

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Following the Songlines

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**WHITE BEAR UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH
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READING

Knowledge Neighbors

Alberto Rios

You and I, my friend, we lend what we have to each other,
Handsaws and tree pruners, cars sometimes, and sugar.
But we lend as well to each other what we know – The Library,
It tends our voices – it speaks for us in words as many as stars,
All to make sense of the world and the worlds we share.
The new century is its newest book, and this book is our lives.
It is our own chance to be new, to be surprised, to see what it is
We are all going to do. Today, we lend ourselves to each other,
Our big hands to the small hands of the mighty race of children,
Our big words to their small syllables, our ideas awaiting theirs.
This book of ours together has no ending written for it yet.
Its stories have unfamiliar faces, but not unfamiliar hopes.
It is a book of many colors with a binding stitched from dream.
When we enter a library, we open the first page of imagination,
The last page of memory, and the webpage of today.
Tomorrow's page has not yet been printed, and may not be –
Perhaps it will be made of flying things, pages that come to us
Like bird wings through the air. This page might be anything.
However it makes itself, however we read, or hear, or taste it,
Let us think that it will be good, because we were good

Following the Songlines

From Alice Walker, a poem about legacy, a poem which on this end of this week seems strangely, sadly, wonderfully, powerfully apt: from Alice Walker, African American poet, activist and teacher:

*for two who
slipped away
almost
entirely:*

*my "part" Cherokee
great-grandmother
Tallulah...
on my mother's side
about whom
only one
agreed-upon
thing
is known:
her hair was so long
she could sit on it:*

*And my white (Anglo-Irish)
great-great-grandfather
on my father's side
nameless
(Walker, perhaps?)
whose only remembered act
is that he raped
a child,
my great-great-grandmother,
who bore his son,*

*my great-grandfather,
when she was eleven.*

*Rest in peace.
The meaning of your lives
is still
unfolding.*

*Rest in peace.
In me
the meaning of your lives
is still
unfolding...*

*Rest. In me
the meaning of your lives
is still
unfolding.*

*Rest. In peace
in me
the meaning of our lives
is still
unfolding.*

Rest.

The poet is herself a living legacy, as each of us here is living legacy, a compendium of blood and bone and stories handed down, whispered secrets, trauma passed through DNA without a word, and all mixed together with the victories, diplomas, family pride and legends. How do we hold our history, our story, make sense of it and own it? Who all else holds pieces to illuminate our own, and at the end of the day, at the end of our lives, what mark do we hope to leave? What truth, what beauty, what wisdom hard-won, what gift do we mean to pass on? Our Endowment Committee invited us just now to think about a tangible legacy, a monetary gift that you might leave the congregation to ensure its strength into the future; they talked about planning for that now. But their invitation, their specific question, is part of a much larger, deeper wondering, woven through all of our lives: how are you holding and thereby transforming the past, and how are you holding and thereby inventing the future?

Michael Twitty is a culinary historian, a chef and a writer, who traces a story similar to that of Alice Walker, a genetic story traced by millions of Americans, African Americans. Through DNA testing and

also years of research he's found out who his people are, what his own history is. Not long ago he wrote a letter to a discovered ancestor, a letter posted on his blog:

To Captain Richard Henry Bellamy:

*You are my third great grandfather. You are white. You and your father William held in bondage my great great great grandmother Arrye. You fathered two Black children out of wedlock on the floors of plantation kitchens. Because of you and several others I am Viking, I am Celt, I am a melting pot of western, northern, southern and eastern Europe. But I am still Black. Your society made those rules, not mine, but its okay because I'm proud to be Black no matter how you intended it to work against my favor. And despite you, I am Asante, Serer, Fula, Mandinka, Yoruba, Igbo, Kongo and Malagasy. I know more about you than any other ancestor I have because you were a freeborn white male whose parents and grandparents could say the same. I have seen your picture, in your Confederate uniform. It turns out you have only Black descendants, and we number in the hundreds. Thousands like you resulted in millions like me. What you don't know is that part of the Ancestors lives on in the bodies of the descendants. I have seen your face in our faces. Your eyes were passed down and all the complexity in them. Your eyes are my eyes. What, in our troubled world, do you see through our eyes? Now that you can see I am your blood, what would you want for me and mine? Signed, your great great great grandson, a free man of Color, an author, and the only reason most people will ever know your name. **

How do we hold our history and transform it, and from that raw material, shape a new future? How do we hold the primary sources, the facts, redeem them in the present, and from that raw material, mined from the past and transformed into steel, into the durable strong metal of love and hope? How do we invent a new future, endow a new future, make possible a new chapter while our own is yet unfolding? Legacy is a mighty work, a life work, life-giving work. It's what we do with our lives, what we make of ourselves.

