



## A Way Out of No Way

BY NIALA TERRELL-MASON, SEMINARIAN, CLAREMONT SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY, CALIFORNIA

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s last speech is now called "The Mountaintop Speech." In it he seems to predict his own death:

*Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life; longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.*

Dr. King was murdered the next day.

"I may not get there with you. But ...we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land." He knew he wouldn't get there with us. We are still not there. I won't get there either; the arc of the moral universe is long. With this knowledge, I am here to lay myself down as one more stepping stone on the road to the Promised Land.

We are all stepping stones. We don't just stand on the shoulders of giants. Giants aren't very common, after all. What is much more common are the people whose names and faces and lives most of us will never know. We know they existed, because we exist, but that's it. What Tim Rice writes in the musical *Aida* is true, at least for most Black people: "The past is now another land, far beyond my reach / Invaded by insidious foreign bodies, foreign speech."

I see slave women in photos, and it is painful for me because one of those women could be my kin. The woman with a nursing baby and toddler bears more than a passing resemblance to my own mother. She could be my great-great-great grandmother and I would never know it. She's a photo on the internet. No name, no date, no place. According to history, she is no body.

Most Black women are No Body to history. They were just hands and feet and breasts and wombs. Their hands tilled the soil, planted and harvested crops, kneaded dough and made good food they weren't allowed to eat, sewed clothing they weren't allowed to wear. Their cracked and tired feet walked for miles in all kinds of weather to work as maids and nurses and laundresses. Their breasts fed white babies as theirs went hungry. Their milk wasn't their own. Their breasts weren't their own. Their wombs were not their own. The bodies of slave women were for the master's pleasure and the master's financial gain.

Many Black people walk around as visual reminders of the hundreds of years of bodily violations our women endured. My grandmother and my great-grandmother are both light-skinned. My grandmother's natural pre-white hair color is red; a light-skinned, red-headed Black girl whose family migrated out of Kentucky—an "Upper South" border slave state that did not secede from the Union during the Civil War. Kentucky remained officially neutral with a population that was 25% enslaved Blacks. We know why my family looks the way it does.

Delores Williams, womanist theologian, says that for Black women our biblical heroine is Hagar. She is our ancestor. Hagar was the Black Egyptian slave of Abraham and Sarah. When Sarah could not conceive—the greatest shame a woman could endure in the ancient Near East—she "gave" her "servant" to Abraham to have a child with. You might be thinking, *Wait, how did this fix the problem of her*

# Quest

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You are the  
fairy tale told by  
your ancestors.  
—Toba Beta

A monthly for religious liberals

### THINKING ABOUT ANCESTORS

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*not being able to conceive?* Well, by law Sarah owned every part of Hagar. The child that Abraham then fathered (Ishmael) was legally Sarah's child. And not in a property way, as it was in the American south, but rather *her* child, as in *her* son.

Hagar was a forced surrogate. It was common practice in those days. When Sarah eventually had her own child, Isaac, she told Abraham to leave Hagar and Ishmael, who was legally *her* son, in the desert. Abraham, knowing this meant certain death for them both in the harsh desert, did as she asked, even though he loved Ishmael.

In the desert, Hagar walked away from Ishmael because she could not stand to see her own child die of thirst or hunger. God heard Hagar's cries and felt her pain. God knew what Abraham and Sarah did was wrong. God provided them with water and told Hagar that they would survive. God gave her a way out of no way.

Hagar was disenfranchised, powerless, used and abused, living in a foreign land. She was disposable and subject to the whims of her oppressors. Hagar was also resilient, strong, brave, and audacious. She lived and survived to give her child a chance. Ishmael is the biblical ancestor of the Muslim people.

Now, this is a complicated, difficult to understand story. Back when Hagar was pregnant she ran away from Sarah's mistreatment into the desert. An angel of God appeared to her and told her to go back and submit to Sarah's rule. An angel of God told her to go back into captivity. Horrible, right? Was God supporting slavery? No. What God did was to make sure Hagar and her baby both survived.

