

Olympia UU Congregation March 8, 2020

“The Wisdom of Our Ancestors”

Rev. Mary Gear

I am Mary, daughter of Karen, granddaughter of Bernice and Kathryn, great-granddaughter of Lilly, Hulda, Maria and Marie. Like Sara, today as we mark International Women's Day, I am also remembering my lineage, the women who influenced my life and who gave me life.

In some cultures, telling you my lineage would tell you something of who I am. In our culture, the names of my grandmothers may not tell you much, although you might notice that the names “Hulda” and “Maria” hint at my Scandinavian and Italian heritage. Where we come from informs who we are.

Earlier we sang:

We are our grandmothers' prayers.  
We are our grandfathers' dreamings.  
We are the breath of our ancestors.  
We are the spirit of God.

The ancestors who gave us breath, also passed on their prayers and dreams, perhaps their skills and abilities, knowledge and maybe even their wisdom.

In addition to our personal ancestors, we also have spiritual ancestors. In our Unitarian Universalist tradition, one of the ways that we express our heritage is through the six sources of our living tradition. The sources are codified in the bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the document that governs how UU congregations are to be together. We are a non-creedal faith, meaning that we don't tell people what to believe and we don't require that anyone belong. We do enter into covenant about how we will be together. Our association is the same: the UUA office in Boston doesn't tell congregations what to believe or require that they belong. When a congregation chooses to be a member of the UUA, as OUUC did many years ago, we enter into covenant about how we will be together.

We call ours a “living tradition” because it is not set in stone, it is evolving and changing as we learn and grow as individuals and as a faith tradition. Our tradition moves with the rhythm of life, and that is the heartbeat of change.

The first source says that member congregations affirm and promote

Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.

I spoke about this a few weeks ago in my sermon on “Shared Ministry.” In our tradition, which has roots in the Protestant reformation, we affirm that each person can experience a connection with mystery directly, connecting to something greater than themselves. This is a challenge to the idea that a member of the priestly class must act as a mediator between a lay person and the divine.

The other five sources speak more directly to our lineage, our spiritual ancestors. Our second source leads directly there; it says that we affirm and promote

Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.

This source draws on our religious traditions, and our history as a people. In our Unitarian tradition, we often call on the words and deeds of ancestors like William Ellery Channing and Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller and Sophia Lyon Fahs. But, our ancestors are varied, from Isaac Newton to Kurt Vonnegut, from Charles Dickens to Beatrix Potter, from Louisa May Alcott to Robert Fulgham, from Thomas Jefferson to Dorthea Dix, from Pete Seeger to Ysaye Barnwell, whose music we sang earlier. (And, if you want more info about who these folks are, I've put links in my sermon text on-line.)

Each of our ancestors called on their beliefs and values to put their faith into action, working for what they defined as justice based in love. Their work called out poverty and oppression of those on the margins. They used words, humor and music to convey their message. They covered a range of identities. And yet, we still work to understand and acknowledge their humanity. They were not perfect, and we cannot expect them to be. Our job is to understand the history of their work and the consequences for our time.

Our Unitarian and Universalist history is under examination now regarding racism and how our existence in a white supremacy culture has affected how we live out our principles. William Ellery Channing is an example of a renowned Unitarian minister who was hesitant to speak out against slavery because he knew that the livelihood of many of his wealthy parishioners depended on the enslavement of black people. It took a conversation with writer Lydia Marie Child for Channing to be brave enough to speak out against what he knew to be wrong. There were Unitarians and Universalists of that time who were working against slavery and supporting the Underground Railroad, and yet the call to power and influence was strong in our leaders and in our institutions.

The story of the struggles and dynamics about race in our spiritual history have been researched and told by people of color in our tradition, like Rev. Leslie Takahashi and Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed. Some of you participated in the book study last Fall of Morrison-Reed's book "Darkening the Doorways: Black Trailblazers and Missed Opportunities in Unitarian Universalism." White UUs are just beginning to understand how we have been affected by a long history of racism, the opportunities we have missed, and how we can recover the integrity of our values and beliefs.

This second source used to read: the words and deeds of prophetic men and women. The prophets of our time brought a message of truth that the gender binary is false and does not reflect the lived experience of many people. In our General Assembly in 2018, using our democratic process, the delegates representing UU congregations voted to change the language from "prophetic men and women" to "prophetic people." That is our living tradition-it changes as we understand more, and it will continue to do so.

Our third source and our sixth source say that we affirm and promote

Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life, and  
Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

As Unitarian Universalists, we make an effort to learn about the world's religions, including the indigenous traditions, seeking to find common ground and understand the differences. For example, today our young people in RE are learning about the Hindu festival of Holi, which heralds the arrival of Spring and is celebrated with traditional food and the liberal use of bright colored powders thrown

everywhere. One of the requests from our parents is that their young ones have an understanding of the world's religions, and world religions is often offered as an adult RE class in UU congregations.

