's more constructive proving ground than the battleground? How might we inspire in boys and young men bravery, courage, strength, and deep bonds of friendship in ways that are peaceful and focused on the common good?

How might we persuade our leaders that by and large war is a massive lack of imagination that inevitably leads to more violence, more war.

How might we forever keep buried during the all too fleeting periods of peacetime *all the barbarism of the past and the wars gone by that had lain in a grave*, as Jack wrote.

On Memorial Day aren't these question worthy of our consideration?

In August of 1918 Jack begins training and describes himself the “Poet of the Air”. He spends the next few months in training, learning to fly. He loves the thrill of it though he also understands the risk.

In one of his last letters home he writes to his father:

Great joy! To-morrow morning I enter spirals; that will be the beginning of more rapidly succeeding and more vital events of interest; that is, more dangerous slips and drops to be caught up in true, more

businesslike, warlike flying. Now good-bye for the while. Keep good and don't worry.

Very lovingly, Jack

Jack Morris Wright died three days later on January 24, 1918 while attempting a spiral that ended in a deadly crash. As an aviator he never saw combat.

Dick Mansfield enlisted immediately following Jack's death. Just weeks in the Army, he was stricken with spinal meningitis and died. He never saw combat. Nevertheless, as his parents had engraved for eternity, he "did not enlist to be safe."

Soon after his death, a friend of Jack's wrote to his mother saying that:

*Like the rest of us Jack early adopted the carefree swing to life in the air. One cannot worry and fly. He had a song on his lips to the last, a smile for every difficulty, and a shrug for unpleasant situations. .... Other than his beautiful personality, [his] appreciation of the powers of the air was Jack's greatest contribution to the pioneers of American aviation in France. As the dreamer of real castles in the air, Jack shall long be remembered, as the comrade of my first Year of the War, he shall be enshrined in my memory.*

*Accept, mother of Jack, the sympathy of one who loved him, and cannot forget.*

On Memorial Day, as ever, we none of us can allow ourselves to forget. We cannot forget that the men and women who sacrifice their lives in wars that only our nation's leaders may wage, we cannot forget that really, they are kids. They are kids who enlist for similar reasons that Jack Wright and Dick Mansfield enlisted 100 years ago.

On Memorial Day, we remember those who have died in service to our country as we reckon with the tremendous responsibility we collectively hold in matters of war and peace.

May they rest in peace.

May we conjure the courage to give their deaths meaning.

Amen.

\* Roughly: "This child this great figure was the eternal adolescent of the beautiful - He will remain in us all a religion."

"Jack Wright Poet of the Air":

<http://net.lib.byu.edu/estu/wwi/memoir/Wright/Jack1.htm>