To a slave woman, to Black women, the point here is clear. Freedom is not always attainable. Often times it's something we fight for with hope that those who come after will get to see it. It's always a goal, but you must survive first. For yourself, and for your children. God gives Hagar the strength to

endure. He toughens her up for the long hard road ahead.

As Alice Walker puts it: "And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see—or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read."

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### The life blood of the ancestors who came before us runs through our veins.

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In the book *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, Albert J. Raboteau notes the failure of the white slave system to make Blacks docile by stripping us of our culture. "In the New World, slave control was based on the eradication of all forms of African culture because of their power to unify the slaves and thus enable them to resist or rebel. Nevertheless, African beliefs and customs persisted and were transmitted by slaves to their descendants." One of the easiest ways to link African past and American present was religion.

The slaves brought over were from different villages and areas of their continent. They spoke different languages and had different customs, but most worshiped nature and the indigenous gods of Africa. That was a shared language. The way they worshipped was common to them and that was beyond language. For example, drumming—a staple of African worship—was incorporated into Christianity. Drumming, singing, and dancing were used to spread coded messages to slaves and keep alive the memory of who they were and where they came from. These elements can still be seen in African American culture and religion today.

Christianity colonized Black lives. Now, I could walk away from it all—Jesus, the Bible, the Christian commu-

nity, God. But I don't want to, and I think there is courage in the determination not to walk away. In Genesis, Jacob literally wrestled with God all night in the desert. At daybreak God asked Jacob to let him go. But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

The man asked him, "What is your name?"

"Jacob," he answered.

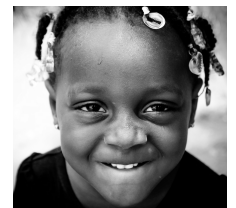
Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."

Jacob wrestled with his faith and did not come out unscathed. He limped away with a broken hip. Still, he walked away triumphant. Faith is hard. Belief is a struggle. Religion both hurts and heals. We are all here as stepping stones for one another as we move from past to future.

Black people and Black women especially have been martyred over and over. Some, like Dr. King, are given sainthood, but most are forgotten. We must remember them. Just as we remember our present day martyrs—the Rekia Boyds, Trayvon Martins, and Sandra Blands. #SayHerName. #BlackLivesMatter. We will make it to the Promised Land one day.

All the people we have lost—but who will make it, too, because we carry them with us—got us here with their determination, strength, and hope. Black women taught us, and continue to teach us, how to survive *and* how to thrive. #BlackGirlMagic is real. Go live your life in such a way that it honors theirs. Do what they could not do. Be who they could not be. Fight the battles they did not win.

The life blood of the ancestors who came before us runs through our veins. Our bodies come from their bodies. We live because they lived. ■



## Spiritual Ancestors

BY KAT LIU, MEMBER OF THE QUEST EDITORIAL TEAM, FROM HER BLOG, WIZDUUM.NET



Like many Unitarian Universalists of color (and many white allies), I get tired of white male dominance within our society and yearn for more diverse representation. Yet I was taken aback one day, while admiring stained glass renderings of some of our spiritual forefathers, when a friend came up next to me and dismissed the images as “old, dead white men.” This was a phrase that I had used numerous times myself in response to images of men who meant nothing to me. But in the narthex of that historic Unitarian church, I recognized some of the men and their importance to our faith.

“Old, dead white men” suggests that these people have no relevance to us now, especially to those of us who are neither white nor male. But these people have relevance to me. They were integral to shaping Unitarian Universalism into what it is. And since UUism is part of who I am, these people were integral to shaping me. They are my spiritual ancestors.

Whenever I lead a communal construction of an ancestral altar, I assure participants that ancestors need not be only those people to whom we’re biologically related. Ancestors can be anyone whose past life now shapes our current one.

We are more than just our bodies. Buddhism describes every being as comprised of five “aggregates,” only one of which is physical form; the rest have to do with how we perceive and think. In other words, those beings who shape how we perceive and think are every bit as much responsible for who we are as those who contributed our genetic makeup.

Still, it’s easier to recognize biological ancestors. It’s easier to see how their genes, passed on through generations, created us. If any one of them did not exist then we would not exist. If any one of them way back in time were different, somebody might still exist in our place who could be similar, but they wouldn’t be us. We know that all our biological ancestors created us, even if they are now so far removed that we might not recognize them.

