

**ANCESTRAL TOOLS FOR SURVIVING AND THRIVING
Which Have You Inherited?**

Rev. Jack Donovan – 10/15/17

Unitarian Universalist Church - St Petersburg, Florida

READINGS (printed after sermon)

- Invocation** from *The Interior Castle*, by Teresa of Avila
Meditation *Before There Was a Trace*, by Bibi Hayati
Readings #1 *A Biblical Genealogy* from Gospels of Matthew and Luke
From *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates
Readings #2 from *The Tree*, by Colin Tudge
I Dwell in Possibility, by Emily Dickinson

SERMON

Recently as I gazed out my window at the sky, a large bird flew into sight, heading toward Crescent Lake or Coffee Pot Bayou. Suddenly it changed course 60 degrees. Why? Maybe its destination was the marina and it had just spotted the boat masts. Maybe its goal was food scraps and it had heard a flock downtown squawking "Open Dumpster! Open Dumpster!". Maybe its intent was a day on the waves and it had just smelled the open sea. Or maybe it needed to make a bathroom stop and it knew there was a gas station near my house.

Instinct helps birds navigate. But so do experience and learning. The fledgling osprey practices soaring and diving, all the while skreeking back to its parents on the treetop. Sandhill cranes, for weeks before migrating north, school the young how to fly in flock.

Does not our surviving and thriving require the same? We need to learn how to use our great innate potentials that we've been talking about the last couple of Sundays. How can you do it? How well are you doing?

This morning I'd like us to reflect on what tools we've inherited, from thousands of generations ago and recently, to fulfill our innate potentials – and also to reflect on how well we've grasped these tools and used them.

Last weekend I flew to Massachusetts for my 55th high school class reunion, and I used that trip to do some of this kind of reflection. In my lifetime there have always been systems to travel long distances amidst strangers who were actually trained to help me as long as I had a ticket and government identification. And I could read the signs and ask for help. I

had money for food at the terminal – and I had a book which could have been about tips for traveling if I’d wanted. I had tools by which to navigate, all of which are fairly new technically and, to some degree, culturally and interculturally.

So, my 55th high school class reunion. I remembered, I had been the boy voted most likely to succeed. Yes – we have these identifications through ritual tools of comparison and competition. What good do they do? The girl voted most likely to succeed wouldn’t be at the reunion – she and her husband were in northern Italy where they went each fall to help friends with the grape harvest. Yes, for many that would be most successful – and we did greatly miss her.

But onward. At Boston’s Logan Airport I got a rental car. The agency of strangers trusted me with their car because of my government ID and my credit card – so I was free to travel – a stranger in a familiar land.

I headed northwest from Boston toward Concord, my hometown. Nostalgia and questions of fulfillment came from all around as I drove. The long tunnel from the airport took me under the new headquarters of the Unitarian Universalist Association, which had been responsible for training me in using the tools of ministry. What were those tools as the UU tradition understood them? How well had they been taught? How well had I learned? Questions by which to grow!

I emerged from the tunnels not far from Boston’s Italian North End where I had learned to say *cannoli* (another way to grow) and about how the North End’s violent paternalistic Mafia’ code of honor had led to the City’s lowest rate of assault on women. Such a paradox, resolved only when a feminist teacher cut through it, observing, There must be a better motivation for women’s safety and security than male honor. How much of that insight had I grasped? What improvement in my living?

Driving up onto an overpass, I glimpsed the towering Bunker Hill Monument in the far distance. “Don’t fire until you see the whites of their eyes,” the colonial captain told his troops. Such courage to give democracy birth. Such a tool. Such a lesson. But as a Foreign Service Officer responsible for bringing supplies to refugee villages in Vietnam during the war, I stopped carrying a gun because it was the wrong signal by which to win safety, especially given that people tend not to kill the goose bringing golden eggs.

