

“To Be a Good Ancestor”

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

First Parish in Wayland

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This week was historic. For the first time ever in U.S. history, millions of people voted for a woman for president. And, for many liberals, this week was devastating as Donald Trump won. And, for still others, this week brought the promise of a long sought after change. Now, we gather here in this place where generations of our spiritual ancestors have gathered following such historic weeks.

Looking towards an unknown future of new political leadership and a different political landscape can feel unsettling. Whether you are for or against Trump, one thing we can all agree on is that going forward things will be different. In such moments of uncertainty and even fear, it is good to remember the values that anchor us as well as the visions that guide us.

We are a Unitarian Universalist congregation that stands within a long tradition. Part of this tradition is promoting a freedom of religious belief. To be a member here, there is no creedal test about what you believe about God, heaven, or hell. Another important part of this tradition is the recognition of the value and dignity of every life. Whether the Unitarian insight of a bit of divinity in each of us or the Universalist affirmation of a divine love that embraces all, the tradition we inherit has long affirmed the worth and dignity of every person. For centuries, our spiritual ancestors have put these values into action as abolitionists, as activists for women’s rights, as advocates to alleviate poverty, and as leaders in the 20th century Civil Rights movement and the legal recognition of same-sex marriage.

These are our spiritual ancestors. These are values that anchor us.

As a minister, my role is not to offer a dissection of the politics or the demographics of this election. I am not a political pundit. And First Parish is not a political organization. While I cannot explain to you all the whys and whats of the election, I will say that elements of Donald Trump’s campaign directly conflicted with our Unitarian Universalist values of respecting the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Instead of respect, we saw mocking of a person with disabilities, threats of violence and exclusion to persons of color, and the casual reduction of women to his opinion of their sexual attractiveness. He bragged about actions that we would teach our kids in our O.W.L. classes to identify as sexual assault. Such things are not about political parties. This is a

moral critique grounded in our shared religious values about how we treat other human beings.

And yet, I know that many of Trump's supporters would say that there was more to his campaign than bigotry, sexism, and xenophobia. There is a part of me who gets this.

On Wednesday, someone who knows I'm from Michigan asked me if I was surprised that Michigan had gone for Trump. No, I wasn't. The auto industry where my maternal grandfather worked for decades has been decimated. My family was grateful that he died before the closing of his beloved Pontiac plant. That red Pontiac logo was so ubiquitous on his cars and clothing that we nearly ceased to register its presence.

So also, the factory that supplemented the farm income of my paternal grandfather in rural Michigan has long since closed. When I was a kid, my brothers and I would play for hours with the magnets Grandpa brought home from the Hitachi plant. Once, Grandpa even proudly brought us to the gleaming factory to see where he worked.

All that is gone now. And nothing came in its place. My parents and siblings, aunts and uncles remain. As do my cousins, nieces, and nephews. But, the options are fewer. The possibilities more narrow.

When I left Michigan, I was one of only two seniors in my high school who went to college out-of-state. When I left, I still believed in Creationism despite a public school education. And, I certainly believed that God had a plan for my life . . . and for the world at large. A plan that didn't include homosexuality, abortion, or atheists. At the time, none of this seemed extreme. It felt 'normal.' It reflected much of the people and culture around me.

Being here today in a Unitarian Universalist church in Massachusetts is the world that now feels 'normal.' Normal feels like not only *expecting* diversity of race and ethnicity, but celebrating it. Normal feels like not only tolerating homosexuality, but counting GBLTQ folks as close friends and neighbors with whom our children happily play. Normal feels like faith that progressive issues will eventually pass—whether it's same-sex marriage, universal health care, or protecting transgender rights.

Indeed, historically, Massachusetts is home to many progressive *firsts* such as the first free public school and the first large public library. It feels good to know that in significant ways this Commonwealth we call home has been a beacon for progressive values for centuries. And yet, such progressive actions took years, often decades, of activism and organizing that led up to these clean, crisp dates of the 'first' or the 'victory.'

These long timelines are helpful to remember now as progressive values face grave threats in the new political climate. We need to remember that our ancestors *have* been here before. There were more than eighty years between the abolition of slavery in Massachusetts and the 13th Amendment in 1865. The first Women’s Rights conference was held in Seneca Falls, NY in 1848, but the 20th Amendment granting women’s suffrage did not arrive for another seventy-two years.