The ideas that shape who we are come from our spiritual ancestors in the same way that our genes come from our biological ones. One “old, dead white man” whose ideas clearly shaped my life is Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson described Hindu theology using Christian terminology. His essay “The Over-Soul” is a direct translation of Hinduism’s Paramatman, *param(a)* meaning highest and *atman* meaning self or soul.

Emerson transformed Unitarianism from anti-trinitarian Christianity into a faith tradition that welcomes Hindus and Buddhists, Pagans and atheists and every other theological bent. Because if God or the Over-Soul is not separate from us individual souls, then it is no longer necessary to “believe in” God. Rather, what we agree on is the inherently worthwhile nature of humanity. Without Emerson, I would not be a UU. Many of us would not. His shortcomings notwithstanding (and let’s face it, many of our ancestors had shortcomings), Emerson is one of my spiritual ancestors.

Emerson was not among the men immortalized in stained glass that day, but William Ellery Channing was. Channing helped create Unitarianism in the United States by breaking off from the more traditional Congregationalists. He both rejected the trinity and asserted that we humans are capable of cultivating goodness, ever increasing our “likeness to God.”

While the Transcendentalists eventually decided that liberal Unitarian Christianity did not go far enough, it

was people like Channing who created the spiritual space in which they could arise. Without Channing and his contemporaries, there would be no Emerson and his compatriots. If Emerson is like a spiritual grandparent, Channing is like a spiritual great-grandparent.

To respect our spiritual ancestors is to know that we don’t just come from a lineage of blood, but also of ideas. It is to realize that we are continually re-created *and* helping to re-create anew as we influence each other. It is to honor those we admire and to feel our connection even to those we don’t. To recognize our spiritual ancestors is to recognize the interdependent web. ■

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## Nominating Committee Seeks Leaders

FROM THE CLF NOMINATING COMMITTEE: JOSEPH SANTOS-LYONS, CATHY CHANG, CHARLES DUMOND

The CLF’s Nominating Committee seeks members to run for positions beginning **June 2019**:

- Board of Directors—three for 3-year terms
- Nominating Committee—one for a 3-year term
- Treasurer—for a 1-year term
- Clerk—for a 1-year term

Board members set CLF policy and approve the budget. The Board meets in Boston or other US cities twice annually and periodically by conference calls. Nominating Committee members put forth nominations for the Board.

For more information about the Board and Nominating Committee, visit <https://www.questformeaning.org/clfu/about/>. You may nominate yourself or another CLF member for any of these positions.

Please contact the CLF office at [nominating@clfu.org](mailto:nominating@clfu.org) or 617-948-6150 by **January 15, 2019**.

## Always

BY **BOWEN LEE**,  
WRITER/ARTIST/  
EDUCATOR,  
MONTEREY,  
CALIFORNIA



On the morning my grandmother died, I squeezed the juice out of citrus fruits and strained out the seeds with a fork so I wouldn't drink them. My grandmother told me when I was three or four that if you swallowed seeds they would grow inside your stomach. But that is not why I didn't want to drink them.

I know my digestion will obliterate the seeds into their primal molecular components if ingested—that all the great potential contained in those seeds would nourish me, become part of me. Although I swallowed dozens of seeds when I was young, not one watermelon ever grew in my stomach, somewhat to my disappointment.

My grandmother knew seeds were better in the ground than taking the long journey through my digestive system, so she let me spit watermelon seeds into her garden. When I was small she had an amazing garden, lush and verdant and full of smells, colors, and textures. Later, when she moved into a little one-bedroom apartment on the second floor of Oakland's busy Park Street by Lake Merritt, she grew trees in pots from the seeds she saved from squeezing lemons. I have never been able to grow a lemon tree from a seed, but she knew how to coax them to grow, flourish and bear fruit.

On the way to work I was thinking about my family's legacy in California, and how it was more than names in a logbook or dates on a document. People change the land they live in, but also the land changes them. The thin, wiry peasant stock my family came from undoubtedly changed into the robust, well-built bodies of native Californians in a few generations.