We are each a living library, comprised of bones and stories. Alberto Rios says we lend and borrow all the time, what we have, what we know, to create this world we share. We are, in his word, "Knowledge Neighbors:"

*You and I, my friend, we lend what we have to each other,
Handsaws and tree pruners, cars sometimes, and sugar.
But we lend as well to each other what we know ...
All to make sense of the world and the worlds we share.
The new century is its newest book, and this book is our lives.
It is our own chance to be new, to be surprised, to see what it is
We are all going to do. Today, we lend ourselves to each other,
Our big hands to the small hands of the mighty race of children,
Our big words to their small syllables, our ideas awaiting theirs.
This book of ours together has no ending written for it yet.
Its stories have unfamiliar faces, but not unfamiliar hopes.
It is a book of many colors with a binding stitched from dream...*

We are a book of many colors with a binding stitched from dream.

This week, this hard, harrowing week, among the many, many articles I saw and heard and read, there was a set of interviews with teenagers from all across the country, asked how they felt about the

testimony and experience of the two aged teenagers brought before the Senate's judiciary panel. (All 50 year-olds, 60 year-olds, 40-year-olds, 90 year-olds are teenagers, we're all still children inside our aged casings. Our young selves are always still inside us.) These current youth – 15, 16, 17 years old – were asked if they thought adults should be held accountable for behaviors they were involved in as teens, in this case more than thirty years ago. "Do you believe that things you're doing now should follow you throughout your whole career and life?" One 15 year-old was startled. "You mean they don't?" he said, "You mean it doesn't count, my life right now?" He said of course your story travels with you, grows up with you. It had not occurred to him that the moral life is anything except cumulative, that we own and we are everything we've done and not done and believed, and beliefs we have outgrown; we're all of that. We ourselves and this whole world are made of everything that's come before. There's no choice in this. Sadness, kindness, cruelty, luck: the choice is in how you choose to hold it, all your life, what you choose to make of it, and what you'll leave behind when you're gone. That doesn't mean that past actions have to haunt you like a grim specter, like a demon, like indelible fate, that every action sits there set in stone, and you're just lugging that huge and awful burden of mistakes. The past comes with you, always, but you get to choose how to make of it something worthy, something wiser, better and more beautiful. We grow as we grow up, if we choose to; we learn and grow mature, like trees, and hand on what we think we know and what we know we loved.

Rest in peace says the poet to her great- great- grandmother **and** her great- great- grandfather.

Rest.

In peace, in me, in us, the meaning of this life is still unfolding.

These young people interviewed said of course it matters what you do in high school, and college, and the next year and the next. To think otherwise is to disrespect them, and to disrespect yourself at every age. I love how they're claiming their ethical and spiritual agency, claiming this bright, responsible, fiery power. It made me hopeful in a dismal week, reminded me that I believe in evolution.

All the past is prologue and the past is always there, waiting for the present to transform it, and reform it, to build upon the rubble and the learning.

This past summer you may have seen those photos out of Europe, mostly in the north, where heat and draught withered all the grasses, killed the crops and meadows. In parts of England, the dead and browning earth revealed amazing things, visible on the ground but especially from the air: the grass was gone, and over weeks came visible the ghostly outline of a formal English garden from long ago, all the complicated geometric patterns where the hedgerows and the roses were – it left an imprint on the ground; and nearby was the footprint of a castle, every room and corridor like a blueprint on the earth; and visible too, the slender traces of old roads, wagon ways, and footpaths all exposed, some from Roman times they think, or maybe Neolithic, like thin, feathery scars on your arm left from childhood scrapes. Rains came at last; the grass greened up again; cows and sheep came back to pasture; tractors came and the ancient pictures faded – but it was a reminder that some legacies are in fact invisible, intangible, quiet, not just on the landscape, but in our character and culture, our ways of being, ways of seeing: ethics and convictions handed down in stories, scripture, legends. These things don't always have measurable worth nor even words describing them; they just become a part of us. It's not the gold that you bequeath to somebody when you die that really

matters; it's the spirit of generosity (or the stain of greed) infusing the gift, illuminating it (or tarnishing it), that makes a difference and lives on and on and on. What trace upon the earth do you *mean* to leave behind? When your life is done, your body washed to bone, what quiet but important imprint will remain?

