

A Loving Legacy

They called it Decoration Day when I was a little girl, and for good reason. Armed with vases of peonies and small 48-starred flags on sticks, families all over America headed to cemeteries to decorate graves and honor their dead. It was a day filled with private grief, publicly shared, and its obligations were inescapable. Picnics and baseball games, which were sure to follow, had to wait until every family grave was decorated. In the post-World War II patriotism that swept the country, gratitude to those who had gone before was a deeply held value.

For most of us now, family graves are miles away in some distant state. Decorating them seems ghoulish to some people, impractical to others. Memorial Day is, for many people, the three-day weekend that offers time to set up the deck furniture, have people over for a barbecue, and squeeze in a round of golf.

But is there meaning in Memorial Day for contemporary families? What if we used the day to tell stories to our children about loved ones now gone? Maybe my grandchildren would love to know that I always got in trouble for swinging too high on the porch swing and bumping the front of my grandparents' house. Or that one grandma made the best fruit pies and another made the best cream pies, and a visit to Kansas often left me with a tummy ache from too much pie. Or that my grandpas let me pound nails into boards, fashioning crude boats to "sail" in the puddles after a rain.

Today, I have the opportunity to honor them by telling their stories to my own offspring. My children could learn from my grandmother who taught school and supported ailing parents from the time she was sixteen. Or from my grandfather who went to school every summer for twenty-some years to complete a college degree, and went on to become a superintendent of schools.

These people didn't give their lives in the war, but they surely gave them to their families and communities. And, when I remember, I am profoundly grateful.

The smell of peonies in May will always remind me of these loving forebears who helped me understand a little bit more about my place on this planet. Children who see themselves as part of their family's story grow in their sense of personal responsibility. Remembering those who cherished them—even those who are now gone but loved the prospect of them before their births—enriches a child's sense of belonging. Planting a flower in memory of a loved one and telling a funny or endearing story will connect a child to his past.

Though we won't spend this Memorial Day placing peonies on loved ones' graves, I hope I can bring them back for my grandchildren by sharing stories of sailboats and cream pies.