

“We Contain Multitudes”

Rev. Shawn Newton

First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

1 November 2020

Samhain - Day of Remembrance - All Souls

In the past couple of years, to convey the news
that someone has died, I've more and more heard
people say of the deceased that
“they are now with the ancestors.”

I'm not particularly keen on euphemisms
when it comes to speaking about death, but I like this one.

In our death-denying culture, there is a need, I believe,
to draw on language that speaks the truth,
that speaks to the reality of the situation,
to the hard fact of the matter.

That's not to say there isn't room for the poetic,
but sometimes it simply needs to be stated
that: “So and So has died.”

But recently when I heard it said of two people
in our denomination who were quite dear to me,
that they are “now with the ancestors,”
there was an immediate sense of reordering in my mind,
as I moved these people who had only moments before
been counted among the living
to that different category of being among the ancestors,
or those who have gone before.

I think that particular turn of phrase landed for me in a new and poignant way
because I spent part of my vacation this year
digging more deeply into my own ancestry.

Being off but also being very much tethered to home,
I finally got around to piecing together my genealogy,
building on work already done by several of my relatives.

I knew that I come from a long line of ministers.
I didn't, until this summer, though, appreciate just how long that line is,
tracing through time to the beginnings of the English Reformation.

Many of my great-great-grandfathers going back generations
were among the Puritan ministers who founded Massachusetts
and the Anglican clergy who founded Virginia.

In the way the phrase "it's turtles all the way down"
describes the philosophical problem of infinite regress,
in my family, it's pretty much "ministers all the way down."

The ones from New England in the 17th and 18th centuries founded and served
churches that are today Unitarian Universalist congregations.

I have found that genealogy, as a spiritual practice,
helps one to appreciate the often haphazard series of events
that brought each of us into being.

One of these events for me involved my first known ancestor to come to Canada,
though very much against his will.

The Rev. John Williams served as the minister of the Puritan church in Deerfield,
Massachusetts at the turn of the 18th century.

In 1704, during Queen Anne's War,
he, his wife, their children, and over a hundred of his parishioners were captured by a
number of Mohawk men and French soldiers from Quebec,
who seized them in retaliation for a French pirate (I'm not making this up!)
who had recently been taken hostage by the British.

Rev. Williams and the others were marched some 500 kilometres
through the depths of winter to Montreal.

While there's much more to the story, the most important part to me
is that Rev. Williams' wife, Eunice Mather, fell while crossing a river,
and was reportedly killed by one of the Mohawk men.

In time Rev. Williams was freed and returned to his home,
with most of his family and congregation.

But he returned a widower who would, in time, remarry.

And it was from that second marriage that, thankfully, for me,
was born Abigail Williams, my 7th great-grandmother,
through my mother's mother's line.

So, I, quite literally, owe my life to a pirate.
I would not be here had kidnappings and killings not happened.
This can be a complicated bit of family history to hold.

But, whether we know it or not,
each of us surely has countless such stories in our history.

Of mishaps and near misses, of good luck and improbable grace,
that have made it possible that each of us is alive and here today.

Taking that in, truly appreciating the many twists and turns
through time that broke in our favour,
allows a deeper hearing of the point of Mary Feagan's poem,
"I Am a Millions-of-Years-Old Wonder."

I am a millions-of-years-old wonder.
I am an international—no, cosmic—treasure.

I ought to be safeguarded in a museum somewhere
like Paganini's old violin.
I ought to be gasped at,
talked about in hushed, amazed, reverential tones.
Viewers would touch me gently and feel lucky.

Daily newspaper headlines could say,
"Mary Feagan Exists Again Today!"
Radio and TV shows could discuss me, my ordinary events—
that I saw a bluebird with my millions-of-years-old eyes
and heard it sing with my highly advanced, evolutionary ears;
that my graceful hands with opposable thumbs
fed my sensitive mouth delicious strawberries that it tasted.

Then, without a conscious thought, my brilliant brain
directed my masterful, complex digestive system
to assimilate and use them for fuel

to wash dishes, write poems, hold babies, laugh, and give kisses.

No one would completely understand or dare to finally say
how my marvelous magical, famous, fine self exists, really.
I am just, bottom line, a millions-of-years-old wonder.
[And,] you are too.

And so we are.

On this day when we call to mind our dead,
we recall our many ancestors,
be they biological, spiritual, or otherwise.

There are, after all, many ways
to be related to those we've loved and lost.
There are many we may count as our ancestors.

