

“A People Who Remember”

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
November 11, 2018

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Reading “Work Song, Part 2: A Vision” Wendell Berry

If we will have the wisdom to survive,
to stand like slow growing trees
on a ruined place, renewing, enriching it...

then a long time after we are dead
the lives our lives prepare will live
here, their houses strongly placed
upon the valley sides...

The river will run
clear, as we will never know it...

On the steps where greed and ignorance cut down
the old forest, an old forest will stand,
its rich leaf-fall drifting on its roots.
The veins of forgotten springs will have opened.
Families will be singing in the fields...

Memory,
native to this valley, will spread over it
like a grove, and memory will grow
into legend, legend into song, song
into sacrament. The abundance of this place,
the songs of its people and its birds,
will be health and wisdom and indwelling
light. This is no paradisaal dream.

Its hardship is its reality.

Sermon

During the Time for All Ages earlier, Liza spoke of the Sankofa bird. The image is striking. In many ways, it defies logic. The bird's head is turned backwards even with its feet facing forward. In many versions, the bird carries an egg inside its beak. The image of the bird illustrates the meaning of the word Sankofa which comes from the Akan people of Western Africa and which literally means "return and get it" and is based on a West African proverb that says "it is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind." Within this one image, past, present, and future connect. Ultimately, it is a symbol of the importance of learning from the past.

This month, our worship theme is Memory. We ask, "What does it mean to be a people of memory?"

We can consider the role that memory plays in our lives as human beings in search of meaning and truth. This meaning and truth comes not only from the present but is also shaped by our past, our history. One important role of memory is that it connects us to who and what has come before us and before this present moment.

Two weeks ago, we honored our ancestors bringing them into our time of worship with photos and mementos and by writing down their names. In another two weeks, we will have our annual "To Say Their Names" service, a service to remember and to say aloud the names of those who have died especially from within our church community. And, of course, this upcoming week, we will have two memorial services to honor the lives of two beloved people in our church community who have recently passed on. As a spiritual community, the practice of remembrance grounds and anchors us to our roots and the generations that have come before.

Our memories also connect us to our past experiences. We look back into the past to try to understand who we are now and who we might become in the future. As the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard has said, "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards."

Like the Sankofa bird, we must decide what is worth retrieving from the past. We do so with the desire to have some kind of understanding of life so we can live it forwards.

As a nation, we just went through an election season that was very much about shaping the future. And as we begin to plunge headlong into that endeavor, we can also remember the importance of not forgetting to look back. To examine our past. Forgetting or denying the past seems to come more easily to us, I think.

But, it's important to try to remember the past as fully as possible.

This is especially relevant today as people particularly in North America and Europe commemorate the one hundred year anniversary of Armistice Day, the end of the fighting of World War I. Here, in the United States, we honor and recognize Veterans Day today. And, if it weren't for this one hundred year anniversary, it might be easy to forget the origin of today's holiday especially for those of us who might not feel a connected to this period of history.

It was 1918, four years after the start of World War I, also called the Great War for the profound impact it had on many of the world's countries and on millions of people.

At the 11th hour, on the 11th day, of the 11th month of the year, the fighting between the Allied Forces and Germany ceased according to the terms of the armistice agreement signed in France earlier that day. (The war would officially be brought to an end several months later in June 28, 1919 with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles.)

Before November 11, 1918, the war had killed fifteen and a half million people, including eight and a half million people who served in the armed forces of twenty-eight different countries and seven million civilians.

The following year in 1919 President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed a commemoration of Armistice Day. In those years immediately following, many states began to adopt November 11 as a legal holiday and in 1938, the U.S. Congress passed an act declaring this day a federal holiday "dedicated to the cause of world peace and to be hereafter celebrated and known as 'Armistice Day.'"

As we know from history, it turned out that the first World War was not the "war to end all wars." In 1954, after World War II and the Korean War, Congress renamed the holiday "Veterans Day" to honor American veterans of all wars.

What is easy to forget on this holiday, at a time when thousands of our U.S. troops are being deployed to the US-Mexico border in response to Central American migrants

seeking asylum from their war-torn countries is that the importance of this day started with peace. It started with the cessation of fighting. With the laying down of arms. At the 11th hour, on the 11th day, of the 11th month. Even for a brief moment in time, there was peace.

In this moment, a remembrance of peace feels so achingly important and also so impossibly distant. This distance from the message of peace is so vast that the group Veterans for Peace has called for a reclaiming of the original intention of the holiday. Their call for this return begs the question, Can we truly remember peace?

And, I wonder what would be possible if we didn't do quite so much forgetting. If we took seriously the need to reconcile certain aspects of our collective past.

Many of us do this work on an individual level. We know that our own healing can only come from examining aspects of our histories, important events that have shaped us. This can be heart-wrenching and deeply transformative inner work.

On a collective level, there is much in our history that goes unnamed, unclaimed, and unexamined. I believe that our reckoning with the history of racial injustice and inequality is an area where we have been all too quick to try to move past the past. To treat the past as if it were dead and buried - long gone.

But, the truth is so much of our unexamined history, particularly of racial injustice, the memories that go untold, continues to fester within our national psyche.

