

All of Who We Are

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD October 8, 2023

A Hasidic tale narrates the wisdom of a great and learned rabbi. As the story offers, several tourists from the United States embarked upon a journey to visit Poland. This group had heard of the great Rabbi Hafez Hayyim and in all their curiosity and enthusiasm arranged to visit him in his home. When they arrived at the dwelling of the religious leader, they were surprised to see that his only possessions were books, a single table, and but one lone chair. The inquisitive and surprised visitors asked, “Rabbi, where is your furniture?” The rabbi replied, “Where is yours?” “We are only visitors!” the tourists responded. “So am I,” replied the wise one.¹

We are but visitors on this planet we call home. We are visitors and yet part of an expansive, ancestral lineage. We are held in a sacred space between all of those who have already lived and died, to be followed by all of those who are yet to come, a bloodline spanning millennia. And we are shaped by all this. This is pertinent to us in each of our days, for in order to do that intimate work of understanding who we are, we need to have a deep and personal understanding of that which preceded us. We are shaped by our culture, our national history, our ancestors, and our faith – both the beautiful and the ugly, both the blessings and the curses. We are but one single visitor and yet we are part of something much more, we are created by all that was while shaping all that will be. Let us focus on that one fundamental, foundational, intimate question that will serve to guide us in our present musings: Who am I? In short, we are our heritage.

Jamaican political activist Marcus Garvey offers a metaphor for heritage. “A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots.”² Roots provide nourishment, connecting the tree to much of what it needs to survive. Roots keep a tree from falling to its own demise after a strong gust of wind, anchoring it in place. So, too, is it with us

¹ “Only a Visitor” from *Doorways to the Soul* Edited by Elisa Davy Pearmain

² *Soul Matters Worship Resources: October 2023*

and our heritage. So, too, does an understanding of what has come before and made us who we are offer nourishment, survival, and the strength to persevere. This calls us to inquire of our history - all of it. That of our culture, our nation, our family, and our faith. Not all of what we find will be affirming, but all of it will help us connect to truth, to who we are, and to how we can move forward.

I think of another metaphor of heritage— that of a garden. Think of a garden tended to through the generations – a garden offered to us at birth to be cared for throughout a lifetime. One filled with carnations and poison oak, morning glories and invasive vines. As visitors on this planet, we tend our gardens, nurturing the beautiful, the life giving, and the nourishing, akin to flowers, while working to remove that which seeks to destroy, to uproot the harmful, likened to weeds. We tend to justice and love while riding the world of violence and inequity, one act at a time, to be passed on to the generations ahead. I see this as one of our most sacred spiritual practices.

So I invite us on a journey of understanding who we are. I encourage us to gently travel together from the common and universal to the individual and deeply personal, traversing a trail that follows from culture to history to ancestry to faith.

As a student of cultural anthropology, I learned much about what shapes us; about what is at the core of who we are. I learned how the language we use affects what colors we are able to see. That there are illnesses unique to various societies as groups seek in their own personal way to understand the body and the mind. Culture affects how we interact with one another. Society in this country, and many countries, perpetuates patriarchy and white supremacy culture. The harms of capitalism shape us. We are overrun by -isms and hate and fear. And this is embedded in each and every one of us – sexist ideologies, racists thoughts and microaggressions. This forms us and we must do the hard work to dismantle this. And yet there is beauty as well. We have artwork and music and dance. We have justice leaders and gender diversity and life-giving faith. This makes us who we are as well, as we appreciate

Picasso or a ballet, as we take a stance towards healing a broken world, as we meet and love people who do not conform to gender norms, as we connect to a faith that calls for us to love. These are the roots – both good and bad – that anchor us to the earth. This is who we are – the roses and the weeds. What do we tend to, and what do we destroy?

History is one step closer to the personal. History is complex because many of our learnings gloss over that which is perhaps the most important in understanding who we are both as a people and as a nation. Hidden history harms us as we seek to discern skewed and concealed data. In order to heal as a nation, we must first acknowledge the harms that have been done. We are founded on the genocide of indigenous peoples and the slavery of those stolen from Africa. Those of this nation uprooted and destroyed entire nations and countless individuals. Generations of lives are now held in poverty, displacement, and racism. And we are called not to be complicit. In this moment I want to lift up the wisdom and insights the author of *Caste* Isabel Wilkerson. “We are not personally responsible for what people who look like us did centuries ago. But we are responsible for what good or ill we will do to people alive with us today.”³ We are responsible for the good or ill we can do for people alive with us today – that is what we do as we make our brief appearance as visitors on this earth. These are the weeds, the thorns, to be uprooted, composted, and given a second chance at beauty, love, and contentment. This is who we are. We are responsible for what we do today.

