

“Welcoming Our Ancestors”

Rev. Mary Gear

Delivered Sunday, October 31, 2021

First Reading: Adapted from “Welcoming the Ancestors” by Christina Shu and Tera Little.

The ritual of welcoming and honoring ancestors is an ancient spiritual practice found in many cultures and traditions. Thus we begin this ceremony with paying tribute and expressing gratitude to our ancestors.

From our histories our ancestors call to us, asking “whence we come, and how and whither?” We are grateful for their gifts, their lessons, and their challenge; calling us into accountability and responsibility to fulfill their hopes and aspirations, for “What they dreamed be ours to do.”

We call on and invoke our parents, grandparents, aunties and uncles, our siblings, from across time and place, to be here with us.

We call on the early Unitarians and Universalists, lay people and ordained ministers, who brought our faith tradition to Washington and the Pacific Northwest.

We call on ancestors of the Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation who built, grew, and dreamed this church and this community into being.

We call on those who represent peoples of Olympia: those who strove to build beloved community, representing diverse cultures and traditions, including the indigenous peoples of different tribes.

We call upon our activist ancestors – those who struggled for justice, freedom and liberation of all people – who challenge us to “honor the fullness of each and every human being.”

We especially lift up those who battled the racism and oppression right here in Olympia, which is still alive today; they ask us to join the on-going struggle to make this city whole.

We call upon and honor the beauty of the earth, this particular part of creation that this church ministers in: the South Sound region and in the shadow of Mount Tahoma, our interconnectedness to nature and to the history of the land itself.

Now we ask you to call to mind your own particular ancestors – family roots, spiritual mentors and guides. Each one of us brings into the room our own network of people and places.

We have welcomed this great cloud of witnesses to join us today– can you feel them?

May our ancestors guide us on our way.

May they bless this space and our time together.

Ancestors, be with us.

Sermon/Homily: Life and Death: Facing Our Mortality

Today is Halloween, a day when some of us dress up. Some of us are scary ghosts or goblins or ghouls. Some of us are creatures like witches or vampires or black cats. Some of us are superheroes, some superstars. It's a time to pretend, to gather sweets, and to play.

The fact that scary beasts like ghosts and spirits are part of Halloween is not by chance. Some of us believe that at this time of year, the veil between the worlds is thin and we can connect with those who have gone before us more easily. As we head into the dark months, now It's a time when we are aware of life and death, we are invited to remember our ancestors, our cloud of witnesses, and face our own mortality.

Last Sunday, Sara offered a beautiful message about facing our own death and how uncomfortable that may be. She noted how we have rituals that help us remember our ancestors and remind us of our own life and death. Pagans, those whose spirituality is Earth-centered, celebrate Samhain, the beginning of a new year and the winter half of the year. This is a time of the Crone, celebrating the coming of darkness. The early Christian church sought to replace this pagan holiday that honors the dead by declaring October 31 to be Hallows-Eve, which has transformed into Halloween.

During this time Christians honor those past with All Souls and All Saints Day. Those of us with Mexican or Latin heritage celebrate the Day of the Dead, honoring those past with a picnic on their grave, celebrating their life with stories and food.

All of these rituals are reminders of how the past lives in the present. They help us remember and honor our ancestors and how we have been shaped by them. They help

us remember how much of what we do and who we are as individuals and as a culture has been shaped by those who have gone before.

As Sara said, it can be uncomfortable to face our own mortality, the reality that we will not live forever. It can also be uncomfortable to remember our ancestors, not only because they are gone and we miss them, but sometimes we're uncomfortable because of how our ancestors lived.

In the Spring of this year, J. Drew Lanham wrote an article in the magazine of the national Audubon Society titled, "What Do We Do About John James Audobon?" We'll put a link to the article in the chat: I recommended it.

[<https://www.audubon.org/magazine/spring-2021/what-do-we-do-about-john-james-audubon>]

Lanham describes himself as a Black American ornithologist, a Black birdwatcher. He tells of his love of all things related to birds from the age of 8, his imagination filled with ideas of roaming the world, watching and collecting birds like the birding hero, John James Audobon.

The challenge for Lanham and others is that Audubon owned Black slaves, he bought and sold Black humans; he held and espoused beliefs that Blacks were less than human, suited to enslavement, and that whites were better, suited to being masters of people and nature.

This story is more complicated because there is debate about Audubon's heritage. Lanham recounts that the story is that "Audubon's father was a French ship captain who traded slaves. Audubon's mother was French or Haitian Creole. By some definitions, a Creole is a person of mixed white and Black descent. Definitions of race and identity have morphed over time to both cover and expose truths, so we may never know who John James Audubon's mother was." It is possible that Audubon was someone of mixed heritage who passed as white.