My grandmother came from that third generation of American Chinese. The land, the sea, the clean, abundant water and the bounty of food made that generation of my family strong, athletic and tireless. They had the energy to build communities, families, opportunities. They were the establishing generation. In the succession of growth in an ecosystem, the land is first settled by pioneers, is made stable by secondary growth, and becomes dominant in the third stage of succession. My grandparents were the ones who sunk deep roots into the land. They were the trees that gave the forest its name. They were Chinese-Americans.

And my grandmother sunk the deepest root of all. At 106 years old, she outlived her four sisters and three brothers. She held her great-great-granddaughter in her arms a month before she died. I was imagining the root of her sinking into the bedrock of this country, firmly anchoring her family to this place...when my mother called on the car speakerphone to say that my grandmother passed away early that morning.

I felt like a great tree had fallen, toppling like a bridge, cutting off our access to the rest of the family that came before us. We will not know who they were, or what they were like, or what happened to them, because the last one who knew them is gone, too.

But though the tree has been cut down, my grandmother's roots were profoundly deep. She anchored us with her presence, with her still being alive and healthy and spunky as a spark plug. *Keep going. Do your best. Don't give up.* All those old lady admonitions I tired of when young and impatient, but desperately needed to hear when I grew older and times grew tougher. Her favorite song was "Always." *I'll be loving you, always. With a love that's true, always.*

I sang it as I was squeezing lemons and putting aside the seeds. I'll remember you always, Nan. ■



## And When Ancestors Are Dishonorable?

BY **KENNETH W. COLLIER**,  
MINISTER EMERITUS, UNITARIAN SOCIETY  
OF SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA

Many people think of their ancestors as dead and gone, and therefore to be thought about only occasionally and with no real attachment, as if they have no claim on us who live. But how can we embrace our heritage while turning our backs on the ancestors who carried that heritage forward and gave it to us?

My African-American friends insist on the necessity of honoring our ancestors. To honor the ancestors is to embrace our heritage and carry it forward in our turn. I believe this, and it is one of the things that led me into genealogy. But understanding my genealogy has presented me with a serious problem.

It is easy to honor ancestors when those ancestors were honorable, but what does one do when one's forbears were *dishonorable*?

My parents were good and gentle, kind and compassionate people. When I look back through the generations of my ancestors, though, I find an unbroken string of slaveholding, giving way to the neo-slavery of Jim Crow and on into the racism of the 20th century. My family's dishonorable history begins at least in the mid-1600s and quite possibly earlier.

For just one example, my ancestor, Lockey Collier, was murdered in 1778 by the people he enslaved, presumably because of the harsh way he treated them. How is it possible to honor such a man and others like him? Are we just to ignore these dishonorable ancestors? Do we say, "OK. I'll honor *these* ancestors but not *those*. I'll honor only the ones I can approve of."

That won't do. These dreadful people are also part of our heritage, and we cannot embrace our heritage while ignoring the hard parts, pretending that our heritage is all fine and dandy and has no stains upon it. It is dishonest; it is a kind of lie.

So I wrestled with this problem and for years, I had no answer. Then I watched the film *Amistad* and found a solution that makes sense to me. In the film, as John Quincy Adams is preparing to argue the case of the captured Africans before the Supreme Court, he has a conversation with the Africans' leader, Cinque. Cinque speaks eloquently of his ancestors. He says that the line of his ancestors will stand with him and help, because he is the culmination of their line. They act in history through him, and they are honored by his honorable actions and life.

And that is my answer. My ancestors' crimes against humanity (and what else are slavery and racism but crimes against humanity?) cry out for redress, for atonement. Neither my ancestors nor the people they enslaved are still living. So how can these crimes be atoned for? And by whom?

By me. The ancestors act through us. We honor our dishonorable ancestors by acting honorably for them.

My ancestors call out from beyond the grave for me to atone for their crimes, and I honor them by confessing my family's sins and working to repair the damage they inflicted on so many people. How can I forgive my grandmother for the racism she worked to plant in my heart? I forgive her by working to erase the very racism she embraced. I do not take their guilt on. I work to heal the wounds they inflicted.