On our next transition away from the common and towards the individual leads us to the ancestors. Let us remember - “We are only visitors,” offered the tourists. “So am I,” replied the rabbi.⁴ We are those living family members and friends among us, and we are the thousands of ancestors who came before – each bloodline intermixed with both compassion and harm, with both beloved sacrifice and violence, no one escaping the depths of love or the throes of the sinful. When I think of tracing familial lineage, I would be remiss not to touch upon the generational trauma suffered by many – addiction or illness or violence that inevitably passes

³ *Caste* by Isabel Wilkerson pg. 387

⁴ “Only a Visitor” from *Doorways to the Soul* Edited by Elisa Davy Pearmain

down from one generation to the next. And yet I meet this not with animosity but with hope, for I know that each generation can heal bit by bit, ridding themselves of bondage one therapy session or 12-step group at a time. I talk to my ancestors every day – thanking an aunt for modeling humor and compassion, a friend for teaching me how to release regret and connect with nature, a stepfather for demonstrating to me the power of faith. “They too were strengthened by what had gone before.” writes Unitarian Universalist minister Kathleen McTigue, “They too were drawn on by the vision of what might come to be.”⁵ So may we be strengthened by them, may we acquire their wisdom, and may we use this as inspiration to better our lives and the lives of all of those yet to come – in this way we never die. In better understanding my ancestors, I better understand myself. When I wonder, why am I so anxious? Why am I so insecure? Why do I appreciate art so much? Why does every song make me want to dance? I look at those around me, I look at those who have come before, and I find those missing pieces of the puzzle. All of the thousands led to me.

Our faith is perhaps the most personal, intimate piece of this journey. Faith has caused harm, this cannot be denied. The Christian origin story of Adam and Eve grants us “dominion” over all living things that perpetuates a form of supremacy. Passages of the bible have been cherry-picked to wrongly promote homophobia or the rule of one race over another. A Christian denomination that was ultimately a predecessor to our own faith – Calvinism – taught that God arbitrarily picked who was to suffer for eternity and who would be saved. As a nation founded on Christianity, we are all affected by these ideologies. And yet we are also touched, directly or indirectly, by the loving, inspiring teachings of Jesus. Regardless of our relationship with Christianity, many of us came broken from other faith traditions, and found what we needed here. While not a perfect faith, ours is grounded in a history of unconditional, sacred love, of divine forgiveness, and of innate human goodness. We traversed the journey from damnation to universal salvation. And this faith has served to save each of us, to one degree or another. To me, it was an understanding that no one was damned to hell. Our commitment to inherent dignity and worthiness, to journeying together towards truth and meaning, to bringing justice

⁵ “They Are Still with Us” Kathleen McTigue

to the world around us – we are taught to lead our lives through love; to center each decision as that which will promote the most good in the world. Because of our faith we each live lives of compassion and care in ways as individual to us as our thumbprints. Our faith is who we are, shaping us in sacred, intimate ways.

And it is our faith that dictates how we live our lives as visitors on this planet – carrying with us no more baggage than the rabbi. As Unitarian Universalists we are founded in love, yes. And as part of this love, we are called to shape and create a more beautiful society and healthier earth for all of those who will follow us – generations of beings yet to be shaped by culture, history, family, and faith. “We are not personally responsible for what people who look like us did centuries ago. But we are responsible for what good or ill we will do to people alive with us today.”⁶ So, with faith as our guide, may we craft an equitable, loving, accepting, and just culture. May we grapple with the complexities inherent in any family system and do that hard and important work of creating more calm, peace, consistency and compassion for those yet to come. We are not isolated beings but crafted by all that has come before us, crafted by our heritage. So let us anchor our roots deep in the earth as we seek to have a better understanding for who we are, shaping all that will ever be. May we tend to our gardens, nourishing that which gives us life and uprooting that which wounds our souls. May we let our love – and our faith – and the love and faith of the thousands of ancestors in our bloodlines before us – serve as our guiding light, leading us towards a world of increasing goodness, kindness, compassion, and justice – one act at a time. May we understand all of who we are, as we work to shape all that will be.

May it be so, and Amen

⁶ *Caste* by Isabel Wilkerson pg. 387