

ACKNOWLEDGING OUR SPIRITUAL ANCESTORS

by Rev. Kit Ketcham, January 14, 2007

What a friend we have in Jesus! And Socrates and the Buddha and Moses! The names of these heroes of philosophy and faith echo down the centuries, recognized by most of us here in this room. Yet there are other spiritual ancestors whose names are unfamiliar, even strange-sounding, men and women whose legacy is as profound and far-reaching as theirs.

For example, who is Legba? Who is Erzulie? Ogun? Shango? And who are your spiritual ancestors?

To clarify just what I mean by spiritual ancestors, let's separate the meaning of "spiritual" from the meaning of "religious". When I speak of religion, I tend to mean institutionalized faith, the church community formed when people come together to reflect on life's meaning, to work toward justice, to frame ethical, personal and communal responses to evil. It is a corporate faith, outlined in principles and history. The Pope represents "religion", as does the Unitarian Universalist Association in Boston.

When I speak of "spirit", I mean that intangible, more private experience which underlines my personal faith; "spirit" informs my behavior and my search for meaning. As a minister, I work to provide a spiritual experience within a religious context. I do this by providing times for us to reflect privately, to sing together, to share our joys and sorrows, to work to bring justice and mercy to a restless world.

You and I are the representatives of “spirit”. We embody the character and ideals which have been handed down to us by our spiritual ancestors.

So again I ask you---who are your spiritual ancestors? Who are the men and women who have demonstrated to you the character and ideals which inspire your spiritual self? Let me give you a few moments to consider who these women and men might be, and then I will give us a chance to name them, for in naming our ancestors, we uphold an ancient tradition, of invoking the sacred by speaking its many names.

BRIEF SILENCE AND A PERIOD OF NAMING OF THE ANCESTORS

What are the characteristics and ideals that have caused you to name these women and men as your spiritual ancestors? When we recognize the divine spark within another human being, we give it many names. What are the sacred characteristics and ideals that you see in these ancestors? (NAME THEM ALOUD.)

The first spiritual ancestor I was aware of, in my younger days, was Jesus. His stories, his ideas, his behavior, his beliefs formed the fabric of my daily life. It was clear that his life informed my parents’ lives. His picture was all over our house, his name and ideals the subject of our songs. We prayed “Gentle Jesus, meek and mild...” Though we knew that GOD was the ultimate object of our worship, we focused on Jesus’ life and teachings more than God’s persona and God’s laws. Somehow it was easier to get to God through Jesus.

As I grew older and began to look at traditional Christianity with a more jaundiced eye, I learned about other men and women who loomed large and who called me to consider additional premises of ethical human behavior: Socrates' courage and willingness to die rather than betray a principle; Albert Schweitzer's reverence for life; Jane Addams' work at Hull House in service to humanity; Martin Luther King Jr's work for Civil Rights for all. These were people who were greater than most of the humans I knew personally. Certainly they were greater than I.

But from learning about their lives, I began to see that the spark that made them great might be in me too. They were human beings who had stepped outside the confines of everyday life to answer a greater call. They were not content with the norms of their lives; they were impelled to look beneath the doctrines of conventional religion to find the meaning hidden there. I began to understand the limitations of institutional religion and to crave a way to grow beyond those limits.

These are the kinds of men and women who become our spiritual ancestors, whose lives portray a vision, not simply a lockstep approach to life. In several religious traditions, these persons are gradually deified and exalted beyond human scope. The Buddha, when he founded Buddhism, resisted the efforts of his followers to call him a God; after his death, however, the common human need to revere a person whose life was exemplary has caused many Buddhists to consider him a deity.

Jesus, whose life and death are familiar to us, also resisted his disciples' desire to call him God; after his death, that same human need deified Jesus and most traditional Christians today consider Jesus a member of the triune Godhead--fully human and fully God.

In seminary, I had a chance to study three of the religions of the African diaspora, the regions in the Americas to which slaves were brought. Those religions, Voudou, Santeria, and Candomble, sprang from the marriage of indigenous African religion with enforced Christianity. Africans abducted to the New World as slaves found themselves far from home, cruelly treated, cut off from their own religious communities, and obliged to create a spiritual home under unbelievably harsh conditions.

Forced by slaveowners to practice Christianity, they created new religions which combined many of the outward signs of Christianity with the mystic rites of their indigenous traditions. The results allowed slaves to worship in their accustomed ways while appearing to comply with their masters' requirements.

The Yoruban and Dahomean traditions of West Africa were ancestor-revering traditions. Faced with the need to adopt Christianity, at least outwardly, the ingenious Africans found ways to meld their ancestor-deities with the Catholic saints of their captors.

