

**Too Deep A Silence – Kathy Disney**  
May 30, 2010

**OPENING READING**

To be said looking at your hand:

Whose hand is this  
that has never died?

Who is it who was born in the past?

Who is it who will die in the future?

If you look deeply into the palm of your hand, you will see your parents and all generations of your ancestors. All of them are alive in this moment... Previous generations, all the way back to single celled beings, are present in your hand at this moment.

- Thich Nhat Hanh –

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**SERMON**

I grew up in the little towns of Blue Springs and Wymore, about 60 miles south of here and I grew up in a family that observed Memorial Day. That is to say, we put flowers on graves in cemeteries. As a child, I remember wrapping large coffee cans in aluminum foil and weighing them down with sand on the bottom before putting in the live flowers – peonies, lilacs, iris and yellow roses for my great-grandmother Mary Harden. There are five generations of my family in the cemeteries of southeast Nebraska, most in the Blue Springs cemetery. At one point, in the late nineties, my mother and I made 26 stops covering four cemeteries. By this time, we were using more plastic flowers, only using live flowers when available (which means growing in the yard) for “the ladies” mothers and grandmothers and great-grandmothers.

But we are still thoughtful about what flowers go on which graves – would she have preferred roses or daisies, finding blue or purple for the men who would not have approved of some frilly, pink bouquet; using white flowers for babies. And our stops are not only for family. Long-time friends of family members long since gone get their flowers, too.

We put flowers on the graves of friends of my grandparents, among them Anne and Martha Craig, two “maiden sisters” who came from a prominent Blue Springs family and died in the late 1950’s and also Ethel Madison. Ethel Madison was an institution. She lived from 1883 to 1974. She began teaching school in 1901 and she retired in 1967 at the age of 84. Her teaching career was so long that she taught my grandfather and by the time she retired, my older brothers were in school.

The Blue Springs cemetery, according to the sign on the wrought iron gate, is the oldest recorded cemetery in Nebraska, dated January 25, 1862. It is located just north of town, with fields on three sides. The north end is the oldest, and therefore the quietest part of the cemetery. On the north-most edge, very few graves are ever decorated. You can feel the silence of that part of the cemetery as you walk through, no stories to be told either by the graves or those who no longer tend to them. Occasionally, my mother and I have placed flowers at the graves of some of those who seemingly have no one to visit them. Not far from our family stones is the grave of a lady name Martha Hargreaves. There are no other stones with that name anywhere around. The stone simply states “Martha Hargreaves of England, November 11, 1848 – August 26, 1903, at rest”. We were intrigued by what story might come out of her silence and laid flowers for her mostly out of respect for having traveled so far.

We walk among the gravestones on the north side of that cemetery and wonder what they would say, those silent, unadorned gravestones, if they were able. I came across a poem by Billy Collins about the dead creating their own silence. It is called “Grave”.

### Grave

What do you think of my new glasses  
I asked as I stood under a shade tree  
before the joined grave of my parents,

and what followed was a long silence  
that descended on the rows of the dead  
and on the fields and the woods beyond,

one of the hundred kinds of silence  
according to the Chinese belief,  
each one distinct from the others,

but the differences being so faint  
that only a few special monks  
were able to tell one from another.

They make you look very scholarly,  
I heard my mother say  
once I lay down on the ground

and pressed an ear into the soft grass -  
then I rolled over and pressed  
my other ear to the ground,

the ear my father likes to speak into,  
but he would say nothing  
and I could not find a silence

among the one hundred Chinese silences  
that would fit the one that he created  
even though I was the one

who had just made up the business  
of the one hundred Chinese silences –  
the Silence of the Night Boat,

and the Silence of the Lotus,  
cousin to the Silence of the Temple Bell  
only deeper and softer, like petals, at its farthest edges.

(pause for moment of silence)

In our opening reading, Thich Nhat Hanh says that previous generations, those who have gone before, are in the palms of our hands. I have a sister in the cemetery at Blue Springs. Susan Lone Disney Howard. She was born the year after me and died in 1997. Her gravestone is next to our grandparents and my grandfather's parents and siblings. She lived a troubled life and died a troubled death and ordinarily, she is pretty silent. But sometimes she speaks up. When I meet someone in troubled circumstances and I am quick to judge, she says "Wait a minute. Maybe there is more going on here than you know anything about". And she is right, and I try to step back and listen more fully and remain open to that person. At other times, she may be silent for a long time then I will hear "Well, poop or get off the pot!" (and I have cleaned that up. She could curse the wallpaper off the wall). And of course, there are times I would rather she stay silent, not remind me of her difficult life and death. However, even though she is not an ancestor, she is here in the palm of my hand. Those generations of people, some of whom I would not agree with or probably even like, right here in the palm of my hand. My people, buried in the northern half of the Blue Springs cemetery, making my palm, my hand, my being what it is – a person with inherent worth and dignity. My ancestors, those gone before me, those in the palm of my hand, are not silent but speak through me. I am what they and their choices have made me – a mammal, a shortish green-eyed, left-handed, thin-haired female human being. As the dead speak through the palm of my hand, their voices may echo pleasant or they may echo harsh, but they are a part of who I am.

And then there are the dead who are perhaps not specifically in my palm, or yours. This brings me back to Memorial Day, and Archibald MacLeish. Archibald MacLeish lived from 1892 to 1982. He had a long and very interesting career but what I want to point out is that he served as a volunteer ambulance driver in World War I and then at the front as a captain of field artillery. He knew something about the dead. From what I can gather, his poem "The Young Dead Soldiers" was written somewhere around 1941. It has made its way into our gray songbook. I would like to read it to you now:

## The Young Dead Soldiers

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.

They say: We leave you our deaths. Give them their meaning.

We were young, they say. We have died. Remember us.

(pause for moment of silence)

On this Memorial Day weekend, remember those young, dead soldiers. Look into the palm of your hand. Consider the deaths it took to bring you into this life. You can, like my family will, take flowers to the cemeteries and decorate the graves of family and friends. Or you can decorate the grave of someone who seems particularly silent. If you are not able to do that or if that is not to your taste, light a candle or raise a glass to honor those who came before you. Or run your hands through some really good soil and consider all the death and decomposition it took to make it so rich.

In our closing song, there is a line “the dead have a pact with the living”. Beyond just carrying on life, perhaps part of the pact is, every now and then, maybe even on Memorial Day, to listen. Like Billy Collins, put our ears to the ground. What you hear might be a combination of the profound and the profane, like me with my sister. Or you might hear those like the young dead soldiers in Archibald MacLeish’s poem, who do not speak but their silence speaks for them, asking for our response. The dead may be silent but it is not too deep a silence. Sometimes it is only as deep as the crease in the palm of your hand.

### **CLOSING READING**

We clasp the hands of those that go before us,

And the hands of those that come after us.

We enter the little circle of each other’s arms

And the larger circle of lovers,

Whose hands are joined in a dance,

And the larger circle of all creatures,

Passing in and out of life,

Who move also in a dance,  
To a music so subtle and vast that no ear hears it  
Except in fragments.

- Wendell Barry -