

Through the Veil

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD November 2, 2025

We are in the season of Día de Los Muertos and Samhain and All Souls and All Saints. It is a time when the living and the dead transcend the realms that separate each other and join together in love and beauty and memory. The mortal with the immortal, the finite with the infinite. The veil between the living and the dead is permeable and thin, as we reach out and touch all of those who have passed – heart to heart, spirit to spirit. When we hear their sacred whispers all around us. Pause, and listen. Murmurings of love. Of memories. Of hope. Of inspiration. All of that of which the dead want to bestow upon the living. It is a sacred and hallowed time. A time to remember, the dead remain in the landscape. In our spirits. “Come back!” cries ancient Greek author Euripides “Even as a shadow, even as a dream.”¹ Our ancestors remain through generations in their legacy. I wonder if this is what these holidays are about: Yes, connecting with our dead loved ones whose spirits live on within and around us, but also to make us look into our own future grave. In these celebrations we realize that our lives are poignantly finite. If taken to heart, we focus on our own imminent mortality. Our own legacy.

I begin this discussion by offering a couple of important caveats - it is such a complex theme to explore. Ancestors are not always those of whom we share blood. Ancestors can be chosen. It is the myriad people who came before us shaping who we are. Likewise, generations do not have to be passed down from parent to child to parent – many of us will not be parents. But our legacy lives on. There are those ancestors of whom good memories are few and far between. There are those who do not offer lessons of what we should do, but of what we should not do. There are those who tried and failed, who did the best they could but fell short. There are those of us who do not know much of where we come from, whether a rich history of activists or immigrants or those who simply persevered. I encourage conversations with those

¹ *Herakles* by Euripides.

generations who are still alive, before those stories are lost to the trees and the brown earth. The popularity of DNA kits speaks to the desire for connection and knowledge of those who have come before. So I encourage us to learn, question, research, and grow.

There is not much that is universal in death, or even in mourning. But one thing that is often universal is the idea that our beloveds are still with us, that they never truly left. Our atoms disperse, and we become a part of all that is – held in the trees and the deer and the bubbling spring. We are part of a never-ending cycle of birth and death found in nature. There are the memories and stories that we hold forever in our thoughts and hearts and spirits. These stories offer strength and unconditional love as we work to emulate those who came before, passed down and down and down. There is the literal blood in our veins and genes that alter every piece of what we are and who we are and why we are, passed down and down and down. Can that universal stardust of which we are each made be a connection between the living and the dead? To some, our ancestors are held in another blessed and beautiful realm, a piece of an everlasting, immortal, and divine life that we could never truly understand. Our beloveds are with us in spirit, they never truly leave.

I am reminded of the memory of my great grandfather Yashinari Shimamura, held in my very being even though we never met. Yashinari immigrated from Japan to the United States in search of a better life. He established himself in this novel country, marrying and fathering two children, one of whom became my grandfather. By the time my grandfather was in grade school, World War II broke out, and this country became a vile place to live for those of Japanese lineage. My great-grandfather lost his business, and my grandfather faced violence regularly at school. Why do I share this? Because of their strength. Their strength to persevere amidst hate and violence and profound stigma and persistent fear. And this was a legacy, this was passed down through the generations. While no succeeding generation faced such violence and bigotry, we hold an intense and everlasting strength and determination. I have seen my own generation and the generations above me act with such strength and

perseverance, overcoming great adversity. And I have such respect for this. And I thank Yashinari Shimamura for the legacy he left on our family.

Our ancestors have collectively shaped all that is. My ability to go to receive higher education, as a woman, is because of the lineage of women before me. My grandmother was the first woman in our family and one of the very few women of her generation to receive a college education. Desegregation is because of the myriad black individuals who risked life and livelihood to offer a better future for those descendants of whom they would never even meet. Immigrants of all nations traveled great distances for a better, more secure life for their children and grandchildren and great grandchildren. These are profound legacies. Our ancestors marched during Vietnam just as we march at No Kings. Our ancestors of other countries fought against fascism just as we are fighting against fascism right now. So may we bring this strength and determination. And there is a great-grandmother whose simple kindness and unconditional love was passed on from generation to generation. A grandfather who pursued not monetary gain, but a life lived around values and integrity, passed on and on and on. And this kindness, love, and integrity ripples throughout the web of life. Our ancestors wanted to offer perseverance. They wanted to offer a flicker of hope that can never be extinguished. These are their legacies. This is how we remember them. This is how, though gone forever in body, they remain immortal in spirit.

Which begs the question, what do we want our legacy to be? What will remain of us when - inevitably - our physical bodies leave this blessed realm? How can we face our own mortality? This is a conscious and intentional decision that many may not consider. I want mine to be that of a faith leader. Passing on the tenets of a life-giving faith that in many ways saved my own life. I want to pass down compassion and love and an understanding of dignity and worthiness. Do we want our legacy to be enduring strength and perseverance, as my great-grandfather, or a pioneer in education, as my grandmother? I speak to myriad people in my line of work, many of whom are grappling with just this - who they are. And it is who we are that in so many ways shapes what we leave when we cross that veil to the dead. Someone who

overcame the adversity of addiction offers the generations the power of perseverance. Someone who overcame poverty offers the next generation the strength to overcome all sorts of adversity. Someone who became the first in their family to go to college offers the next generation hope that they, too, can achieve the unexpected. Your legacy is what you leave long after you leave this broken and beautiful realm. We face our own mortality. We face our own finitude. We face our own impermanence. So, what piece of us do we want to let live on in perpetuity, affecting all that is and all that ever will be?

We can feel so intimately tied to a direct ancestor when we contemplate the value of what they offered us: love or strength or perseverance. We connect to the poignancy of what we have received. Someone gave us that of which they held deep and intimately within, and this directly shaped exactly who we are, faults and strengths alike. And we connect with them through that love and that beauty that transcends even death. May we accept death and mourn death, so that we, in turn, can truly heal and be united with the deceased, in mind and in spirit and in story. In the trees and in memory. It is acceptance - learning to live with the new reality. We lose partners and friends, leaders and elderly grandparents. Each with its own distinctive path and unique journey of mourning and loss, some far more poignant than others. Acceptance is when we are able to return to our own life, with a gaping hole in our hearts, with a life that will never look the same or be the same, but will progress with a sense of normalcy from day to month to year. We grow and learn and thrive.

Rev. Kathleen McTigue offers, “We, the living, carry them with us: we are their voices, their hands and their hearts.”² They are always with us, sometimes we just have to look. In the trees, in our memories, in our blood, on the other side of that thin and permeable veil, in the stardust and in a sacred and unknowable realm, they are there, whispering into our ears.

So, in this celebratory season of death, may we reach through that ever illusive yet thin and permeable veil whispering our lament to them as they whisper their love to us in return. This is

² “They Are with Us Still” by Kathleen McTigue

a sacred and hallowed time. May we remember, we are neither the beginning nor the end, but part of all that is, was, and ever will be. We are not eternal in any physical sense but in our legacy. So may we embody the legacies of the ancestors and may we embody our own in return. May we shape all of those who are yet to come - leaving this realm in body but remaining in spirit. As we face our own imminent mortality we ask, what do we want to leave in this world long after we have left this impermanent and finite realm. So, may we carry the strength and determination and perseverance of all who came before. May we connect with them through that love and that beauty that transcends even death. May we accept death and mourn death, so that we, in turn, can truly heal and be united with the deceased, in mind and in spirit. In the wind and the trees, they are there. In our blood and our memories, they are there. All around us, in ways tangible and intangible, the wind, trees, the stories and the spirit, they are there. Through the veil, they are there.

May it be so, and amen