

OF FIGHTERS AND LOVERS
ALL SOULS SUNDAY, November 2, 2008
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St. John's Unitarian Universalist Church
Cincinnati, OH

PRAYER:

Life is a gift. Life is a fragile gift. We fulfill the promises of this great gift by passing them on to those who come after us. Let us recall those gifts bearing the names of Melvin Bajczyk, John Palmer Hodges and Harriet Snyder, Emily Vogelgesand, Dee Hazelbeck, Connie Kiradjeff, Jason Keller, Margaret Messenheimer, Jack Mooney, Richard, Reiman, Laverne Sloan, John Yunker, and Virginia Zeller.

Gathered in this fellowship to celebrate life and the gifts of life, each asks

If I am to stand up, may I stand bravely?
If I am to sit still, may I sit quietly.
If I am to lie low, may I do it patiently.
If I am to do nothing, may I do it gallantly.

Here amongst friends and loved ones, we recall those gifts which our ancestors passed on to us. Food, clothing; wisdom, discipline; laughter and music. We recall the stories which have wrapped our families into a fabric, sometimes seamless, sometimes frayed or torn. We recall the stories that helped us meet the trials of human existence. We remember the sharing of reflections of how to greet life's success with humility.

All our lives we need one another, and others are in need of us. May we hand on to others, the gifts we have been given. Thus may we participate in the transforming love which binds all souls.

Let us be still....

Peace be with you. Amen.

SERMON

I came into our Unitarian Universalist, liberal religious movement in high school, as a number of my friends attended the local Universalist church. My mother had died when I was fifteen. As we were then Episcopalians her funeral was conducted by a Episcopal priest. It was only some time later when her brother, my uncle and guardian died, and his funeral was conducted by the minister of the Universalist Church, that I fully became aware that her family, my grandparents and great-grandparents, had been Universalists.

Spending a couple of years attending the Universalist church, what appealed to me was the idea that God is “eternal and all conquering love.” Everyone is saved because God’s love overcomes all, all evil. All Souls Sunday is the high holy day of this faith, lifting up the salvation of all souls. Including all our ancestors, bringing them into the hopes of our meditations.

Approaching Election Day, we also have in thought our nation’s ancestors, and this theology suggests we might consider being a nation of lovers, rather than a nation of fighters. This is the point of our reading this morning. Richard Slotkin in GUNFIGHTER NATION writes, “Historical memory will have to be revised, not to invent an imaginary role for supposedly marginal minorities, but to register the fact that our history in the West and in the East, was shaped from the beginning by the meeting, conversation, and mutual adaption of different cultures.” (page 655)

Yet as Slotkin points out, our ancestors are wrapped in myth. We cannot clearly separate our illusions, our myths of our ancestors. He comments, “Cultural entities locate themselves in time by recovering and mythologizing their own history...” (Page 639) By cultural entities he is referring not only to our nation, GUNFIGHTER NATION, but to our church with its cultural heritage, and ourselves, our families, our ancestors: all cultural entities. Our ancestors are wrapped in myth, are mythical.

I find myself often trying to sort this out. I was part of my mother’s myth, particularly my mother’s myth about my father, or so I think. I recall one day we came home and she picked up the mail. Starting up the stairs to our apartment, looking through the envelopes, she became quite annoyed. Someone had not addressed an envelope properly. Quite pointedly she said to me,. “I am Mrs. Frank W. Carpenter.” You can see I am part of her story, as I am named after my father. And my mother’s dignity, her identity, the story she told about herself, was tied up in who my father was and the pride she took in him.

As cultural entities, the cultural production which supported her identity was the musical “South Pacific.” My father’s career was spent in the south Pacific during the American occupation of the Philippine Islands. And while his career was 30 years earlier than Michener’s World War II novel, she was caught up in its romance. I recall sitting beside her at a live production in my Junior High School. In the musical the Sailors, Seabees and Marines sing

Bloody Mary is the girl I love-
Now ain't that too damn bad!
Bloody Mary's chewing betel nuts-
And she don't use Pepsodent.
Now ain't that too damn bad!

My mother knew what chewing betel nuts was about. Over on the Chalice Table, is one of the artifacts my father brought home, a betel nut box, which Islanders carried with them to dip into for their chewing material. Still has some betel nut in it.

I have been trying to extract myself from my mother's mythology about my father, or demythologize as we said in Biblical Criticism classes in seminary. My ex-wife complained I talked too much about my father, so I shut up. Part of the difficulty was that his friends, including Cincinnati, William Howard Taft, are not exactly the sort a liberal person lifts up and the things he was involved with -- America's imperial ambitions -- are not liberal causes these days. But today as Slotkin reminds us, we need a new narrative, we need a new myth drawing on the memories of more Americans.

A few weeks ago I preached on how far out have you come, and it seemed to me, since in the past couple of years I have been exploring in greater depth who I am in regards to my father, I would come further out with you about him, my mother's myth, as I am seeking to figure it all-out.

My father was born about 140 years ago in upstate New York, didn't get along with his stepmother and lit out for the West, Nebraska, following on the trail of his aunt and her family who had converted to Mormonism before the Civil War. My great aunt's husband married eight times, with about twenty two children.

My father joined the Army in northwest Nebraska. Soon his unit along with most of the US Army was called into action for the largest military maneuvers since the Civil War, against the Sioux and the Ghost Dance movement. It ended quite bloodily at Wounded Knee. Many of you have most likely heard of the battle of Wounded Knee. My father was not on the battlefield, but at the Pine Ridge Reservation where the indigenous survivors were taken.