The poet Jane Shore captures so poignantly
the notion of the great cloud of witnesses
that surround us in her poem "The Blue Address Book."

Like the other useless
things I can't bear
to get rid of—her
nylon nightgowns,

his gold-plated
cufflinks, his wooden
shoetrees, in a size
no one I know can use—

I'm stuck with their blue
pleather address book,
its twenty-six chapters
printed in ballpoint pen,

X'd out, penciled in,
and after she passed away,
amended in his hand,
recording, as in a family

Bible, those generations
born, married, and since
relocated to their graves:
Abramowitz to Zimmerman.

Great-uncles, aunts,
cousins once removed,
whose cheeks I kissed,
whose food I ate,

are in this book still
alive, immortal, each
name accompanied
by a face....

The baby-blue cover
has a patina of grease,
the pages steeped
in the cigarette smoke

of years spent in my
parents' junk drawer.
Though scattered
in different graveyards,

here they're all
accounted for.

Their souls disperse, dust motes in the air that I inhale.

On this Day of Remembrance,
it is right and good that we give thought
to what endures of our ancestors.

That we give thought to the hopes and dreams
that gave shape to the lives that shaped ours,
and consider the ways they may speak to and through us even still.

In reflecting on your ancestors,
in whatever ways you claim them,
are there aspirations and expectations of theirs,
whether ever spoken of or not, that live on in you?

Do these forebears continue to shape your life?

I'm not sure that any one of us can honestly answer "no."

For better, and sometimes for worse,
it seems we are instilled with the hopes and dreams of our ancestors—
and sometimes, it must be said, saddled with their baggage, too.

Whether we have rejected these things, deciding them not to be our own,
or devoted the energy of our lives trying to fulfill or deny them,
our inheritance from those who've gone before us
can often linger on as our odd, and sometimes unwelcome, companions.

It can be said of each of us that we contain multitudes.

Yet, our complicated tethers to the past
provide the threads of continuity over time.

They form an ongoing conversation between the generations
about the unfolding direction of the world,
a conversation that must never, ultimately, be limited
to the needs and wants of a single generation,
but open to and shaped by the hopes and dreams,
the challenges and fears, the shining goals and enduring commitment
of generations past and generations still to come.

To be alive means being forever caught in the middle,
to live in-between—with moral obligations to those who've gone before,
as well as very real, practical and moral obligations
to all those who will come after us.

In the meantime, in *this precious meantime* that is ours,
we are given to finding our own way in this world,
figuring out how best to live a life of meaning and purpose.

But the writer of the *Book of Deuteronomy*, in the Jewish scriptures,
reminds us that:

We build on foundations we did not lay.
We warm ourselves at fires we did not light.

We sit in the shade of trees we did not plant.
And we drink from wells we did not dig.¹

These words, themselves now nearly 3000 years old,
remind us that the past does, indeed, deserve its due.

We come into this world
with a great debt of gratitude to be paid
to those who've made possible all that blesses and sustains us.

Part of that debt is paid by passing along the gifts we've been given.

And in coming to terms that we, too,
will one day be counted among the ancestors.

In his poem titled, "For the Anniversary of My Death,"
W. S. Merwin writes:

Every year without knowing it I have passed the day
When the last fires will wave to me
And the silence will set out
Tireless traveler
Like the beam of a lightless star

Then I will no longer
Find myself in life as in a strange garment. . .

Every year, as we spin on this globe around the sun,
each of us passes the anniversary of our death.

That final date that will at some point in the future,
be entered by others into countless forms to settle our affairs,
and perhaps even etched into granite
to mark the years we were given on this good green earth.

It can be a deeply unsettling thought.

After all, there's little in this life more sobering

¹ Freely adapted from Deuteronomy 6:10-12.

than thinking of ourselves in the past tense.

And, yet, that deeply unsettling thought
can be the key to unleashing life itself.

Because it prompts us to ask what our lives are for.

Because it drives us to question our own life's purpose,
and to ponder the meaning of our days.

Because it causes us to wonder at what of us
will survive after death, what of us—
the things we did, what we loved, and who we were—
will live beyond the grave and carry our legacy forward in the world.

Few, if any of us, will fall into the category of those long-remembered,
generations hence.

More likely, the impact of our lives, will be, as it always has,
like gentle ripples moving out in ever-widening circles—
shaping the planet and people yet to come
by how we lived the days that were ours—
and the days that are ours still.

May we live well, in this day we have been given.

Blessed Be.