This also true within our own Unitarian Universalist tradition. One gaping hole in our historical records and the telling of our history is the role of people of color and African Americans in particular. Recently, our neighbor congregation down the way a bit in Nashua, New Hampshire grappled with this, and this story has some Vermont connections as well.

A few of the members of the UU Congregation of Nashua read the story of Jeffrey Campbell and his sister Marguerite Campbell Davis in the book Darkening the Doorways by Mark Morrison-Reed. They were intrigued that they had never known about the local connection to these Unitarian Universalist ancestors and so they started to do some digging into their church archives and in other sources.

Jeffrey and Marguerite were born in Boston in 1910 and 1916 to a father who was black and a mother who was white. Their father was killed in a racially motivated attack and the family moved to Nashua, New Hampshire in 1919. After doing some church

shopping, young Jeffrey decided that the place he wanted to worship and get involved with was the Universalist Church of Nashua.

He was an active participant getting involved especially with children and youth programming. He became a member when he was 18. Upon graduating from high school, he was accepted to the Theological School at St. Lawrence University. He was the first African American student ever to attend the school. His pursuit of ministry presented challenges and some soul-searching within the Universalist denomination. After he graduated in 1933 and was ordained in 1935, Jeffrey was unable to find a permanent position. During the mid-1930s, he supported himself with part-time and temporary leadership positions. In 1939, he received a fellowship to study theology in England and he remained there until 1951 after declaring himself a conscientious objector and making a living teaching returning soldiers and their families.

When he returned to New England, he took up a faculty position at the Putney School in Putney, Vermont, where he remained on the faculty until nearly the end of his life. He did try repeatedly to gain a full-time position as a Unitarian Universalist minister but was unsuccessful, although he did serve as an unpaid, on call ministers to the UU congregation in Brattleboro, Vermont for some years.

His sister, Marguerite, also continued to be involved with the Universalist and then the Unitarian Universalist church throughout her life working first at the Universalist Church Association and then the Unitarian Universalist Association. Jeffrey died in 1984 in Brattleboro. His sister died the previous year. And, they along with their mother are buried in Nashua.¹

At the time when folks at the Nashua congregation discovered all of this history, the Campbells' grave was unmarked. The congregation decided that it wanted to reconcile this part of its own, and our collective, Unitarian Universalist past. They raised money earlier this year to purchase grave markers for all three Campbells, and earlier this fall, they held a reconciliation and remembrance ceremony at the Nashua cemetery.

Sankofa - to return and fetch what has been left behind.

Sankofa is a way of living that has provided spiritual sustenance to many peoples of African descent especially here in the United States.

And, the wisdom of sankofa can apply to us all regardless of cultural background.

¹ <https://uunashua.org/justice/honor-legacies-of-campbells/the-jeffrey-campbell-project/> and <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/nashua-church-honors-campbells>

As we remember the past, we also put ourselves back together. We re-member. We reconcile past wrongs or at least do our small part to bring repair and wholeness. We allow ourselves to dream. In our country today, we need to do this kind of dreaming. This kind of re-remembering, of stitching ourselves back together.

When I imagine the sankofa bird flying high above us now, I wonder what it sees as it looks backward.

What from the past is worth fetching to carry forward?

What is best to leave behind?

What needs to be reconciled and repaired?

We can think of ourselves like the sankofa bird that has a choice to make in what we return for and what we bring with us forward.

The writer and historian Howard Zinn has said, “To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction.”

In remembering, we must remember that there is a history of cruelty that we can look back on but there is also a history of compassion, sacrifice, courage, and kindness.

Early on during World War I just months after the war had started fall began to turn to winter. The war was wearing on and everyone was starting to get the sense that this war wouldn't be finished by Christmas as many had thought. All along the Western front small scale truces emerged.

In some areas where the fighting did stop, soldiers emerged from the trenches into what was called No Man's Land. Some approached one another from opposite sides of the war breaching that chasm of “us versus them” to shake hands, take photos, exchange small gifts of cigarettes, chocolate, and cognac. Some took the opportunity to tend to the dead and the wounded.

The Christmas Truce - as it has been called - has a lot of mythology built around it. There are stories of huge soccer match that took place right there in No Man's Land. While this is nice to think about, the historical records don't exactly back up this story. But, these myths make clear that we do need these kinds of stories. We need memories of peace - as messy and muddled as they might be.

In those places along the Western front where the fighting did stop in December of 1914, peace - however fleeting - became a memory that could be recalled later.

A memory that maybe just maybe can be carried into our present and shape our future.

Wendell Berry writes...

"If we will have the wisdom to survive,
to stand like slow growing trees
on a ruined place, renewing, enriching it...

then a long time after we are dead
the lives our lives prepare will live
here, their houses strongly placed
upon the valley sides...

Memory,
native to this valley, will spread over it
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into legend, legend into song, song
into sacrament. The abundance of this place,
the songs of its people and its birds,
will be health and wisdom and indwelling
light."

We return and fetch what has been left behind
to learn from it
to better understand ourselves
to find the glimmer of compassion, kindness, even peace,
that can help us make new memories now for the future.
If we can reckon with that past,
hold up to the light what is worth saving,
and uncover what needs repairing,

then we can give those who come after us a new way of knowing the world, a new history on which to build their future.

So may it be.