Urban planners talk about “desire lines.” One writer says, “In any populated area, people create paths between the places where they are and the places where they want to be,” regardless of the roads and sidewalks. In a busy cities they can map these patterns. “These ad hoc paths are called *desire lines*; they’re not exactly real, but they’re easily drawn by taking pictures after snowfall, or through time-lapse photography,” and they help planners know where to lay down a crosswalk, for example, or a plaza. “Desire lines are ways that people inscribe themselves on places, the accumulation of human behavior leaving visible traces: the cupping of stairs as thousands of footsteps ascend and descend, the marking of pavement with cigarette butts, discarded gum and dirt, the worn dirt trail that cuts across a college campus green, the patina acquired through many, many, many hands holding a brass bannister - are all subtle, important signals, traces that we’re leaving unawares.” [adapted from “Desire Lines” in *Rewire* by Ethan Zuckerman]

Some legacies are unintended, and some are completely and urgently deliberate. In Australia, centuries ago, millennia ago, the indigenous, aboriginal people, hundreds of communities, speaking many, many different languages, gathered their understanding of the “songlines,” a system of invisible pathways crisscrossing the whole continent and especially the desert: a vast map of valleys, waterholes, outcroppings, rocks over hundreds of kilometers. The songlines were laid down, the people say, by creator beings in the Dreaming time, the dawn of time, as they made the earth itself. The gullies are their footprints, the valleys places where they sat to rest. The songlines that describe all this are recorded not in written words or pictures but in songs passed down through generations. The melody and rhythm are more important than the lyrics, mimicking the wind and the pace that walkers travel over land, and if you know the songs, if your parents sang them to you as a child, because your grandparents, and great great great great grandparents learned them right and passed them faithfully along; if you know the songs, you could conceivably find your way from end of Australia to the other, and you would recognize the natural history of every place you came to, even if you’d never been there. The land is sacred, and the songs are sung, even now, to keep the land alive. The music, wrote Bruce Chatwin, is a memory bank, like a library, for finding your way in the world, in place and also in time, from east to west, south to north, and also from the distant past to the present and beyond. Songlines map the physical terrain and the spiritual ground: the songs hold the ethics of the people, their rituals, mythology and history. The songlines tell the people who they are, where they are, what they are, and if you fail to teach them to the children, those children will wander in the dark, lonely and removed from all that’s holy, healthy, beautiful and true.

What songs do you sing to your children? What songs are you leaving behind?

I served a congregation in New England founded in 1825. The membership book, in which new members still would sign their names, held signatures from people who had seen the Revolutionary War. In the 19th century a church membership book contained the minutes of meetings, records of births and deaths and marriages, financial notes in clean straight lines – it was their data base, in a leather binding. I read there about the Civil War and abolition, and cryptic notes about which members’ houses were stops on the Underground Railroad. I read about lean years, when they paid the minister in chickens and hay; pulpit guests like Sojourner Truth and Ralph Waldo Emerson; I read about their first woman minister, and another one who had consumption and who travelled west to the

ends of the earth, to Centerville, Minnesota, to take the “prairie cure.” There was a fascinating note about a cross-dressing man, a member, who sat regularly with the women’s alliance, pouring tea, fully accepted; they noted the stylish cut of his gown and his hat (her hat). I read of a fire that destroyed their building, and how they were welcomed back for a while by the Congregational church from which they’d separated nearly a hundred years prior. That book was like a little library all in itself, telling the story of lives one by one, and what their life in community meant. It was clear that the current congregation, the people I knew, had received and were embodying this entire inheritance, even if they didn’t know the specific stories. It was in their DNA, living on through their work and hope, and what they were teaching to their children.

Just like here. What songs do we teach to our children?

Jonathan Lubin and Mark King, Jackie Metelak, Steve Kahn, Jack and Nancy VerSteegh, Paul and Sarah Sevcik, and about 30 other households now are asking *that* question when they talk about the Endowment here, and making a planned gift. Most of these folks have not given any money yet; they’ve made a promise in their will, to leave a legacy to fund the church not while they’re alive in it, but for future generations. It’s a leap of faith, like the planting of sequoias, oaks, the old growth forest we will never live to see but hope that someone will. They are wanting to make sure that this place – *but not the place - this church - but not the building, not necessarily the building - but the thing itself*, which is not a thing: the community, the essence of our principles and purpose, the wonder and the moral compass, the way of being that we practice here, which is a way of gratitude, compassion, courage, truth-telling, hope - they want to ensure that this is cherished in our time, nurtured, named, and passed along. The Endowment exists so that others, people we will never know, will find solace here, and friendship, a sanctuary for the weary soul, a home that is their spirit’s home, a laboratory for shaping integrity, and joy from the rough stuff of their daily days. It endows the possibility that what we love here and what we call worthy might continue.

*You and I, my friend, we lend ourselves to each other,
Our big hands to the small hands of the mighty race of children,
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Let us think that it will be good
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* This passage is adapted from Michael Twitty’s piece. You can find the full article in the Social Hall, and join our “Facing Race” group on October 7 for a discussion of it, and the implications of our ancestry.