

10.14.12 Sermon: "Our Heritage, What's in it for Us?"

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As Marge Piercy poetically illustrates, we all inherit physical characteristics and personality traits from our parents and grandparents. We might also have grown up eating foods prepared in a traditional way for special holidays. We may have been introduced to clothing, music, language and stories from an ethnic background or particular country linked to our ancestral heritage. Our ideas about family life, child rearing, education, work, and sports may have been handed down to us from long ago and far away. We may have been expected to become the next generation of fire fighters, farmers, nurses, soldiers, politicians, merchants, or mothers at home baking cookies and canning pickles. Our attitudes toward change, the appropriate role of government in our lives, law enforcement, medicine, or asking for help may reflect experiences and beliefs of our great, great grandparents. We are all complex people influenced by forces and visions which we may be very aware of, or not at all.

I have found that beginning to understand who and where I have come from, my heritage, has been beneficial to my ability to relate to and appreciate other people, and the world around me. It was a huge eye-opener for me, for instance, to realize that not everyone enjoys the benefits of an educated, supportive, loving family and home where nutritional meals are regularly served, a well-lighted space for doing home work provided, and talents nurtured and applauded.

Some of my ancestors arrived on the Mayflower, some fought in the American Revolution, others escaped the potato famine in Ireland. There is a thread of hope for a life of freedom from oppression, a belief in working hard for something better, a belief in standing up for what is perceived to be right. In more recent decades, family members have fleshed out that "something better" as

- the civil rights of people of color,
- a woman's right to be counted as a fully capable human being,
- a freeze on nuclear weapons development,
- increased literacy for all of our population,

- food and housing for those caught in poverty, and
- basic rights for our LGBTQ citizens

Fighting hatred and prejudice with education is a practice deeply rooted in my family, going back at least three generations; my maternal grandmother attended Bowdoin College in Maine, earning a teaching degree; one of her brothers became a school superintendent. Education can broaden one's appreciation of multiple viewpoints and solutions to problems. It can also yield arrogance and elitism. Some of both, tolerance and elitism, came my way, and it was a while before I became aware of this, and learned the value of humility.

During my early years in Chicago, Illinois, I heard of Jane Addams, Nobel Peace Prize winner and founder of nearby Hull House, one of the first settlement houses in America. Her life exemplified the kind of social conscience nurtured in me by my parents. In her essay "Filial Relations", Addams states that after college, she yearned to be "in service to a world in need" rather than devote her life to travel and leisure, as her family desired. Addams advocated a healing compromise between the "social compunction" and family responsibilities, encouraging society to view a women's public efforts as "directed to the general good" rather than "selfish and "captious".

Both of my parents exerted great effort with integrity in promoting good local government from Chicago to Pontiac, Michigan to Troy, NY. Witnessing this instilled in me a sense of possibility for the effectiveness of individuals and groups working diligently to change laws and influence elected officials. Along with this, I gained an appreciation of the pressures and influences under which those in elected office must function.

Growing up in Unitarian, later Unitarian Universalist, churches, I found myself intellectually nourished, but yearning for spiritual inspiration. At about age 11, I discovered mysticism between the covers of Kahlil Gibran's The Prophet. My mother was hospitalized many miles away for over a year at that time, and nothing intellectual was particularly comforting. I found the book on my parent's bookshelf, and sitting with it open, reading the words over and over to myself,

was comforting. I had unknowingly tapped into a kind of meditation, into a religious tradition that nourished my heart and soul.

At Starr King School, I explored other religious traditions further. We were able to take classes at neighboring seminaries in the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley; I took Ethics at the Lutheran school, Process Theology with the Jesuits, Prayer with the Presbyterians, and a drama-based study of the Bible with folks from a variety of religious traditions. I found myself hungry to learn about who Jesus was. My desire for an object of faith other than science and reason eventually led me into more than twenty years of Evangelical Christianity.

Amazingly, I discovered, never leaving my UU thirst for understanding and UU predisposition to examine ideas from many angles, that there were more than a few Christian teachings which, at the core, were familiar to me, and a few I despised. I'd heard that Unitarian Universalism grew from a Judeo-Christian heritage, but had not really recognized those contributions. Here are a few of the ideas that rang true for me.

Micah, an Old Testament prophet said (Mi 6:8), "He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God?"

I believe most UUs want to do good rather than evil, promote justice in human activities, choose mercy over vengeance, and respect and value the uniqueness of others. These actions require humility rather than arrogance, wherever and with whomever one is walking.

Luke, a physician among the disciples of Jesus, is credited with writing (Lk 12:48), "For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required." In my experience, most of us UUs seek to use the resources and talents we have to help others as well as ourselves. We have been spurred on by the example of the Good Samaritan, in the parable told by Jesus, to help people less fortunate, not counting the cost. We often help those who are despised by people in power, even as the ancient Samaritans were despised by their powerful neighbors.

In a letter to the new Christian church in Ephesus, the follower of Jesus named Paul wrote “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.” Kindness is not an unfamiliar concept among us. My mom once told me that forgiveness was one Christian concept she really liked. To me, forgiveness seems rolled into our principles of respecting the dignity of each person and the interconnected web of life; if interconnected people are holding grudges, respect and love are blocked by anger.

We are all familiar with questioning the status quo, not accepting much of anything just because it has been around for a long time. Jesus questioned Jewish authority figures and laws that put rules before human need. He challenged regulations forbidding life-sustaining “work” on the Sabbath, like picking grain to eat while walking through a field. He ignored the lower status accorded to women by welcoming them as equal travel companions. He gave credit to Mary who sat to learn from him, rather than to her sister Martha, who chose the traditional role of serving. Jesus questioned a group of men about to stone a woman for adultery, suggesting they examine themselves first, saying, “He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first.” (Jn 8:7). This man was certainly a rebel. A Jewish carpenter who built with words and deeds.

I was awakened to the historic depth of our UU heritage in Romania, Transylvania, Yugoslavia and Hungary by reading For Faith and Freedom by Charles Howe before our choir’s trip to those countries in 2010. John Sigismund, Unitarian King of Transylvania, declared, in the 1568 Act of Religious Tolerance and Freedom of Conscience, that each person should be free to choose his own religious beliefs. His teacher, Francis David wrote the words adapted by Richard Fewkes in our closing responsive reading.

UU heritage is also represented in the hymns chosen for us to sing together today. The words of “Find a Stillness” are based on a Unitarian Transylvanian text, put to a Transylvanian hymn tune. “The Morning Hangs a Signal” was a favorite of my father’s; the words are adapted from William Channing Gannett, 19th century Unitarian minister, social reformer involved in women’s suffrage, education of freed African Americans, and child labor reform, as well as a writer of poetry, essays, Sunday School lessons, and hymns. “Come, Come Whoever You Are” is

based on the words of 13th century Sufi philosopher/mystic Rumi, with music by Lynn Adair Ungar, a living UU minister, educator and poet. Shlomo Carlebach, Jewish rabbi, teacher, composer, and singer, who is known as a pioneer in the movement to “encourage disenchanting Jewish youth to re-embrace **their** heritage wrote the words and music for “Return Again”.

As we move forward in our lives as Unitarian Universalists, let us do so with an open mind to the richness we might discover in any of the many aspects of our individual and collective heritage.

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