

## **The Whispers of Our Ancestors**

**By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD, October 27, 2024**

There is a veil, I believe, between the living and the dead. An array of cultures and religions hold that during this time of year that this veil is thin and permeable, a sacred time surrounding the autumn equinox and winter solstice, celebrated in this time of Samhain, of Dia de los Muertos, and more. Thin and porous, allowing spirits to pass through, opening channels of sacred communication between the living and the beloved dead. I offer, too, this veil is slight during that sacred transition from this realm to the next – during that time of death. A curtain between the mortal and the immortal, the transient and the eternal, the tangible and the transcendent. I imagine that as a being begins to transition out of this earthly realm, they hear the whispers of the ancestors, “joins us, welcome, do not be afraid.” During these celebratory and somber holidays, yet also at unexpected times we, the surviving mortals, the grieving and joyous descendants, hear murmurings from the beyond. “I love you,” “I will see you again, beloved,” “Never lose hope. Always have faith.” Through cherished, sacred, and holy murmurings, they may offer us what we need to join them beyond the realm of the living. Through unconditional, eternal, and everlasting love, they offer what we need to persevere in this life with peace, hope, compassion, and faith.

In reflecting upon death in preparation for this sermon, I paused as my mind filled with beloveds who are no longer with me in body but are held forever in spirit. My stepfather who died of dementia, my aunt who died of suicide, my grandfather who drowned, my grandmother who slipped away in peaceful old age. And yet the ancestor whose memory felt most immediate in that moment was a childhood best friend, Emily. In that small pause I initiated, I heard the echoes of her life. Her laugh, her humor, her tears. I heard the phone call, just as clear as if it had been yesterday, “Jane, I have cancer.” I saw her in the hospital, and heard her as she reflected upon her life, sharing with me that she had no regrets. What a blessing. I heard my brother telling me that she died, and I heard the broken, sorrowful, and sacred laments at

her memorial service as her ashes were placed ahead of the mourning. And I still hear her, in the wind and the rain and the rustling leaves. I hear words of love and reminders of our shared joy and tears of laughter, I hear words of perseverance and strength and hope that she embodied on this earthly realm and that help me to survive and thrive and find delight in each of my days. My beloved Emily is here, with me, and she always will be.

What is an ancestor to me? Who are our ancestors? Who carries this sacred title? While the word often refers to a deceased one from whom we are a descendent, I understand the concept slightly differently. I offer, an ancestor is any impactful person who has slipped from this realm from whom we are offered sacred wisdom; anyone who is held always in our hearts and minds and souls and our very beings. These are our ancestors.

We each hold someone that we love as I loved Emily or my aunt Nancy or my stepfather Al or my grandparents Joy and Jack and Gloria and John. And so, I invite us in this moment to pause. To close our eyes. To envision those blessed beings who came before us and whisper into this sacred and consecrated space their names. [pause] They are lifted in this moment into a great cloud of ancestors, joined together in communal love, lifted above this collection of worshipping bodies to join in sacred union.

I offer a reflection from author Linda Hogan. "Walking. I am listening to a deeper way. Suddenly all my ancestors are behind me. Be still, they say. Watch and listen. You are the result of the love of thousands."<sup>1</sup> While not every parental pair from which we descend held between them a deep love, there were thousands who did. So much love has led to just who we are in this moment. Love of partners and love of new life. We are an assortment of centuries of ancestors, an assemblage of each living soul who has come before us, birthing our parents and

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<sup>1</sup> "Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World" By Linda Hogan

grandparents and great grandparents and the lineage that spans all human existence – strengths, weaknesses, successes, failures. I am those whose names have been forgotten and lives fallen out of memory but who live on in my simply being alive. We are invited to listen to the whispers of all who came before, living and dead, as we slip into an understanding of just who we are and just why we are.

Death is the most sacred of experiences, a holy moment to bear witness to. Death and what follows is one of the greatest mysteries bestowed upon us. It is a time of intimacy and vulnerability and profound faith. Sorrow, yes. Beauty, yes. Lament, awe, mystery, grief, wonder, yes. And in this profoundly mysterious experience I think of the question posed by so many, never to be responded to but asked nonetheless: Why? Why did she die so young? Why did he die so tragically? What could I have done differently? There is no answer, no response, no comforting phrase nor reassuring, Godly reply. But there is something. There are inexplicable and sacred whispers of the dead, whispers of love and of remembrance; of compassion and hope bestowed upon us in this time of tragedy.