Perhaps I inherited that attitudinal goal and line of logic from my mother. My mother had also been born on Bunker Hill, on the square where the shadow of the monumental obelisk touched almost every house in the

course of the day, like a hand clocking the appointed hours of virtue. My mother believed in the League of Women Voters, the ASPCA, the NAACP, and Mother Teresa. And she lived her beliefs. I ponder how effectively those beliefs were inherited by me or others she touched.

Then I drove past Boston University where I'll never forget hearing Professor Howard Zinn contrast a people's history of the world with the empire's history of the world. That was new to me then. How does one get closer to truth and right and good? How does one find fulfillment? There are teachers.

Across the Charles River I scanned the riverbanks to spot Harvard's Kennedy School of Government where I had studied political economic policy. I remembered my systems analysis professor's advice, "Always have a new question you're working on." How often do I do that? That's a good question. It won my professor a Nobel Prize in Economics.

A few blocks beyond the Kennedy School was the Peabody Natural History Museum with its giant whale bones hanging from the ceiling, and its dinosaur skeleton, and its dioramas of stone-age people living on the rises above waterways and savannahs, hunting, gathering, weaving, cooking, designing flutes, sculpting animal shapes, producing the stone tools now arrayed in the cases, fine edged chips still sharp enough to scrape a deer skin or carve a roast pig. As a child I was enchanted by the wonders of this museum and the dioramas. And how I thrilled when someone out in Concord – one of the farmers or a Thoreau-like wanderer - found an old arrowhead and I got to test it with my own fingers.

All of this taught me that once we were hunters and gatherers. As a boy I longed to understand life by a campfire above a savannah with a little group I knew from birth. And then the Peace Corps sent me to live on a self-sufficient Pacific island and I experienced it for myself - and to this day I'm still realizing what I learned that influenced the subsequent trajectory of my life. What is fulfillment on an island of 300 people where nobody knows how to read or write or do math? The older folks knew fulfillment – you could see it. But the younger folks – they were losing that third-world knowledge to the encroaching and seductive first world. How do we regain and retain intimacy with our world? What skills and attitudes and practices?

After driving past BU and Harvard, I was supposed to stay on the route that was approximately the same as Paul Revere's on his way to Lexington and Concord. But lost in reverie and nostalgia, I missed my turn at the new exit ramp that somebody had added while I was away, and I ended up heading due west along the route that Revere's colleague Samuel Dawes followed.

Why did every village Revere called on send militia to Concord, but none from Dawes'? Revere was what is known as a connector. He had friends in every village outside Boston and they knew his word was gold. Dawes was an esteemed man in his own circle, but nobody on his route of villages knew him, so they stayed home.

Who do you trust and why? Suspicion is innate and essential for human survival. But acquaintance lets us test trustworthiness. What are your tools for making acquaintance? Our colonial ancestors knew the need – perhaps that's why they set up Committees of Correspondence all through and between the colonies, to make sure they knew not only the issues but one another. By the time they got around to saying, For this I pledge my life, my fortune, and my sacred honor, they knew that fulfillment requires commitment to understanding and caring for one another and community. How have I interpreted and lived that inheritance today? How could I?

So, back to the trip. Unintentionally (I think) I was headed out toward the town of Norwood. It so happens that is where my father and his eight brothers and sisters and my brother and I were all born, and many of our cousins. What had I learned there before a war year in California and postwar before moving to Concord at age five? At the turn into the last century Norwood had been something of an immigrant town – lots of Irish working on the railroad. My grandfather caught the train two blocks from his house into Boston where he worked as a locomotive mechanic.

The ancestral tool for success in those days was hard work. Most believed in it, plain and simple – and it worked for some like my grandparents and their children, often with a dictum to serve the common good. For others, that tool did not work out so well, as a famous Harvard sociological study called The Hidden Injuries of Class showed. Studying the immigrant-heavy North End of Boston, it found that if success is defined as getting to the top of the pyramid, a lot aren't going to succeed and they will be made to feel bad about that. In such a system as that, Martin Luther King proves wrong – not everybody gets to feel great, because not everybody can get everybody else to serve them. Structures and systems matter. How can I use that understanding that our academic ancestors have willed to us?