I work to create the heritage that I want my life to carry forward.

*From Collier's 2018 book  
The Great Wound: Confessions of a  
Slaveholding Family* ■

## Living On

BY FLORENCE  
CAPLOW, MINISTER, UU  
CHURCH OF URBANA  
CHAMPAIGN, URBANA,  
ILLINOIS



We exist because of those who have come before us. Their strength and love encourage us in our living. There is a deep humility in understanding that we are just one note in the symphony that began long before our birth and will continue long after we're gone. And the sound of our note is shaped by all who have shaped us, as we shape the notes to come.

Our bodies and minds are formed by the DNA of our direct ancestors, but we also carry the culture and stories and songs that have been passed down to us by people far beyond our immediate family. There are spiritual ancestors as well as physical ancestors.

Two years ago, my 88-year-old UU mother and I went on a self-guided pilgrimage to New England to visit the UU "holy places" there. We spent several days in the small town of Concord, Massachusetts, the home of many people I consider my spiritual ancestors, that circle of Transcendentalist men and women of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century whose writings, speaking, poetry, activism and tremendous insight shaped America in many ways.

It was powerfully moving to stand in Ralph Waldo Emerson's study, surrounded by the books that had so enthralled young Louisa May Alcott and Henry David Thoreau, or to see the house where the Alcott sisters created their private world that became *Little Women*. We went to Walden Pond and I picked up an acorn for my home altar, thinking in gratitude of Thoreau and how his book *Walden* changed my life as a teen.

Before leaving, we went to Sleepy Hollow cemetery, on a wooded hill at the edge of town. They are all there, just a few hundred feet from one another:

Emerson and Nathaniel Hawthorne and Elizabeth Peabody and the Alcotts and Thoreau, their graves clustered along a high rocky ridge. I could just imagine them walking together one fall afternoon, as the new town cemetery was being planned, and laughingly arguing about who would get the best view from their grave.

Emerson's marker was a massive uncut chunk of native stone, suitably magnificent and iconoclastic. At Louisa Alcott's little gravestone there were hundreds of pens and pencils: offerings, I assume, from aspiring writers. At the base of Hawthorne's gravestone there was a folded-up piece of paper with a scribbled poem. Thoreau's gravestone was just a few inches tall, like the stone for a young child, and all it said was "Henry." I sat down on a tree root, grown from his bones, and thanked him in my heart for what he brought to the world 120 years before my time, about how to live on this earth, as best one can, with grace and appreciation.

The next summer, my dearest spiritual friend died. We had known each other since I was six years old and she was nineteen. She was a steadfast force of goodness, love, and light in my life for more than forty-five years. When we spoke on the phone for the last time before she died, she told me, for the first time, that she saw me as her spiritual daughter. "Yes," I said, "Yes. I am who I am because of you." Now she is gone, at least in the form I knew, and I go on, carrying, as best I can, her qualities of fierce honesty and unconditional love, in her memory and honor.

In Japan, many people place their loved ones' names on their home altars, and light candles and incense for them, in gratitude, just as they do for the Buddha. Similarly, in my congregation we have an All Soul's Day ritual each year in early November in which we honor our ancestors by lighting candles, remembering and acknowledging: "I am who I am because of you." ■



## From Your Minister

BY MEG RILEY  
SENIOR MINISTER,  
CHURCH OF THE LARGER  
FELLOWSHIP

One sentence launched me into discovery about my ancestors. It's the first line of a book, *Tearin' through the Wilderness*, which my great-Aunt Marie researched, wrote and self-published in 1956, long before self-publishing was a thing. Boxes of that book sat around in my childhood home, but I never read it until my Dad died and my siblings and I each obligingly took home the one with our name printed on the brown paper cover in my grandmother's writing. My grandmother had inscribed one to each of us kids, but my father had never passed them on to us!

Here's how that book begins, written by great-Aunt Marie in the 1950s:

*The Allen, Rives and Watkins families left a Virginia country environment where they were relieved of the drudgeries of workaday life by the labor of slaves.*

The book then goes on to describe my ancestors' decision in 1821 to leave Virginia and migrate west to Missouri, now that Missouri had entered the union as a state where enslaving other people was legal. My ancestors, and others they knew in Virginia, did their best to recreate the southern culture they loved, establishing part of the state still known as "Little Dixie."