From where our beloveds reside after this transitory and mortal life is from where these voices arise. And there are no two perfectly paired understandings of that which is beyond comprehension, that which follows this short and fleeting life. There is no one wrong answer nor one right answer simply personal interpretations of this great, unknowable mystery. And yet I think a personal understanding makes that voice we hear all the more real, all the more meaningful, all the more poignant and beautiful and awe filled and true. Why else have millennia of people sought to craft an understanding of life after death? It is to know – beloveds, where are you now? Dear ones, how can I reach you? It is these spaces from where their voices come. My truth has changed as my faith has evolved; we each periodically grapple with what we hold true in our hearts, spirits, and minds. I cannot interpret all theories and beliefs, but I can give voice and meaning to some; some that may not even be distinct but overlap in profound ways. Some understand another realm, a space where spirits or souls reside, a space of wonder and awe, where relatives are united and held together in eternity,

where pain is healed, and wounds cured. We may hear murmurings from the sacred, eternal, blessed, immortal beyond. Or we are but a part of all that is, was, and ever will be, at one with all of creation, born of the trees and the flowers and the wolves, only to return upon our passing, the cycles of death and life, of existence and nonexistence, inherent within this entire planet we call home. Our laughter held in the breeze, our memories imparted in the call of a bird, our whispers of love held in the clouds floating above us, our murmurings of hope and faith at home in a budding azalea. Or we simply live on in another, we are the memories and emotions alive in all of those who survive us, held within us in a sacred and vulnerable place. We converse with our ancestors who live on in that still, small voice within. Or, reincarnation, cycling in perpetuity from one body to the next, thousands of lives accumulating to this one point – you in this life. There is a comfort that ancestors are being reborn. In my studies of Buddhism, I’ve learned of sacred moments of the bereaved witnessing a beloved ancestor in the eyes or actions of a young child. What a blessing to recognize an ancestor in the body of the next generation; a new beginning cloaked in hope. We hear the ancestors in the laughter.

“Still yourself and listen and soon, in time, the Mystery will begin to speak to you,” writes author Mark Nepo, “through its thousand disguises as life on Earth.”<sup>2</sup> Listen, and the Mystery will speak to you. What – who – do we hear when we hear murmurings of hope amidst despair, faith amidst tumult, love amidst hate, compassion amidst anger, beauty amidst the ugly realities of life? How do our ancestors reside in the mystery of this unexpected, impossible hope? In this seemingly unattainable faith? It is about opening space for that love or that compassion or that beauty and inviting the ancestors to fill it. The mystery is us reaching out in confidence that we will be responded to with the whispers of unconditional love murmured from the realm of the eternal or the cascading waterfall or from that still, small voice within or from one who is yet to come. I invite the mystery that the ancestors fulfill this task without us even asking them as they intuit our pain from the beyond. Those who have passed are the wisest among us. Those who have passed are the only ones knowledgeable of the great, eternal

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<sup>2</sup> “Listening” by Mark Nepo

mystery of what exists beyond this realm. Those who have passed are the only ones who know all there is to know about life and death. So, we would be remiss not to welcome them, not just for their love, but for their sacred and eternal insight. Always, each hour, each day, each year. When all seems lost, they will always be there. They arrive in this love, compassion, beauty, and faith. They arrive in this profound mystery. Emily, Nancy, Al – they will always be there.

And when immersed in the love of the living or the dead, conversation is always reciprocal. For me, it is prayer. It is sitting with closed eyes or lighting a candle and offering my cloud of ancestors the words, “I love you,” “you will never leave me,” “thank you for blessing my life.” I tell my heart, I tell the trees, I tell my God and I speak directly to those of whom I have lost. This ritual is so important to me. And they reply, “I love you too, I am always with you.” When tears unexpectedly fill our eyes, memories strike us with great force, the wind seems to whisper words of love, laughter spills from our mouths for no apparent reason, they are with us. They are whispering, “I love you.” Will we be with them again? I believe yes, but none of us could ever truly know. What we do know is their presence in our lives now. What we do know is they forever live in our hearts through memory and through an eternal essence of love. They offer us hope and strength beyond the grave; they shape who we are; they whisper sweet nothings into our ears, for no other reason than because they love us. So may we offer thank you, beloved, for memories of dancing with me in the rain, for memories of comforting my sorrow, for memories of love’s great embrace for this has impacted me in ways big and small. Thank you, in the beyond, for guiding me in faith, hope, compassion, and beauty, for enhancing my life in all the ways of the wise and loving spirit. Thank you, dear, beloved Emily, in all of your youth and beauty, for teaching me what it means to live without regret. Thank you, dear, beloved Aunt Nancy, in all your humor and grace, for teaching me how important it is to live with joy and laughter. Thank you, dear, beloved grandmother, for teaching me the importance of unconditional, heartfelt, genuine kindness and love.

In the chill, autumnal air, as the leaves transition from green to brown and orange, may we welcome the celebratory and somber time of that thin and permeable veil, where the living and

the dead nearly touch. The dead are with us, always, whispering words of love into our awaiting ears. Teaching us of hope and faith and awe; bestowing upon us wisdom and strength. They are with us in the love they have held for millennia, love trickling through the generations culminating in just who we are. They are with us. They are with us as we light a candle and through prayer offer sentiments of profound, eternal love. They are with us. So may we listen to the love held, always, in the wind, the crashing waves, the chirping birds. May we listen to the voices that reach us from the unknowable, mysterious realm of the eternal, offering peace and guidance and comfort. May we listen to the whispers within, in our hearts and minds and bodies, for this is how they reach us. May we listen to the joyful words and laughter of young children. May we listen, beloveds, for the dead are never gone. They are held within. They are with us, always. Listen.

May it be so, and Amen