

EPIPHANY CHAPEL & CHURCH HOUSE
The Only World War One Chapel in the United States

DEDICATION OF THE CENTENNIAL MEMORIAL GARDENS & MONUMENT

Diane Rehm WAMU/NPR June 3, 2018

I am honored to be here with you today, for the dedication of these Centennial Memorial Gardens and Monument to those who gave their lives during the First World War. It is a beautiful sight to behold. I know how much time and effort has gone into the planning, and the ultimate creation is magnificent.

But truth be told, I almost didn't make it here today. When the Dean of Virginia Theological Seminary, Ian Markham, first contacted me, I told him that, as much as I'd like to attend, it wasn't possible because I would be at my grandson's high school graduation from Concord Academy in Boston this very weekend. I particularly regretted saying no, I told him, because my own father, Wadie Aed, a naturalized citizen from Mersin, Turkey, had served in France with the U.S. military toward the very end of the First World War. My son, David, had discovered that in a search of our ancestry. And that was all I knew. But little did I know of the resourcefulness of the Reverend Dr. Phebe McPherson!

Within days, another email came to me, this time from Dr. McPherson. Here's the quote that got me: "I am deeply moved to hear that your father served in the US Army in France. I've learned that your father's military unit was the Camp Meade Detachment 147 Infantry, 37th Division. I've attached a copy of his WWI registration card and information from the Army Transport Service. He was deployed through Camp Meade!" And with those four sentences, she had me!

My father came to the United States as a boy of sixteen, became a naturalized citizen, according to the records, enlisted in the Army as a young man of 22. Seeing his registration card, in his own handwriting, brought me to tears. It was the first time I'd ever seen my father's handwriting! After the shock and tears subsided, I called my husband, and we adjusted our flight to come directly here from Boston.

I came to honor not only my father, but all those World War One men and women who served and the many who gave their lives in that effort.

I cannot imagine the courage it took for those young men—and their families—who were ultimately deployed to the trenches in France. They had no idea what they would face, and no way to prepare themselves for the cold, the rain, the mud, sickness, and deaths. It had to have taken a great deal of strength, as well as faith, to face those troubled times. But my father never talked about that experience, never shared any of it with me or my sister.

I remember seeing one photograph of him and his brother, my Uncle Toufic, in their military uniforms. But I never asked, and was never told, about their experiences. In fact, until my husband, John Hagedorn, and I visited Ellis Island recently and saw all the records regarding my Dad's entry into the U.S. in 1907, and, in 1929, his wife's—my mother's entry, I had no certainty about my parents arrival into this country.

And now, one hundred years later, after the end of the war that was to 'end all wars,' we find ourselves again encountering trouble times. Within our own country there are profound divisions about what is happening here in our homeland as well as around the world. Families, friends, even spouses are divided in their beliefs about where our country is headed, and where the leadership of our country is taking us.

Recently I had the honor of speaking with Pulitzer Prize winning author John Meacham about his most recent book, "The Soul of America: The Battle For Our Better Angels." In the introduction titled 'To Hope Rather Than To Fear,' Meacham gives us two quotes: The first from W.E.B. Du Bois, written in 1935: "Back of the writhing, yelling cruel-eyed demons who break, destroy, maim and lynch and burn at the stake, is a knot, large or small, of normal human beings, and these human beings at the heart are desperately afraid of something. Of what? Of many things, but usually of losing their jobs, being declassed, degraded, or actually disgraced; of losing their hopes, their savings, their plans for their children; of the actual pangs of hunger, of dirt, of crime."

Then, another quote, this one from Abraham Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address in 1861: “We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

Throughout these moments of despair, as Meacham writes, and as I believe, is an underlying sense that the goodness of people, the ‘better angels of our nature’ will ultimately prevail. It will not be easy to repair the divisions we are experiencing, the mistrust, even the hatred of ‘the other.’ But I continue to believe, despite so much evidence to the contrary, that within most people lies an innate goodness that will carry us forward in whatever difficulties we may face, be they personal, professional, or, indeed, constitutional.

The warriors who died in that First World War that was to end all wars paid the ultimate sacrifice, as did their families. It remains a phrase that haunts us, after World War II, the Korean War, the Viet Nam War, the Iraq Invasion, and who know what could come. But we continue to have faith that memorials like this one, that stand to remind us of the power and goodness of those who stood, brave and steadfast, against a tyranny and injustice, will remind us of the courage and bravery that have shaped this country, and that war, in whatever form it may take, is not the answer. May God, and the people who lead us, guide us ultimately to understand the wisdom and dedication of the ‘quote’ “normal people,” who know that war is not the answer, and who speak up and speak out, to lead us the direction of peace, as the ultimate goal.

My Dad was one of the lucky ones. He came here, to marry, to raise a family, to own a grocery store with two of his brothers, and to provide a comfortable, middle class life for all of us. I wish I knew more. What I do know is how proud he would feel to witness today, to know that his service was honored, and that his daughter has been enriched and enlightened by being part of this ceremony.

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