I grew up on stories of my brave ancestors heading west in a covered wagon. Indeed, "Covered Wagon" was one of my favorite games in childhood. Never had anyone mentioned the centrality of enslaved people to that narrative. If you'd asked me, I wouldn't have even known that Missouri was a slave state. (Wasn't it in the Union?)

We never had anyone play the part of enslaved people when we divvied up roles in the game of "Covered Wagon."

Yet those people I'd never heard about are absolutely central to my family history.

After I took in this new information about my ancestors, I wanted to know more. I took some sabbatical time to go to Missouri and to read everything I could lay my hands on about them. Luckily, my grandmother sent all of my great aunt's papers to the Missouri Historical Society when Aunt Marie died. So there was a lot to read!

I also consulted some local history buffs who helped me figure out the location of the house my ancestors had built—as an exact replica of their home back in Virginia. Driving up to it, on beautiful rolling hills of fertile farmland, miles from the nearest town or highway, I was struck by how much it looked like the photographs I'd seen in my aunt's book. Because I didn't want to scare the current inhabitant, in case they were home, I went to knock on the door and introduce myself.

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**I am taking  
[my ancestors] with me as  
I try to inhabit spaces of  
consciousness,  
accountability, and justice.**

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"Hello," I began, when an elderly woman answered the door. "My ancestors built this house and..."

She interrupted me as if I had announced she won the lottery. "YOU'RE related to the Watkins, the Allens and the Rives!?" she shouted. "OH MY GOD!"

She invited me in. She got out her own battered copy of *Tearin' Through the Wilderness*. She told me that the reason the house looked so much like the old photos in it is that her son and daughter-in-law had gone to Virginia and found the original house and modeled their porch on that house. She told me her late husband lived for a time with my late great-great uncle, a man I'd come

to know through reading all the historical papers.

We were getting along swimmingly, though I knew this wasn't going to last. I let it go by when she referred to a politician I admire with a racist derogatory name coined by Bill O'Reilly. She took me to the old family graveyard next door and I saw the gravestones of many people whose stories I'd been reading about.

Then her daughter-in-law, summoned to meet me, came over to the house. Another overtly racist comment was made, this time about recent protests in Ferguson, and I said, "I am sure we see many things very differently, but what you just said was very painful to me." I then inserted a few sentences about the way I saw things—I figured I had just suffered through their interpretations and they would live with mine.

Conversation felt forced and strained after that, and I left before long. As I drove through the countryside on my way home, I reflected on the ways we are both keeping my ancestors alive. They are certainly more committed to that house than I am, and they know my ancestors' names and stories at least as well as I do. Their current belief systems about humanity are more in keeping, probably, with the ways that my ancestors understood morality to function in the 1800s.

I am honoring my ancestors' lives in a very different way. I am listening to their stories, coming to care about and even love them, and attempting also to be accountable for at least some of the pain and damage they inflicted. I'm allowing them to keep evolving and moving, though many of them died during and right after the Civil War.

I am taking them with me as I try to inhabit spaces of consciousness, accountability, and justice. I hope my own descendants will do the same for me! ■



## REsources for Living

BY LYNN UNGAR, MINISTER FOR LIFESPAN LEARNING, CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP

Our ancestors are the people gone before us—blood relations or family of mind and spirit—who guide and instruct and inspire us. They are, however, also the people who limit us with memories of their fears and their expectations, whose well-worn paths we may feel we need to follow, whether or not that's the journey we want to take.

We are surrounded by a “great cloud of witnesses” who call us on and give us strength—or who sit in unending judgement, speaking through the voices inside our head that remind us that we were supposed to turn out to be something that we're not. People are complicated. Which means that relationships between people are even more complicated. And they don't stop being complicated after people die.

Relationships also don't go away after people die. My paternal grandfather came to this country in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, looking for a place where it was safe to be Jewish. He longed to be a scholar, but took the realistic option of being a tailor. He provided for his family, but I don't think anyone ever described him as being content with his life. My three siblings and I all have earned some form of doctorate. My grandfather died before I was born, but I have no doubt that his life speaks in me, nudging my direction.

