

Service of Remembrance

Memory *is* first a brain thing. It is the faculty by which information is encoded, stored, and retrieved, hopefully right when we need it. It is related to the limbic system and is vital to how we experience life, retaining information over time which can influence future action. That's the basic explanation of individual memories.

That same limbic system is also involved in emotion, behavior, and motivation. When all four of these things start interacting with the world around us, people in the field of epigenetics say it can alter our very genes, *and* those changes can be passed on to future generations.

I don't fully understand the science involved in epigenetics, but I get the overarching idea. Powerful feelings and experiences change us *and* our descendants.

Now, epigenetics involves transmitting traits through *biological* reproduction. What *if* something similar can happen with any entity we call an organism? What about a religious community? What about a faith movement? Can memories of our spiritual ancestors make a change within us in the present? If we look at memory as a function of history, we might perceive a phenomenon which transcends scientific explanation. I believe memory *can* transfer courage and hope through time, across generations, within communities.

We sometimes talk about ways that our ancestors depend on us to continue to work on dreams which were not fulfilled in their lifetimes. Martin Luther King Jr. began one of his most famous speeches by acknowledging that the dreams embodied in the Emancipation Proclamation had *not* been fulfilled a full *century* after it was created. Some parts of the dream in that speech of Dr. King's *have* come to pass in the past half-century, at least for some. But not all. We're still working on that. People right here in this congregation are still working on that. Our justice ancestors – Lucy Stone, Sojourner Truth, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cesar Chavez, Bayard Rustin, Lucy Hicks Anderson – to name just a few, *are* dependent on us to fulfill their dreams.

And we are dependent on our ancestors because memory *can* transport courage and hope through time, across generations. I recently read a biography of James Reeb, the Unitarian Universalist minister who was murdered in Selma, Alabama, in 1965, after traveling there in response to Dr. King's appeal for people of faith to join the struggle. I learned that he had been surrendering things throughout his life as he journeyed to help others. First it was his childhood faith community, then the *relatively* comfortable field of parish ministry, then his well-salaried position in an inner-city church. He and his wife kept giving up elements of the privilege they were born into and that was theirs for the taking. When he answered Dr. King's call, there had already been so much violence in Alabama that he *had* to have known that his life was potentially at risk.

Many of those who were harmed, many of those who died, came to the struggle for racial justice through their faith. Because of technology, we don't have to read and *try* to picture what happened to the people in Alabama, the way we do with Francis David or Michael Servetus. Because of technology, we can see it or hear it still: the dogs, the batons, the guns, the explosions, the nooses, the bruises, and the blood.

And we also have images and sounds from Charlottesville from August of 2017. The huge turnout of people opposing oppression, many of them people of faith, including Unitarian Universalists, without weapons or physical protection. They knew

what kind of people they were going to be facing when they traveled there. They know what hate is capable of doing. And if they didn't fully know how much they were risking before they got there, they knew it when they realized the police were going to do little to nothing to protect them from crowds of white supremacists, most armed with a variety of weapons, some with high-powered guns.

Those who came to Charlottesville to oppose hatred had families and friends. They had hopes and dreams. They knew what *could* happen – and the worst did happen to Heather Heyer. Where *did* their courage come from? Why were they willing to face fear, injury, even death?

It may have been a function of memory. Memories of James Reeb, of Dr. King, and of so many others who gave up comfort, security, sometimes their very lives to oppose hatred and oppression. It isn't just about seeing them as examples. When we study the history of oppression, we know that the perpetrators not only built on the actions of the past but actually carried within them the same fear and greed that engendered those past actions.

And we who work for justice, we who believe in freedom, draw directly from the hope and courage of *our* ancestors.

In these unsettled times. In these frightening times. In circumstances unique within the lifetimes of many of us, I want to offer the reminder that things have been worse. They have been worse for people of color, for women, for those who are not heterosexual, for those who do not find their identity within the gender binary, for those with special needs, for immigrants. Our ancestors went through worse times.

That does not mean that today's issues are not critical. It means that memory is vitally important. **This is when spiritual epigenetics come into play.** This is a good time to look back at our ancestors, to learn more about their lives, to draw directly from their wisdom, to feel their hope, to know their courage, to embody their dreams, to reach out and claim them as our own. *We are* stronger and braver and more resilient *because* our ancestors give all of this to us through community, across time and generations.

May it be so. Amen.