Ancestors

A reflection by Jackie Clement
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When I was in Boston recently, I was privileged to hear one of my colleagues offer his Odyssey, the story of his spiritual life and ministry. David Pettee, Ministerial Credentialing Director at the UUA, can trace his ancestors back to the early days of New England. He lives among the history and institutions built by the people from whom he is descended. He walks where they walked. He knows their names and can visit their graves.

I couldn't help think as I listened to David's story how very different my own story is. A first generation American, I can trace my history back only two generations on my father's side and three on my mother's. There are few stories of the exploits of earlier generations in my family, yet David knows stories that reach back centuries.

This means that he knows some troubling things about his ancestors' lives, as well as the marvelous things they accomplished. You may have read some of David's story in the *UU World* magazine where he wrote about discovering that some of his New England ancestors were active in the slave trade, swapping rum for living human beings in Ghana. As I sat and listened to David's tale, his discovery that his ancestors owned slaves and traded in human lives, of how he came to meet and forge a relationship with some of the descendents of those slaves, I couldn't help but think of the play performed here in this sanctuary last week, *Walking with My Ancestors* by our own Oforiwaa Aduonum. It, too, tells the story of the slave trade in Ghana, but from the perspective of those who were enslaved. Two powerful stories that meet on the coast of Ghana, but from opposite directions. Two powerful stories of ancestors who met in one of the saddest tales of human history, and whose descendents still live with its legacy.

As I thought about these stories, not the dusty relics of history, but the living stories happening *now* to people I know and like, it came upon me once again how we will someday be accountable to history for our own actions. Today we gather to celebrate our ancestors, to honor their memories, to invoke their spirits here in this room that we may feel their presence and share it with others. But today should also be a reminder that we are tomorrow's ancestors, that we, too, have a legacy to leave. It is possible that someday someone else in a room very much like this one, perhaps in this very room, may build an altar and place upon it a picture or memento of us.

What memento would we have them place? What words of memory would we have them say? History is not just the dry bones of the dead, the dust of civilizations long gone drifting off a moldy page. History is living in the stories we tell of the people who made us who we are. It is the stories we are writing this very moment in our own words and deeds. If on that distant day someone in a room much like this is indeed moved by our legacy of actions and words, which role will we have played in the human story?

The poem I read earlier is one woman's take on what she wants her legacy to be, to live life to its fullest and leave behind a smile. But there are other legacies, just as valuable, just as needed. The trick is to find what your particular legacy will be. As our second reading said, "help us to share our stories with those who come after and point them back to their spiritual legacy."

In these words John Morgan points to the wider idea of ancestors. We have familial ancestors, those in whose line we were born. But we also have many adopted ancestors, those in whose line we have chosen to stand. These are our spiritual ancestors, those who have taught us or nurtured us directly, offered us things of the spirit. But it is also people of long ago, those we didn't know, who built traditions that we have chosen as our own. The ancestors who created a land of freedom, imperfect though it may be. The ancestors who handed down a religious tradition of freedom, imperfect though it, too, might be.

David Pettee's familial ancestors include slave owners and slave traders. He can neither deny nor disown that part of the legacy. But he has chosen a spiritual legacy that includes those who fought to abolish slavery, people like Unitarian minister Theodore Parker who wrote his sermons with a loaded pistol in his desk to protect the runaway slaves he harbored in his home or John Quincy Adams who, following his presidency, successfully defended the African captives who attacked the crew of the slave ship Amistad, or William Lloyd Garrison the prominent abolitionist who wrote, "Enslave the liberty of but one human being and the liberties of the world are put in peril. " These people, too, are part of the spiritual legacy David has adopted and has integrated into his familial story. More, in reaching out to the descendents of the slaves owned by his forbearers, David is building a legacy of reconciliation for his own children.

This synthesis of familial and adopted traditions, values and stories, is so very in the line of Unitarian Universalism that draws on the wisdom from many traditions. It is also much in line with the Day of the Dead, which melds the ancient rituals of pre-Columbian Mexico with the Roman Catholicism of the conquistadors. Is this religious syncretism, the borrowing of one tradition by another tradition? Sure, but most of religious history is. In fact I think we ought to practice more syncretism! When the word "purity" becomes a goal of human endeavor, bad things are likely to follow. I think we ought to be free to adopt all that nourishes growth. Certainly we need to fully understand the source and meaning before we adopt other practices or views, but ours has always been a tradition that says that revelation is not sealed, and that the free and responsible search for truth can be informed by all the world's religions.

So let us take all that is best in the legacy of our familial ancestors. Let us wrestle with what was troubling. But let us also know that we can choose our spiritual ancestors, and build our own legacy bringing together all that is best as we understand it. And by this we will live, and by this we will build our own legacy as we become the ancestors.

Last week, I read a portion of the poem *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran as we dedicated Jaylen Burks. It ended with these lines:

> *You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth.*
> *The archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite…*
> *Let your bending in the archer's hand be for gladness.*

We stand on the path of the infinite, neither at its beginning nor at its end. Let us make our days those future generations will recall with gratefulness. Let us be the ancestors our descendents need. And let our bending be for gladness.

Namaste. Por lo tanto puede ser.