

SERMON for November 4, 2018

HOW DOES PEDIGREE INFLUENCE FULFILLMENT? (Got Free Will?)

Rev. Jack Donovan – Unitarian Universalist Church - St. Petersburg, Florida

READINGS

<u>Gathering</u>	<i>When the Nazis Came</i> , by Rev. Martin Niemoller (c. 1946)
<u>Invocation</u>	<i>When Some Try to Divide Us</i> , improv on Niemoller
<u>Reading</u>	<i>I Think Continually</i> , by Stephen Spender

SERMON

A headline on yesterday's front page said, "A Halloween as neighborly as our nation" – subtitle: "The gay couple already felt unwelcome in Tierra Verde. Then they saw the graveyard." The graveyard was a neighbor's front lawn in Tierra Verde, with crosses and torches and gravestones marked with Trump opponents – CNN, Hilary Clinton, Nancy Pelosi, Chuck Schumer, George Soros, Socialism, Pocahontas.

What epitaph, I wondered, should we put up in response to the front lawn graveyard? "Rest In Peace, Nasty People"? Well, no.

How can I say that on this, the 4th of the five Days of All Souls, the holiest remembrances on the Universalist calendar. Do you realize how many of our UU churches are called All Souls Church? Do you know why? Radical acceptance, absolute caring. My Universalism reminds me of the importance of affirming "the worth and dignity" of all souls.

Well, how about "R.I.P. Nasty People When Your Time Comes"?

No? Okay, I have spiritual work to do. It is not for nothing that the Bible includes "Love your neighbor!" as a key part of the great covenant of blessing. So how about an epitaph that simply says, "Hi, Neighbor!"

Well, maybe still more work to do – particularly this month on what influences me and my choices and my spiritual growth (and you and yours).

Through September's season of beginnings, we considered the influence of the universe and evolution on our potentials and our spirits. Through October's season of harvest we considered the influence of culture on the development of our spirits. Now, through November's season of remembrance and thanks, let us consider the influence of ancestral lineage on the development of our potentials.

For example, was my reaction of distaste at the graveyard-makers somehow influenced by the psycho-social heritage passed down through my lineage of ancestors? Was my reaction of compassion for the gay couple and their adopted two year old mixed-race child somehow

influenced by my ancestral heritage? In fact, should we see the phobias displayed on the graveyard signs as evidence of a heritage of hate passed down along the ancestral lineage of the graveyard owners?

Who knows what defenses lurk in the hearts of men and women, implanted not just by survival genes and innate brain function, but transmitted generation to generation from direct ancestors? Again, not for nothing the Bible observes, The waywardness of a parent will be passed through four generation of children. Not for nothing Native American teachings call for all deeds to be done with the seven future generations in mind.

I think of my values as coming from our culture, and from the generations immediately with me in time and place, and from my own reflections on life experience. But I haven't really examined my ancestral heritage much.

Does anybody? What do you know of your grandparents' ways in the world and their influence on your way? What do you know of your great grandparents, your great great great grandparents, their stories, their strengths, shortcomings, wisdom, misconceptions, fears, passions, and all the influences they have transmitted through generations to you?

I'd like to clarify a distinction here between "culture" and "ancestral heritage." For this morning, if you would, let's define culture as the customized behavior considered appropriate in a whole people – and let's define ancestral heritage as the influences on our behavior of the engrained responses of our ancestors to their cultural and environmental conditions.

Mental health counselors ask about your relationship with your mother and father and siblings – or even about your relationship with cultural norms. But do they ever ask about your relationship with and the influence of your great great great grandparents?

I remember when I was living in the central Pacific Islands as a young man, I wrote a poem expressing that the islanders lived every day exactly like the day before and that they had no sense of history back further than the generation preceding the eldest. True, the island have never had a written history, or even writing. But later it dawned on me: At every meal, food and drink was set in the circle for the ancestors – at every meal. And in the common house of every village, everyone constantly gathered and talked endlessly, story-telling, reminiscing, assessing.