Change came through decades of advocacy and activism. Prophetic men and women such as Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Elisabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, William Lloyd Garrison and so, so many others sustained a critique for years . . . sometimes dying before witnessing the change to which they had given so much.

Such lives can be a source of inspiration. The second of the six Unitarian Universalist sources points to the “words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.”

‘Prophetic’ might be a word that puzzles some of us. Prophetic does not necessarily mean an ability to predict the future as a kind of magic power. Nor does a prophet have to be a person who believes a god is whispering secret messages to them. Rather, I understand prophetic, as used in the 2nd source, to point to a person who has a strong vision for what the future could be. A prophetic man or woman is one whose actions in the present are reaching towards a future that is not yet present, but which is possible.

The words and deeds of prophetic women and men challenge us. By listening to their words and learning from their actions, we begin to ask new and different questions about the world in which we live. Rather than accept the world the way it is, prophetic voices challenge us to see the ways in which the systems and dynamics of our world reinforce destructive patterns. A destructive tendency some would call evil. But these prophets are not simply naysayers pronouncing doom and gloom. They also point to the alternate vision—the vision that serves to both condemn the present models and convey a conviction in the alternate power of “justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.”

As we look back to the ancestors who came before us and their prophetic words and deeds, we find examples of people who lived out their values, even when they were not popular, even when the likelihood of change seemed years away.

Another way to think about our own moment and the choices we now face is to view ourselves as the ancestors of future generations. Or, as Jonas Salk, who developed the polio vaccine, asked, “Are we being good ancestors?”

What will history say of us? Perhaps we'll not be remembered as heroic individuals with household names. But, as a group of people, of liberal religious people, as Massachusetts people, as Unitarian Universalists, could we make a difference? Could we be good ancestors who resisted the hate, the incivility, the dehumanization of others? What would it mean to you to be a good ancestor?

What would it mean to you to be a good ancestor within your family? To your friends or larger community? To your state, your nation, or your planet? What do you value? For what will you fight? For what will you sacrifice—even if you never learn of its full effects?

James Luther Adams, a 20th century Unitarian theologian, suggested that we are all prophets. I understand him to be saying that we are all charged with imagining a better world and doing what we can to enact that vision. Perhaps looking back to the ancestors of the past will inspire our own bold action. Or, perhaps, feeling the call of a future that needs your action today as a good ancestor may inspire you to do what you can.

I do not believe that the world will ever be entirely good or right. In this sense, our task is not to 'fix' the world once and for all. Life is too dynamic and the world too complex for this to be possible. The prophetic vision is not a blueprint for a utopia or a perfect paradise. Rather, I believe that we are called to live out goodness and compassion, love and justice in the times and places in which we find ourselves. We are not called to 'get it right' 'once and for all.' We are called instead to be awake to the struggles happening today.

In a sense, I understand us to be in a kind of millennia-long relay race from generation to generation. We receive our world and our wisdom from our ancestors and we will pass along a world and our wisdom to those who come after us. For now, we are the ones holding the baton of shaping the world, of learning about the terror and the beauty within its many corners and communities. For now, we are the ones who must carry the prophetic vision of a world in which every life is treated with respect and dignity; where brown lives and black lives truly matter as much as white lives or blue lives; where persons of all genders live equitably; where all who seek the peaceable exercise of religion may freely do so . . . including walking down the street in a hijab.

In her poem, "I Will Rise," the prophetic poet Maya Angelou depicts a story of passionate defiance. Against those who want her silenced and still, she proclaims, "I Will Rise." Against those who would tell lies about her or deny her the right to voice her experience, she declares, "I Will Rise." And then, she ends her poem with these words:

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.

Bearing the gifts received from her ancestors, Angelou rises against the lies and the dismissals, the hate and the histories that would have her be silent and still.

Faced with a time that threatens to oppress, silence, and exclude too many, let us rise, as our ancestors did, to be a part of those who defy hate. Let us rise to stand in solidarity with those who are most vulnerable so that they may also rise. Let us be good ancestors who did what we do for love and justice while we held the baton of shaping the world.