When I was in seminary, everyone was reading Dee Brown's book BURY MY HEART AT WOUNDED KNEE. When your father was pretty close there, you don't talk about it much. As Richard Slotkin talks about, the old GUNFIGHTER NATION script was: Cowboy good, Indian bad. BURY MY HEART AT WOUNDED KNEE represents a time when this script was just upended: Indian good, soldier bad. In many ways it perpetuates the myth of GUNFIGHTER NATION; it's still about fighters, not about lovers.

Jonathan Lear of the University of Chicago, in his RADICAL HOPE: ETHICS IN THE FACE OF CULTURAL DEVASTATION, deepens our understanding of what lead up to Wounded Knee and points us to that conversation of cultures Slotkin says we have denied.

Sitting Bull led the Sioux in the adoption of the Ghost Dance religion which was rooted in dreams of buffalo. The age old antagonist of the Sioux were the Crow. The leader of the Crow was Plenty Coup. He had had a dream about buffalo ghosts many years before. He also understood his dream to call for major changes for his tribe with the coming of the whites. Lear comments:

From Plenty Coup's perspective, Sitting Bull deployed religious imagination in the wrong sort of way. ... Sitting Bull used a dream-vision to short-circuit reality

rather than to engage with it. ... From Plenty Coup's perspective, ... it was being misinterpreted and misapplied. Sitting Bull deployed a messianic vision that fueled the Ghost Dance in a wishful way. It is a hallmark of the wishful that the world will be magically transformed – into conformity with how one would like to be – without having to take any realistic practical steps to bring it about. The only activity in which one is enjoined to partake is a ritual, in this case a dance.” (Page 150)

The Crow with the leadership that came to Plenty Coup because of his dreams gave up many of their fighting ways. They are the only indigenous nation never to surrender to the United States. This is an example of the conversation between cultures we must lift up, of our need for lovers more than fighters these days. The Ghost Dance may be seen as a form of fundamentalism, and the deaths at Wounded Knee like the 1993 ATF attack on the Branch Davidians.

I have no account of what my father was doing at that Battle. John J Pershing, who would lead the American forces in Europe during World War I, was also among the soldiers there. After his death, Pershing's Secretary was amazed to find the general's long-johns from the winter of 1890 during the campaign against the Sioux. It was one of the coldest winters on record and the soldiers were in the field for close to two months. Keeping from freezing was an issue and of such is the stuff of myths.

My father came into his reputation for peacemaking as successor to Pershing as governor of the southern Islands of the Philippines. In June 1913 Pershing had led what some considered a massacre of Muslims on the southern island.

When my father took up this position, another American official in the islands, Dean Conant Worcester, warned my father, “someone might be foolish enough to believe that ... [he was] known to entertain ... socialistic characteristics relative to land tenure...” [Peter W. Stanley, REAPPRAISING AN EMPIRE, page, 181]

Later, Worcester upbraided my father, for having become an administrator, negotiator, and tactician, rather than a creative man of action. (ibid 140)

Well, of course I find it hard to be sympathetic with this fellow. While Worcester was born in Vermont, his self-image, his personal myth was he was a cowboy, a gunfighter, He complained of the general in charge in Manila early in the occupation that he hated to begin a fight. (Ibid 127) Worcester himself was always ready to troop out of the capital of Manila to see a fight. Watching battle from a church tower, Worcester was fascinated by the picture book aspect of war. (128)

My father, perhaps in part because he chased Indians through bitter cold and had been shot at by cowboys and Filipino insurgents, was not fascinated by war. He was not a fighter. Peter Gordon Gowing, one of the most referenced scholars, wrote,

Carpenter tried to maintain amiable contact with the varied elements of the population. He traveled incessantly through-out the [islands] on regular inspection trips. Everywhere he conferred with Moro datus, Pagan leaders, missionaries, Arab teachers, Filipino and American officials, military officers, Chinese traders, Japanese planters, newspaper men, foreign emissaries, and investors and speculators. Carpenter was his own best policeman. His tact, personality, integrity and sense of justice did more to preserve peace and order ... that any other fact” (MANDATE IN MOROLAND, Page 277f.

Such is the stuff my personal myth is made of, which my mother wrapped about me. It’s good material for reflecting on All Souls Sunday. Not a fighter, a lover.

I suspect, every where you look, your lives, your parents’, you will find it true as Slotkin wrote, “Historical memory will have to be revised, not to invent an imaginary role for supposedly marginal minorities, but to register the fact that our history in the West and in the East, was shaped from the beginning by the meeting, conversation, and mutual adaption of different cultures.” (page 655)

In South Pacific Lieutenant Cable sang:

You've got to be taught to hate and fear
You've got to be taught from ear to ear
It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear
You've got to be carefully taught
You've got to be taught to be afraid
Of people whose eyes are oddly made
And people whose skin is a different shade
You've got to be carefully taught
You've got to be taught before it's too late
Before you are six or seven or eight
To hate all the people your relatives hate
You've got to be carefully taught

If we are to survive, the 21st century will need to be a century of lovers, not fighters. We will need to look to those stories from our lives, the lives of our parents and our ancestors, stories not only of their fear and hate, but also of their struggles for peace and reconciliation. As Studs Terkel would remind us, we need to recall the stories our ancestors told that helped them rise above fear.

<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20081117/shapiro>

On this Alls Souls Day, let us turn to our ancestors for Stories of Peace making. Let us invite into the conversation of who we are and what our nation is about, all peoples.

We are partners with eternal and all transforming love.