So, Lanham asks, "What do we do with a racist, slave-owning birding god almost 200 years dead? And what do we do with such a man who might have been in denial of his own identity?"

One argument is that Audubon, John Muir and others like them, were men of their time and should be judged accordingly. The problem with that is, although Audubon died shortly before the Civil War, he lived in a time when others were actively working to end slavery. We know that Audubon knew about the abolition movement because he wrote and spoke against it. He could have held a different view about enslaving Blacks, and

he chose not to. We can understand Audubon's views in the context of his time and even in the context of what we know of his personal story. But, as Lanham writes, racism doesn't get a pass because of historical context; it's still racism.

My favorite line from Lanham's article is this: "Deconstructing holiness is hard work." He most certainly dissects Audubon's life and work, showing how racism exists in so many ways, and how the racism of the past lives on in the people, structures, and institutions of today.

This kind of "holy deconstruction" is possible and necessary not only for organizations and institutions, but also for our personal stories. Part of my awakening to racial justice has been developing an understanding of the environment that I grew up in and how that has shaped me. Both of my grandfathers worked in Muskegon, Michigan in factories that made parts for the auto plants in Detroit and Flint. They were both members of unions and both died young of cancers most likely caused by industrial toxins. They were both also incredibly racist. I have vivid memories of comments from each of them about Black people in our town and who they worked with. They were taught, and taught me, that Blacks, especially Black men, were not like us, and were dangerous.

It wasn't until I was an adult that I learned that the management of auto factories and plants used racism to curb the power of the unions. If management could divide the workers by race, laborers would not unite to fight for better conditions, pay and benefits, and would remain weak. I imagine that my grandfathers were fed a steady diet of racism from bosses and coworkers, and they believed it. They were seen as expendable and used up by the same system that exploited Blacks. They were all used, and many like my grandfathers, were used up.

Knowing this history and context has helped me to better understand my grandfathers. It doesn't excuse their racism. They both lived through the civil rights movement of the 1960's. Do I wish they had taken the higher road of racial justice? Of course, I do. But they didn't, for many reasons, some of which I will never know. What I do know is that their choices affected me, they helped create the water that I swam in and the beliefs that I soaked in. My life's work has been to understand where I came from, how I can become more aware, and how I can take the higher road.

In his article on Audubon, J. Drew Lanham wrote:

[Audubon] chose to watch birds and be inhumane. What choices will be made now by conservation organizations? Will there be excuses of context to brush over with paint the truths that need to be revealed? Seeing beauty and advocating for justice are not mutually exclusive acts. I would argue that one can

feed the other powerfully.

Understanding my grandfathers has helped me put their lives in context so that I can appreciate the beauty and joy they brought to my life. The story of my Grandpa who had abdominal surgery for his cancer shortly after I was born, so insisted that he gave birth to me and had the scar to prove it. The Grandpa who taught me to fish on Silver Lake, which was often more about seeking quiet than catching fish. My grandfathers taught me something about love, what it is and what it is not. The beauty of their lives helps me face the harder parts, and that fuels my work for racial justice.

This past week, the Audubon Naturalist Society announced that it will no longer go by that name in response to the “pain” caused by its slaveholder namesake, John James Audubon. Executive director, Lisa Alexander, was quoted in *The Guardian* as saying this:

“..the mission and vision of the organization have not changed. The deliberate and thoughtful decision to change our name is part of our ongoing commitment to creating a larger and more diverse community of people who treasure the natural world and work to preserve it. It has become clear that this will never be fully possible with the current name.”

By whatever name it will be called in the future, this naturalist organization committed to saving birds cannot not erase John James Audubon, any more than I can erase my grandfathers. I wouldn't want to! If my grandpas hadn't existed, I wouldn't exist. But they can use the beauty of nature and the work of Audubon to fuel their efforts for justice. Beauty and justice are not mutually exclusive and can feed each other.

In order for any of us to fully understand who we are—as people, as organizations, as institutions, as a nation—we must understand our entire story, our whole history, even the uncomfortable, ugly, hard parts. James Baldwin wrote that “History is not the past, it is the present. We carry our history with us.” If we deny, erase, or whitewash what has been, we will never truly know who we are, and without that knowledge, we can never live into who we wish to be.

I know that some of our ancestors have believed and done horrific and awful things, and sometimes those things were done to us. Those stories are especially hard, and we need support to face that past in order to move into a healthy future.

On this Halloween, when the veil between the worlds is thin, I invite you to call upon your ancestors as you are able.

Ancestors be with us.

Seek the whole of their stories. Invite them gently into your awareness. What stories do they have to tell you about who they were and about who you are? What parts of what they tell you do you wish to take as your own, and which do you wish to change? Embrace and even love, the whole of it—the beauty and the call for justice.

May your Halloween be filled with moments of sweetness and revelation.

As we take a breath together, let's move into a time of silence.