

# Why Remember?

(Written for the Memorial Service  
at the South Manitou Island Cemetery  
Sunday, July 30, 2006)  
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A READING FROM JOSHUA 24:1-3a

(NRSV) Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. {2} And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: 'Long ago your ancestors--Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor--lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. {3} Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many.'

Of all the capacities of the human brain, the acquisition, retention, and recall of information are undeniably among the most marvelous and mysterious. Experts in intelligence declare that every impression experienced by an individual, verbal or otherwise, is stored away in the cognitive memory banks, waiting there to be retrieved and brought to the consciousness of those who wish and are able to recover it. This capacity, though not understood scientifically by the ancients, or even fully by us for that matter, has been celebrated and pressed into the service of the intellectual, cultural, and religious life of all people. Human beings have always had the desire and the ability to bring the past into the present by way of memory, and in so doing to perpetuate tradition by reconstruction, restoration and reenactment.

Successful cultures, since the beginning of time, have remembered and honored their ancestors. Remembrance and revering is appropriate, because our ancestors provided the foundation upon which all that exists was built. Their lives created our history. It is because of them that we live. We are connected by circumstance – we are their future; they are our past. Their memories exist in us. Their patterns and stories exist in us and have shaped us. We are connected biologically – their genetic codes having been transmitted intact to us, and thence from generation to generation far into the future. In that sense, they are immortal. Remembrance and revering is important, because all of this gives us a sense of respect for who and what we are, and how we fit into the ongoing story of life.

Joshua, the biblical successor of Moses, as an old man about to die, called the people of Israel together, to remember their history, and to decide whether to follow the ways of the world, or those of a higher calling. I suggest we are called together here today, to remember, and to decide.

What will we remember?

For some it will be about sacrifice, pain, and loss. Others will remember comradeship, closeness, the sharing of hopes and fears. Still others might reflect upon life's ups and downs; the harms that threatened, but the victories that came.

The value of remembering, for some, is strictly in telling the story; in sharing what is important to them; in working out the good and the bad; the happy and the sad that one has encountered in life. For others it is the issues; the lessons involved in any telling of the past and the education it can provide. For yet others, it is a matter of honoring, of respecting, of evoking the emotions and feelings that are best in a person; laughter, joy, tears, peace, forgiveness, humility, determination.

What will we decide?

Many of the souls now resting beneath this Island's sands were simple folk who came across the seas from faraway places. They came with empty pockets, and with high hopes for a better life. For them, "better life" was envisioned as access to intangibles such as opportunity, the freedom to make of it whatever one could, the privilege of having a place of one's own, and the right to be independently happy.

The better side of our inherited humanity – courage, self-reliance, resourcefulness, and camaraderie – love, kindness, understanding, justice, and joy – brings people together in a better life. The things of this world, on the other hand, have always divided families, groups, peoples, and nations, giving rise to suspicions, resentments, conflicts and sorrows. It was those things that pushed our ancestors off their homeland's shores, and onto the shores of this island; South Manitou.

In his book, *My Point of View*, Glenn Furst writes that early island settler Benth Johnson, an immigrant from Norway, would often greet the rising sun on a fine summer morning by standing in his doorway with arms raised, happily exclaiming, "Aah; diss iss ta land of milk an' honey!" Clearly, he understood and appreciated the blessings of early life in this free and beautiful wilderness.

Like the ancient Israelites, let us decide to remember our roots. Let us decide to remember those things that so many of those who are buried here valued so highly, so courageously and laboriously struggled to secure, and eventually handed to us as a gift.

And in those moments when we forget; in those moments when we take all that for granted as we whine about our *troubles du jour*, let us then remember old Ben Johnson standing in his doorway at sunrise, sending his message through time to us via our memories – this is indeed a land of milk and honey.

The good life we enjoy is a gift from those who came before.