As I knew even as I took the immigrant trail to Norwood, there is more than Paul Revere's way to get to Concord – so when opportunity arose, I changed course like the bird, went cross country past all the high tech companies, and came into Concord along the narrow road past Ralph Waldo Emerson's house where the trees were already turning red. I arrived in time to gather with my brother and our old friends on the porch of the Colonial Inn, which Henry David Thoreau's parents used to own. More reminiscence.

Where do you look in ancestral legacy for how to succeed in life? My childhood house is on a hill literally two stone's throw above the Unitarian Church and the tavern next to it where the colonial revolutionaries planned their resistance. From the woods on that hill, they pursued the fleeing British soldiers. At the base of that hill is a cave system that hid African Americans on the run to freedom in Canada. When they built my house on that hill, the excavators found a Native American burial ground of the First People. When I lived there, the town's school teachers already could not find affordable housing in the town.

Mixed messages. How does one live without destroying life? What do the town's stories teach about how to live? What wisdom has the town gleaned from its experience and passed along? It has preserved and/or restored the houses of Emerson, Hawthorne, Alcott, and Thoreau. It has preserved their legacy in the local library and in the names of schools. It has invested heavily in the public education and summer recreation of its children. It has preserved huge chunks of wild space. It has transformed my junior high school into affordable housing for the elderly.

In my schooling, there was considerable exposure to secular Western culture. But was there intentional consciousness-raising about the question of what life is or how to live? Maybe as a child I just didn't notice it. Or maybe my Catholic Church or other orthodox congregations had their own answers they wanted to inculcate and opposed the School Board allowing stimulation of free inquiry. But the question should be there to guide the quest: What is life and how should I and we live?

I should say that the reunion Saturday evening was a delight – and a great highlight was the founding of a scholarship fund at the high school in my dad's honor. He had been our principal in our high school years. It was very appreciative and sweet.

Sunday morning I wanted to get a taste of Concord at leisure, so I had breakfast in the restaurant where the ice cream shop used to be. A dad – divorced, I presumed – was breakfasting with his daughter. Then his wife, the mom, bounced in, perspiring in her jogging outfit, flushed, happy, and soon bounced out again, saying, "See you at home, lovies."

Then I went to church, for the first time ever attending Concord's UU church. I didn't recognize a soul. After the service and social time, I went and had a good-bye lunch with my oldest Concord friends, then went and explored the beautiful old public library where my spirit had been taken on so many adventures and which is a testimony to community provision of public good.

Then I went for tea at the home of some other old friends. We got to talking Concord, of course, and I mentioned I often tell our children here one of my favorite Thoreau stories, of the huckleberry picking party – and Sally gave a shout and went and got her children’s book which she had just gotten published – the huckleberry picnic story. Communities, I believe, learn and benefit from their best and worst and everyday stories. Why aren’t they more a part of the tool kit our children are given?

Before I left Concord, I went to the town green and looked up at the Old Hill Burial Ground on the slight rise above the green, its memorial flags on Minuteman graves. I walked past Concord’s memorials for the Civil War, the World Wars, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq. These memorials don’t, for me, define our heritage. But they do punctuate it with the grim alternative to peace and community. I saw lots of family names I had grown up with – and names of friends under Vietnam.

Then I headed back to Boston and St. Pete. I left with a feeling that I knew a little better some answers to the questions that I hope will remain perennial. What have the ages prepared as our tools for living? What tools have we inherited and how has it gone?

We could talk for days about this – and I think we would be happier if we did. In a weekend I had seen a lot of my inheritance and how I flew guided by its signs. I found that all my classmates seemed substantially satisfied with their lives – none of us finding much use in the idea of “most successful” other than as ourselves.

