

“Wishing to (Not) Forget”

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

First Parish in Wayland

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In October, I found myself again recalling painful memories of living in an abusive marriage twenty-five years ago. The memories began to return as I listened to a survivor of Domestic Violence tell her story at the Domestic Violence Vigil that First Parish co-hosted. As MC and tech host for the event, my mental focus had been elsewhere . . . until the survivor started to speak. Then suddenly I was back again in my mid-twenties married to a man who undermined my sense of self with the words he did and did not say.

That’s when I began to write this sermon in my head. How do we relate to the painful parts in our history?

For a long time, I simply wanted to forget the pain of that period of my life. And, for months, even years, the pain receded, faded memories tucked behind the fullness of my life. When the memories appeared this time, I noticed a shift in my response. Instead of wishing to hide from the pain, I tried to look at it, to feel it, to acknowledge it. Instead of wishing to forget, I wished for deeper healing . . . even if it meant remembering.

Healing often includes remembering, doesn’t it? And yet, to heal does not necessarily mean you move forward unchanged. As author [Anne Lamott](#) writes,

You will lose someone you can’t live without, and your heart will be badly broken, and the bad news is that you never completely get over the loss of your beloved. But this is also the good news. They live forever in your broken heart that doesn’t seal back up. And you come through. It’s like having a broken leg that never heals perfectly – that still hurts when the weather gets cold, but you learn to dance with the limp.

I suspect many of us know how to dance with limps, acquainted as we are with heartbreak and loss.

There are no “rules” for how we respond to heartbreak and loss, no one “right” path for how to move forward. Haven’t we all witnessed a range of responses to grief, loss, and hard times? For some, it’s important to keep the struggle front and center, naming it, processing it, not forgetting. Yet for others, the pain needs to be set aside at times, compartmentalized to be able to function day to day without being overwhelmed. Still

others may seek to place the pain fully out of view and only look ahead, never looking back. Or, looking back years later when it finally feels safe to do so.

For most situations, I have come to believe that to heal we all must look back eventually. I believe this is true for our personal griefs as well as for the painful memories we share with others in families, communities, and nations.

Looking back to heal led Jabari S. Jones to explore the roots of their African ancestry. Citing the idea of *Sankofa* from the Akan tribe in Ghana, Jones embraces reaching back in history in order to reconnect and to heal from the intergenerational trauma connecting their African ancestors to their own life today as “a Black, queer, forty-something, non-binary person residing on unceded Abenaki land in Vermont.” ([Bio](#) from [uua.org](#)) Jones recounts how they read books on Black history and whiteness, trying to make sense of the history that connects their present with their ancestral past. In response, Jones writes:

One thing I’ve learned is that at the core of white privilege is the entitlement to amnesia and ignorance. To forget that America was founded on stolen land, stolen labor, and genocide, and that we live in a society structured by this history, is to embrace an identity rooted in a false innocence and a flight from truth and healing.

What does it mean when a culture collectively selects to forget? To feign ignorance? To avoid the painful parts of history?

Currently there is an ongoing debate about “critical race theory” in our nation. Proponents of critical race theory understand it to be a tool for analyzing how the social construct of “race” has functioned in our social systems. In other words, it is a descriptive tool of how society has used the idea of “race” to create different opportunities and experiences for people—opportunities and experiences that are markedly unequal. Critics of critical race theory denounce it as an attempt to make white identified folks feel bad about themselves. Seeking to sever the line of connection from the past to the present, critics distance themselves from the undeniable racial injustice of a past that contains slavery, genocide, and violent oppression.

Admittedly, my doctorate is in Religion, Gender, and Culture and my own academic background is deeply grounded in critical race theory. It has been odd to me to see what I had experienced as academic theory fiercely debated on tv news shows, newspaper headlines, and legislative bodies. Watching I have been thinking not only of theories of social structure and transmission of cultural knowledge, but also about human response to painful memories. How do we relate to the painful parts in our personal *and* cultural history?

When I consider the debates around “critical race theory”, what strikes me is that our culture is debating whether or not we want to look back at the painful parts of our history in order to heal. And, like our response to personal pain, we have different responses. Some are trying hard to not look back, to emphasize only the future. Others, like Jones, are saying that we can move forward only by looking back, by understanding the linkages between the past and present.

Of course, looking back to the painful parts of history is neither simple, nor easy. The nature of time means that we cannot go back and simply “fix” the problems. We cannot tell a loved one not to get in the car to avoid the accident. We cannot decide to wait a bit longer before marrying to make sure about the other person. We cannot stop the introduction of Jim Crow laws. We cannot intervene to insist treaties with Indigenous tribes are just and held up. We cannot keep the boat from landing at Jamestown in 1619 and beginning a wretched legacy of enslavement. Time keeps us here, now.

But does our helplessness at “fixing” the past mean we should not look back? What is gained when we look back? What shifts when we follow the principle of *Sankofa* to return and retrieve what we need?

For example, why does it matter that we go back to the “First Thanksgiving” and reconsider, *relearn* what happened and why four hundred years ago? Living as we do in New England the story has often been a familiar one of happy gratitude for a successful harvest and a foothold begun in the New World. With Pilgrim hats and feathered headdresses made of construction paper, children reenact the story in schools as their parents and grandparents have done. I mean who among us has not made a turkey by tracing our hand on a sheet of paper and coloring in the feathers?!?

And while it is a good thing to be grateful for food, for family, for chosen family, we are increasingly becoming aware that doing so beneath the banner of the Pilgrim’s story is problematic. Because what we know now is that the little colony at Plymouth also marks the beginning of centuries of loss for the Wampanoag, the Massachusett, the Nipmuck, and, in time, for countless other Indigenous peoples across the continent who lost their land and their lives to white European settlement. Remembering this painful history, Thanksgiving has become a [National Day of Mourning](#) for many Indigenous peoples.

How do we reconcile the loss and pain of Indigenous nations with the reality that our very presence today as a congregation began by white European settlers? By white European settlers we laud as our founders—and, for some of us, as our biological ancestors?

If you had hoped that I would offer “an answer”, I must disappoint. The only “answer” I have is the sense that healing will only happen when we look back, even or especially at the painful moments. Only then do we begin to acknowledge the fullness of history. Only then are we able to start grasping the history held by others—histories, stories, and experiences we may not have known or been taught.

Such explorations are hard and painful. I am not surprised that people resist doing so both in their personal lives and on the cultural level. And yet, increasingly I fear what happens if we do not honestly appraise the past. What cost will we pay for feigned innocence, for the white entitlement of amnesia? I believe the work of deepening our understanding of whiteness, of committing ourselves to anti-racism, of seeking to build real relationships with Indigenous nations and people of color remains critical work for all of us, especially those of us who identify as white.

While such work is certainly politicized in our nation right now, at its core I understand this work to be an expression of our religious values to respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person. To be anti-racist, anti-oppression is to be pro-human, pro-justice. And, to do this work can be painful—just as it is painful anytime we choose to face loss and feel its impact. But we are not alone in this work. As a congregation, we pledge to “work together for a better world.” I challenge all of us to reconsider just what that might mean for us today as individuals, as a congregation, and as a nation. Perhaps if we join together in looking back, we might also find a way forward into a more just future for Black Lives, for Indigenous peoples, for all who face ongoing oppression.

So may it be.
Amen