Of course - they were telling stories and remembering ancestors and talking about the influences of their characters and lives –skillful fisherfolk, adventurous sailors, unfaithful spouses, great cooks, spirit-tuned medicine-makers, champion dancers, artistic carvers, careful weavers, trustworthy builders.

They did take time to remember and assess and appreciate the ancestral pedigree of character, behavior, influence. I believe it was a contributing factor to the remarkable mental health and traditionally harmonious spirit of their communities. Do we devote such time?

Maybe it's only likely to be practiced in non-literate village cultures? Many of our more ancient ancestors had community customs of remembering and thanking their ancestors and using the stories to teach wisdom or caution or expectation. That was one purpose of Halloween and Samhain, and perhaps *Dia de los Muertos*: sharing as community around the hilltop bonfires with the heavens and the ancestors themselves and carrying the sharing back to the village hearth fires of home, using the brightness of cherished stories to light the night's and soul's darkness and the way to a good tomorrow.

It wasn't magic; it wasn't absolutist. When Wiccan priest Starhawk was asked how authentic to ancient traditions her rituals were, she said (and here I quote roughly from memory), "We do our rituals exactly like our ancestors did - we make them up."

I believe it is characteristic of our religious tradition to ask all humankind to recognize the practice of experience and reflection and imagination as the common origin of beliefs and practices, springing from the universal archetypes of human beings, though given wonderful idiosyncratic local expression. Then, I think, all souls would have much more to celebrate together.

I think, also, it can be said that human beings start as sacred souls, seeds of human potential; then sprout from the seeds into human spirits, nourished by the universal creative power, growing so they may become what some call fulfilled and some call holy.

But the reality is that many of your direct ancestors and my direct ancestors abided to some degree in darkness and saw themselves to some errant degree darkly and passed the influence of that dark misperception to us where it has distorted and beclouded our truth and our best. There are great forces in the world to which human kind has reacted without knowing, without suspecting, without crediting what was going on to our fortune or detriment.

For example, one of those forces seems to be the changing character of the generations themselves, reacting one generation after another to the interdependence of cultural styles and historical events. Generational theorists William Strauss and Neil Howe theorize that there have been four character-types of generations repeating cyclically through Euro-American history starting with the Pilgrims born in England in the 1580s – each generation being about 21 years long, each full cycle lasting 80 to 90 years – a long human lifespan.

The generational sequence they discern goes like this:

1. a generation living childhood during a culture of crisis and purpose-seeking and living young adulthood in a culture of settled norms and common purpose;
2. followed by a generation living childhood in a culture of settled norms and common purpose and young adulthood in a culture of re-awakening and revisioning,
3. followed by a generation living childhood in a culture of re-awakening and revisioning and young adulthood in a culture of unsettled norms and hyper-individuality,

4. followed by a generation living childhood in a culture of unsettled norms and hyper-individuality and young adulthood in a culture of crisis and searching,
1. followed again to start a new cycle by a generation living childhood in a culture of crisis and purpose-seeking and young adulthood in a culture of settled norms and common purpose.

A little complex at first, I know. But consider the generational experiences and responses of Euro-American children, young adults, midlife adults, and elders in the decades on either side of 1620, 1700, 1780, 1860, 1940, 2010 to get a quick sense of the crisis points and of the great awakenings or revisionings some forty years after each crisis. With what awareness and skill did our Euro-American ancestors react and respond to these influences and how has this heritage of reactions and responses been engrained in your psyche or spirit?

Consider the influence on your ancestral heritage of response through this cycle if you are from the Mayflower or conquistadors. Consider if you are from the European religious wars. Consider if you are from the Irish starvation. Consider if you are native American. Consider if you are from Russian serfs or Italian fascism. Consider if you are here from slavery. Consider if you are here from the Holocaust. Consider if you are here from womanhood. Consider if you, like a friend of mine from my U.S. State Department days, are here from a blend of all of these.

Consider, as reported by journalist Malcolm Gladwell, the influence of your ancestral heritage of response if you are from the combativeness of herding cultures, the mutuality of wheat-farming cultures, or the communitarianism of rice paddy cultures.