Slaves who were subjected to Protestantism did not have saints to work with, but they did see the Holy Spirit as incarnated in human bodies through the trance of possession and thereby managed to maintain their indigenous roots.

The African-American sermon style of call and response, the “amen corner” and gospel rhythms very likely have evolved from the strong need for all worshipers to participate actively and bodily in the religious ceremony.

It is essential to remember, when we Euro-Americans sing and enjoy African-American spirituals and gospel music, that these beautiful songs are a direct outcome of slavery and oppression. Remembering this fact adds a layer of new understanding and compassion to our sometimes superficial enjoyment of this soulfilled music.

The ancestors of Yoruban and Dahomean traditions--Legba, Erzulie, Ogun, Shango, and a host of others--came to be seen as incarnations of the same God Spirit that the Christians worshipped. The creative minds and hearts that created Voudou in Haiti, Santeria in Cuba, and Candomble in Brazil saw the compassionate human saints and prophets of their captors to be representations of the same divinity that they worshipped, though the implications of their message had been rejected by slaveowners.

And the divine ones of Voudou, Santeria, and Candomble were Yoruban and Dahomean ancestors. They were the deified relatives of slaves. Their ideals and character had been celebrated for centuries. The memory of these holy women and men had been kept alive and sanctified by generations of Africans, and this they maintained even under the harshest conditions of slavery.

The spirits literally visited their ceremonies, possessing the bodies temporarily of those who were willing and able to be the bearer of the spirit, and imparting the wisdom of the ancestors to the gathered community.

In Haiti, Voudou was the inspirational force which fired the movement to overthrow the colonial government and bring freedom to Haitian slaves. In other lands where slavery reigned, Santeria and Candomble gave slaves an opportunity to form a safe community within the context of slavery, giving strength and a sense of salvation to a captive people. Women's authority was revered and promoted. The community might be captive, but hearts and spirit would not be forever enslaved.

In the Afro-Atlantic religions, there is a sense of continuity in the divinity of the ancestors. Through the trance of possession, the spirit of the ancestor visits the community, the possessed person IS momentarily the ancestor, speaking a spirit language, able to do things that the human is not normally able to do. In a real sense, during possession, a live human IS the ancestor, embodying the character and the ideals of the ancestor.

We may think of those indigenous religions as fantastical and mysterious, sometimes even dangerous. But they are a true expression of the human heart and soul as much as our poetry, our hymns and our chalice lightings.

For we too are very much aware that we do not stand alone, that we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before, whether our ancestors are such famous heroes as Jesus or Moses or whether they are our own mothers and fathers and grandparents.

We can see some of the ways other human beings, including ourselves, have adopted some of these religious practices. We think of the speaking in tongues of Pentecostal worshipers; we think of those who are “slain by the spirit” in their worship and whom we have perhaps rudely nicknamed “holy rollers”.

In our own worship practices, we invoke the names of our revered ones who have gone before us--William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Thomas Jefferson. In our sharing of joys and sorrows, we utter the stories of our lives and strengthen the bonds between us.

“The Spirit”, which is known in these indigenous religions as “ase”, we think of as the “spirit of life” or the “holy spirit” or, in old-fashioned Christianity, as “the holy ghost”. But it is the same idea--the creative force that dwells within all beings and impels them toward right action.

Now it’s very interesting to consider these religions and to study their development, to note the ways they intersect with the religions we are most familiar with, and yet, this is not the real point of my remarks this afternoon.

I have spoken to you of “spiritual ancestors”. I have reminded you that we all have spiritual ancestors, from famous heroes of the past to our own relatives and friends who have died. We have practices which parallel, if not duplicate, some very ancient practices. I have shown you that developing religion to meet particular human needs is a natural human phenomenon. It is not strange nor evil to sanctify, even deify, a dead hero.

But as I was writing this sermon, it dawned on me that if I leave out the true lesson of this study, for myself, I will shortchange you. I will have simply told you some interesting facts and perhaps encouraged you to study these religions for yourselves. But that is not all I learned from studying the religions of the African diaspora.

What I began to see, early in my study, was that my assumptions about these religions--that they were primitive, magical, scary, colorful, very different from my faith tradition of Unitarian Universalism--my assumptions had led me into one of the most basic errors of human thinking.

My assumptions about these religions had reinforced my sense of separation from the people who found solace and nurture and wisdom within them. I could observe the healing ceremonies, the dances of possession, the divination of one's future, from a distance, thinking how different they are from me and that I would never pursue such a religion. It simply had no attraction for me except as entertainment.