Do we live in boxes that blind us to many possibilities? Yes. But what of that? We all are in those boxes. It is the nature of reality and of the developmental journey necessary to grow in understanding and caring and community. To get out of whatever box constricts the energy of life or restricts the quality of life, perhaps we only need to be working on our next question.

So, may you dwell in possibility, and may your hands, broad or narrow, spread wide to gather paradise.

.....

READINGS

Thoughts for Gathering

I found that the more I worked with cells the bigger and bigger they got, and when I was really working with them I wasn't outside, I was down there. I was part of the system. I was right down there with them, and everything got big. I even was able to see the internal parts of the chromosomes... It surprised me because I actually felt as if I were right down there and these were my friends. As you look at these things, they become part of you. And you forget yourself. The main thing is that you forget yourself.

- Nobel geneticist Barbara McClintock

Life is not easy for any of us. But what of that? We must believe that we are gifted for something, and that this thing, at whatever cost, must be attained.

- Radium co-discoverer Marie Curie

Invocation from *The Interior Castle*, by Teresa of Avila

A magnificent refuge is inside us.

Come, enter.

Shatter the darkness that shrouds the door.

Step around the vipers attempting to chase us off.

Be bold. Be humble.

Put away the incense; forget the official incantations.

Ask no permission from the authorities.

We slip in. We soften our eyes; we follow our breath down the invisible path that leads home.

Meditation *Before There Was a Trace*, by Bibi Hayati

Before there was a trace of this ordered world,
I carried the memory of a lock of your hair,
A stray unknown end gathered within me.

In that invisible realm
Your face like the sun longed to be seen,
Until each separate part finally would shine.

From the moment of Time's first-drawn breath,
Love resides in us,
A treasure secure in the heart's hidden vault;

Before the first seed broke open the rose bed of Being,
An inner lark soared through your meadows,
Heading toward Home.

What can I do but thank you, one hundred times?
Your face illumines the shrine of my eyes,
Constantly present and lovely.

Readings #1

- *A Biblical Genealogy* Gospels of Matthew & Luke adapted

From Eve and Adam to Noah are nine generations, from Na'amah and Noah to Abraham are eleven generations, from Sarah and Abraham to David are fourteen generations; from Bathsheba and David to the exile in Babylon, fourteen generations; and from exile in Babylon to Jesus, fourteen generations. Yet God's children have no place to lay their heads.

- from *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates

At Howard University I took a survey course of Europe and saw black people, rendered through "white" eyes in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, unlike any I'd seen before – the black people looked regal and human- contrasted with those created after enslavement, the Sambo caricatures I had always known. What was the difference? In my survey course of America, I'd seen portraits of the Irish drawn in the same ravenous, lustful, and simian way. Perhaps there had been other bodies, mocked, terrorized, and insecure. Perhaps the Irish too had once lost their bodies (to the ownership of others). Perhaps being named "black" had nothing to do with any of this; perhaps being named "black" was just someone's name for being at the bottom, a human turned to object, object turned to pariah ... And still and all I knew that *we were* something, that we were a tribe – on one hand, invented, and on the other, no less real."

Readings #2

- from *The Tree*, by Colin Tudge

Since the start of the twentieth century, the architects' favorite materials... have been concrete and steel, with liberal quantities of bricks that have not been dried in the sun but fired in high-temperature, energy-guzzling kilns. Typically, too, they have been built in open spaces... generally exposed to winds and merciless sun...habitable only by constant infusions of energy to heat them and cool them down again. Twentieth century architecture, in short, has for the most part been a prolonged exercise in profligacy.

- *I Dwell in Possibility*, by Emily Dickinson

I dwell in Possibility –
A fairer House than Prose –
More numerous of Windows –
Superior – for Doors –

Of Chambers as the Cedars –
Impregnable of Eye –
And for an Everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky –

Of Visitors – the fairest –
For Occupation – This –
The spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather Paradise.