

When our daughter was 5 and our son was turning one year old, we took a trip to visit my great aunt and uncle who lived just a short distance from Washington DC. While we were there, we of course took in many of the national sites, including the memorials. I remember vividly the rows of white gravestones at Arlington National cemetery, the tomb of the unknowns, and the flame burning at the grave of John F. Kennedy.

We took our children to "The Wall" where the names of those killed in Vietnam are etched in stone. We discovered one "Koester" among all those names, a young man named Joel, and even though we didn't know him, we felt a special connection as we ran our hands over the letters. The "unpopular war" has perhaps the most well-known and most visited memorial.

We lingered at the Korean War memorial, which had just been dedicated a year earlier and the statues of soldiers on patrol helped us to remember all those who served in that "forgotten war" and also reminded us that the "cold war" certainly took the lives of a great many warm, young bodies.

We saw the planned site of the WW II memorial which is now finished and talked about the first world war, often called the "great war" which was hoped to be an end to war.

But this was all before our nation entered into its "longest war", in response to the attacks of 9/11, which our service men and women continue to fight to this day.

We took our children to these memorials so that even though they were small, we could talk to them about the importance of honoring those who gave their lives in our service. We do not honor war, or violence, or the scars it leaves behind in the collective tissue of society but we do honor the men and women who are called upon to fight those wars.

But just how are we to honor such service? What can we possibly do that would demonstrate our gratitude for their full devotion? A day set aside, a Memorial Day, is a wonderful thing. Programs with flags and flowers, speeches and salutes are all wonderful things that strength-en our collective memory and remind us of the costs paid by a few for the good of the many.

Yet honoring someone seems to be something more than remembering them. How can we truly honor the service given by those we remember today? Perhaps a stop at another memorial on the National mall -the Lincoln memorial- can help us. Etched in those stone walls are the words of the Gettysburg address... words which still ring true today.

We took our children up the steps of that grand memorial, where Martin Luther King Jr. stood and dreamed about a nation of equality -born out of the bloody battles of the civil war Lincoln presided over. We went in to where the great statue sits and on a quiet night with few others around, we read out loud the words Lincoln spoke on that battlefield where so many died.

"Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent a new new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Lincoln began with the foundation. No memorial will long stand without a firm foundation.

He continued on with words to validate the importance of dedicating cemeteries and battlefields, and other tangible reminders of war's great cost but he also recognized the inability of those reminders to truly honor the dead.

Halfway through his short speech Lincoln concluded, "*in a larger sense, we can not dedicate, we can not consecrate, we can not hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract.*"

So how then do those of us who are yet living, who have perhaps never struggled in war, best honor those who have? Lincoln urged the people of his day to dedicate themselves to the unfinished work advanced by those who died. "*It is for us the living*" he said, "*to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us...and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from the earth.*"

It remains as true today as it was then.

The best way to honor our national dead is to live as better citizens.

Those who fought in the civil war, the great wars, the forgotten war, the unpopular war, the longest war are all counting on the rest of us to live as better citizens. To work for the common good. To rule with the majority while protecting the minority. To stand firmly on that foundation that all members of the human race are created equal and are deserving of dignity and respect. To elect leaders based upon their commitment to these ideals and not on their ability to raise money or sling mud at their opponents.

Because here is the thing about this democracy so many have lived and died for. A government of, by and for the people means when things are not working we simply cannot blame the President, or the Congress, or the Court System. We must look to ourselves and the dedication we put forth in being informed citizens who take seriously the great task remaining before us in our own day.

We are all in the service of this great country we call United. Today we remember, we honor, we memorialize those who have given their lives in this service. They have shown the ultimate love and have laid down their lives for the sake of us all. It is good and fitting and necessary that we have this day to remember them. But we who are living must also honor them by re-dedicating ourselves to the great task of building a just and civil society, a functioning democracy where ideas provide the currency of governance.

This is the most fitting memorial for those we remember on this day. May God give us the courage to honor our national dead by living as better citizens, so that we might find ways to end violence, beat our collective swords into plowshares and live in a world where there is liberty and justice for all. That's the **living** memorial I pray all our children will have the opportunity of seeing.