Maybe you saw the movie *Coco*, which came out in 2017. If not, I'll try not to give away any big surprises, because you definitely should see it. Young Miguel longs to be a musician, and has even managed to cobble together a guitar and learn to play it. But he has to do all of his practice in secret, because music is strictly forbidden in his family. They are shoemakers, not musicians. They are loving, but also firmly



strict in enforcing this rule that goes against the center of Miguel's heart. It takes a visit to the world of the dead

for Miguel to discover the family story of heartbreak that is still keeping him from what he loves. And he discovers that hearts can mend even after death, and that you are still alive in the world of the dead so long as someone remembers you.

The movie is beautiful, but the title might be confusing. The main character is Miguel. *Coco* is his extremely elderly grandmother, who is moving deeper and deeper into dementia. I don't think that *Coco* says more than a couple of words in the whole movie. It isn't her story.

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### Our ancestors write our stories, and we tell theirs.

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Except that it is. Miguel can't claim his own story until he understands hers. What he loves, what he wants, what stands in his way—all of it is wrapped up in a story that goes back two generations. Miguel's story is the continuation and (in the way of Disney movies) the resolution of *Coco*'s story.

Our ancestors write our stories, and we tell theirs.

These ancestors don't even need to be blood or adoptive relatives. Mentors, friends, heroes, teachers, ancestors in faith—all have their part in shaping who we are, and we carry all of them forward with us. Your favorite poet, your high school science teacher, your martial arts instructor, and the novelist whose book changed your point of view are all your ancestors, all part of the arc of your story.

I was in my early 20s when someone gave me a book of Adrienne Rich's poetry, and I read these words: “No one lives in this room...without contemplating last and late the true nature of poetry. The drive to connect. The

dream of a common language.” And I recognized in those words what I wanted to do with my life—to dream a language that would hold our human desire to connect. Her words and her story spoke to me, and they keep speaking. I hope that in some way I carry on a tiny piece of her heritage.

The pagan celebration of Samhain on October 31, the Catholic All Souls Day on November 2, and the Mexican celebration of El Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead), which spans those dates, all point to the same truth: the dead are still with us. It matters that we hold their stories. And somehow this time of year feels right to honor that connection in all its complexity.

And it is a gift to people of all ages when we honor that connection deliberately, ritually, as families that include both the living and the dead. A celebration could include building an altar, sharing memories and stories as we place on it pictures and favorite items in honor of those who are no longer alive, but are still with us.

It might involve visiting and tending to grave sites, letting children be involved in helping to honor and preserve the memories of those they loved or those they never met. It might mean getting out a picture album and remembering out loud the funny stories and personal quirks and even the character flaws of people who you want to keep alive in memory.



In the song, “We Are,” Ysaye Barnwell writes: “We are our grandmothers' prayers, and we are our grandfathers' dreaming. We are the breath of our ancestors. We are the spirit of God.” Our ancestors breathe through us. And we will breathe through the lives of those who come after us. It is our job to write a life story that is worthy of that history and that future. ■



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## Honey

**CONNIE WANERK**, RETIRED  
LIBRARIAN, NEW MEXICO

Luxury itself, thick as a Persian carpet,  
honey fills the jar  
with the concentrated sweetness  
of countless thefts,  
the blossoms bereft, the hive destitute.

Though my debts are heavy  
honey would pay them all.  
Honey heals, honey mends.  
A spoon takes more than it can hold  
without reproach. A knife plunges deep,  
but does no injury.

Honey moves with intense deliberation.  
Between one drop and the next  
forty lean years pass in a distant desert.  
What one generation labored for  
another receives,  
and yet another gives thanks. ■

Oops! In our June issue we thanked congregations that had supported the CLF in the past year. Unfortunately, we missed a couple of generous congregations in that thank you. Our sincere, if belated, thanks (with an apology) go to:

**Throop Memorial Church,**  
Pasadena, CA  
**Champlain Valley UU Society,**  
Middlebury, VT ■