You might have noticed that in our worship services we use readings from the sacred texts of other traditions as well as secular readings; we have many sacred texts. Our definition of sacred is quite broad, which is both a blessing and a challenge. The blessing is inclusion and welcome. The challenge is respecting and understanding traditions when they are not ours per se. When we have not been raised in a particular tradition or experienced it deeply, we are not steeped in the culture and traditions in which they are embedded. No spiritual tradition can truly be understood outside of the environment in which it was formed and is practiced, so that poses a challenge to those of us who want to honor all traditions. How do we honor cultures and traditions without taking them for our own use without permission?

For those of us who are of white European descent, we are challenged to know and understand the impact of colonialism and racism. What does it mean for a white congregation to use spirituals from the black church tradition? What does it mean for a white congregation to use a ritual from a native tradition? Our typical practice is to ask someone who is of a particular culture to teach about their tradition and offer any rituals. When we don't do this, our values call us to deep discernment about the implications of our actions, both historical and current, with the hope that faithful reflection informs our decision.

As a living tradition, we are not given many answers, but rather guidance based on history as we are called to ask the questions that inform our present and future.

Our fourth source says that we use

Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Our Unitarian and Universalist traditions are rooted in protestant Christianity, which grew out of Jesus' experience as a Jew in the ancient middle east. Our spiritual lineage goes back to ancient times, and we draw on the Jewish and Christian Bibles as sacred texts. Although most UU congregations don't necessarily identify as Christian now, how we are organized, how we gather and how we worship is molded by this history. What we do on Sunday morning, and that it is even Sunday morning rather than another time, comes from this heritage and would not be out of line in a mainstream protestant church. What we say might be a bit of a challenge in some places, but not what we do.

Our living tradition shows up here in the ways that we interpret our history through the lens of these times. I did this last week when I spoke about this Christian season of Lent as a time of emptying ourselves in order to be open to what is yet to come. I offered a current and I hope relevant, interpretation of the ancient ritual, bringing its historical meaning into modern times.

Our fifth source, and the final one for today, offers that we affirm and promote

Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.

One of the strengths of our faith tradition is that we assert the connection between religion and science; we don't see them as incompatible or in conflict. If you pay attention to the news at all, you know that

this connection is a hot topic as science and scientists are under siege these days. There are scholarly papers, and not so scholarly writings, about why science and religion don't mix, continuing a debate that has been going on for millennia. This is a rich topic that deserves at least a sermon of its own.

Humanism was one of the formative movements in the Unitarian tradition in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and was the foundation of many of the small lay-led fellowships established in the western US in the 1940's and 50's. The Unitarian Fellowship of Olympia was one of those. Today there are UU congregations that identify with this movement in a way that is reflected in their name, such as the Washington Ethical Society in the other Washington, Washington, DC. In our UUA you will find humanist fellowships located in the West and ethical societies located in the East with deep roots in the humanist movement.

There are many areas of overlap in the beliefs of humanists and Unitarian Universalists, and some UUs identify as humanists. They affirm the inherent worth and dignity of all people and value science. They affirm the use of reason and free will, work for justice and care for the Earth. Humanists see religion as a human creation, not created by God. Many people ascribe to humanist beliefs without naming them as such, and many faith traditions call on humanist teachings.

Our tradition's connection of religion and science also has a history that is important to understand. It informs the part of the source that speaks to warnings against idolatry, or extreme worship of an idea.

One example of our complex history is Clarence Skinner, after whom our UU publishing company Skinner House Books is named. Skinner was a Universalist minister in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century who worked hard to promote the marriage of religion and science. He, like others, saw the new science of eugenics as the salvation of our species, offering a way for planned evolution to produce smarter and stronger babies, creating a stronger and smarter human race. Eugenics is a way to manage human reproduction to produce offspring with desirable traits. While this may not sound like a necessarily bad thing, its application was shot through with racism and classism, stereotypes and oppression. American was a leader in the eugenics movement, and later the Nazi party looked to the US for how to treat racial minorities, using eugenics as a scientific rationale for the holocaust.

Our living tradition calls on us to use science and reason, but also tempered with justice and compassion. From this example we learn that science alone is not enough; we are always called to listen to the voices of others and use the lens of justice-making.

Earlier Barbara sang beautifully about making peace with our past, looking it honest full on in the face and embracing it with forgiveness. Our ancestors, both personal and spiritual, were human, as are we. Our work is to understand our history, bring it into the present to make amends as needed, so that we may have a better future for all of us.

Knowing our history isn't enough. Wisdom requires that we know the full history, all of it, especially the parts that are buried. Wisdom requires that we digest the history, understanding it in the context that it happened and examining it in the context of today. And, wisdom requires that we be open to reinterpretation as we learn and grow, with hope that we build a better future based on our wisdom from the past.

The section of the UUA bylaws which contains the six sources ends with this:

Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to

deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.

Our living tradition is a journey and we are on this journey together. “Whoever you are, whatever your gifts, you are welcome to join this journey.”

Ysaye Barnwell reminds us that

We are  
Seekers of truth  
Keepers of faith  
Makers of peace and the wisdom of ages.

May we remember who we are and may we sing to the universe who we are.

May this indeed be so.

Blessed Be and Amen.

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More about the Six Sources [here](#).

Unitarian Universalist Association by laws are [here](#).

OUUC's covenant is [here](#).

Previous sermons can be found [here](#).

[Here](#) are some links to resources for UU history.