Consider the influence of your ancestral heritage of response to 1000 years of changes in technology and work, as described by Austrian historian of work, Andrea Komlosy:

- the heritage of response to a subsistence life in home and field, 1000 CE to 1250 CE
- the heritage of response to the growing maritime and mercantile enterprises, 1250 to 1500 CE
- the heritage of response to the arising of wage labor along with forced and serf and slave labor from 1500 to the industrial revolution;
- the heritage of response to mechanization, centralized energy supplies, democracy, negotiated wages, and economic transition from agricultural to factory societies in the 1800s and 1900s;
- the heritage of response, from the later 20th Century through this day, to increasing corporate dominance of production and capital, lessening of democracy and civil rights and common welfare and worker leverage.

Each of our ancestors has reacted or responded differently to all these influences and passed on - in their fears and aspirations and strengths - the lessons learned, be they insightful or deluded. Consider all the psycho-social means developed to somehow cope with both oppressions and opportunities. Consider the psycho-social means developed to justify exclusive privileges. How have they shaped what it is to live a human life?

I think the case can be made that the human journey always has the same destination at any stage – to be able to say Yes to life, to say I’m glad I am here, to say I’m doing my best and it’s worth doing. I think the case can be made that only those who, by fortune or wisdom, develop a sense of clarity and integrity and meaning from their lives, a sense of having loved and been loved, of having taken care and been cared for in meaningful measure – perhaps only those can truly and fully feel Yes. And to get there, I believe it greatly helps to understand the influences on your life and how to be of influence yourself – that is wisdom.

Stephen Spender’s poem speaks of those who remember “the soul’s history.” That memory goes far back, through corridors of light, through channels of grace, to the source of the sun, to the fire’s center. That memory seems to give awareness of the ancestral influences which we may learn to understand - and which we may learn to employ to gain benefit or learn to reject to avoid harm. Those with memory of the soul’s history seem to be the one’s who experience the flowering of the spirit. They seem to be recognized as truly great, who leave the world signed with their honor. Over the next three weeks of harvest and thanksgiving, may we all learn to be among them.

READINGS

Gathering *When the Nazis Came*, by Rev. Martin Niemoller (c. 1946)

First the Nazis came for the communists, and I did not speak out because I was not a communist. Then they came for the unionists, intellectuals, disabled, and Jews. But I wasn’t one of those, so I did not speak out. Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak out for me. Rev. Martin Niemoller (Dachau Concentration Camp prisoner 1938-45)

Invocation *When Some Try to Divide Us*, improv on Niemoller

Gracious creative source of every atom of our beings,
may our time together fill our spirits with your spirit.
May your graciousness within us **become our courage and our caring.**
When some brand some as *Other*, **may we speak for all as brother & sister.**
May we resist **when some try to divide us by color or religion,**
May we resist **when some try to divide us by gender or sexuality..**
May we resist **when some try to divide us by rights and privileges.**
When some try to divide us by species,
may we resist by caring for all as neighbors and self.
May our graciousness proclaim kinship **& bring us together in celebration.**
Amen.

Reading *I Think Continually*, by Stephen Spender

I think continually of those who were truly great.
Who, from the womb, remembered the soul's history
Through corridors of light, where the hours are suns,
Endless and singing. Whose lovely ambition
Was that their lips, still touched with fire,
Should tell of the Spirit, clothed from head to foot in song.
And who hoarded from the Spring branches
The desires falling across their bodies like blossoms.

What is precious, is never to forget
The essential delight of the blood drawn from ageless springs
Breaking through rocks in worlds before our earth.
Never to deny its pleasure in the morning simple light
Nor its grave evening demand for love.
Never to allow gradually the traffic to smother
With noise and fog, the flowering of the spirit.

Near the snow, near the sun, in the highest fields,
See how these names are fêted by the waving grass
And by the streamers of white cloud
And whispers of wind in the listening sky.
The names of those who in their lives fought for life,
Who wore at their hearts the fire's center.
Born of the sun, they travelled a short while toward the sun
And left the vivid air signed with their honor.