That felt wrong to me and I began to examine the implications of such an attraction. I realized that this was a pretty elitist attitude on my part--I was looking at people's religious faith as something to laugh at, to disdain, to stand back from. I could not, I would not identify with it; I was better than, separate from those who practiced animal sacrifice and fortune-telling and spirit possession.

"Being separate from or better than" is a deeply ingrained human attitude. We lord it over a lot of people for a variety of reasons--they dress funny, they speak poorly, they have weeds in their yards, their kids run wild, they are uneducated or too conservative.

We are full of ways they could improve themselves, if they'd only try. We can be pretty self-righteous. And self-righteousness is a feature of all the negative "isms" that we have become aware of--racism, ableism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, classism, even "religionism". We are better than, we are separate from "those people".

I think it's most valuable to study these often-misunderstood religions partly because they grew out of slavehood and demonstrate the courage and creativity of the African peoples who were forced from their homes and into captivity.

But they also give us a glimpse into the roots of human beings who still experience a form of slavery--the subtle captivity of racism and white privilege, which enslaves us all whatever our race.

As long as we allow our own sense of separateness from other humans to flourish, as long as we nurture it by judging others' habits or practices as less valuable than our own, we are reinforcing the structure of racism and all the other isms. We are different from one another, but this does not make us better than they nor separate from them.

Understanding is the basis of social justice work--understanding and compassion, not superficial knowledge and pity, but the real understanding and compassion that come from removing our blinders and our defenses and listening to what it is like to be a person of color in this country.

To shift gears into a possible analogy, sexual assault violates the dignity of the victim at a deep, fundamental level. It enforces a sense of helplessness and induces feelings of rage, depression, and self-destruction.

Whether you are the victim of sexual assault or the friend or relative of a victim, your life is forever altered by this cruel act. It is hard to trust, hard to overlook the jokes and snide remarks, it is impossible to just “snap out of it”. We are sympathetic to the plight of victims of sexual assault, whether we fully understand their pain or not.

But slavery was the literal and figurative rape of an entire people, and it too is playing out in our history. Human beings who were debased and destroyed by the indignity of slavery are not dead and gone. Our enslaving forebears and the ancestors of our neighbors and friends of color are, in a sense, alive and in pain. The lives of all their descendants have been forever altered by this historical act of rape.

Our friends and neighbors of color may find it hard to trust, hard to overlook the jokes and snide remarks. They may find it hard to believe that being passed over for a job is not related to their race. We too find it hard to trust, hard to refrain from judgment, hard to understand their feelings, hard to see our own privileged status.

Just as the self-worth and dignity of an assault victim is fragile and easily torn, the self-worth and dignity of a victim of years of racial cruelty and even murder cannot be easily mended. We cannot just “snap out of it”, as we might like to do. The outrage of slavery has affected all of us in very damaging ways, whether we are people of color or white.

Nor are the victims of American slavery the only ones we are talking about. Native Americans, Hispanics, Asians and others have been pushed into metaphorical slavery by equally inhumane practices--broken treaties, reservations, internment, marginalization. We ourselves may not have mistreated anyone, but we suffer too--unless we take steps to overcome the suffering.

As a denomination, Unitarian Universalism has never attracted large numbers of persons of color. Our worship practices may be a bit formal, our faces a bit too pale, our manner a bit too Anglo. Whatever the reason, attracting lots of persons of color to our congregations is not our first job.

Our first job is to understand the underlying attitudes and beliefs that separate us from other human beings. Our first task is to examine ourselves, rooting out the ways we separate ourselves and cast ourselves in an elite role.

The first principle of the Unitarian Universalist Association states that we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. This is the foundation of our religious faith. From it all our other principles flow, until they culminate in the seventh principle---that we affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of existence, of which we are all a part.

This suggests to me that unless we accord to all persons the same worth and dignity that we ourselves want to have, the interdependent web is out of whack. Human life is a key piece of the web of life and all humans must be valued equally.

We are not separate from one another; we are not better than one another. We are not the same as one another, but we are brothers and sisters. And we are becoming the ancestors of generations yet to be.

What will they have to revere about us? Let us pray that our memories are revered for our true and deep commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of every person, with all the ramifications of that profound act as it plays out in history yet to come. And let us hope that the interdependent web, which supports and nurtures us, grows stronger and stronger with our every step toward wholeness within the human family.

Let's pause for a moment of silent reflection and prayer.

Our closing hymn is # 318, "We Would Be One".

BENEDICTION

Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that we are brothers and sisters across this globe, that we may have different ways, different cultures, but our human needs are the same---for food, clean air and water, community, and freedom. May we offer our respect and our friendship across the fences that so often separate us. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.