

A Usable Past
Intern Minister Michelle Lattanzio
November 8, 2015

As some of you know, I'm serving as a chaplain at a suburban hospital as part of my ministerial education.

Recently, I heard one chaplain say to another chaplain, named Kim, that "You carry Martha and Mary within you."

Kim happens to be Christian, and she carries within her these two wise women from Biblical lore, one a doer of deeds in service to others and one a thoughtful contemplative.

For Kim, Martha and Mary are a type of living heritage, a usable past; their spirits live on within her, and their gifts to her are their life stories and their wisdom, a well from which Kim can draw upon anytime.

In this time of remembering our ancestors, I wonder about who we each carry within us as we walk through the world.

The stories and teachings of people contained in the Bible are part of our Unitarian Universalist heritage -- and thus Jesus and other Biblical figures qualify, for some of us, as ancestors.

Our church is unique in that we are open to a wide variety of spiritual paths, Christianity being just one of them, one source that is part of our spiritual roots.

If you don't have Martha and Mary, who else do you have from within your spiritual journey? Who do you carry within you? Who do we adopt as ancestors?

What gifts do these ancestors bring to bear upon our everyday lives?

I'd like to invite us, as a congregation, to consider who we carry with us and how they inform our lives.

The concept of a usable past comes from Carol Flinder's book *At The Root of This Longing*, about the intersections of feminism and spirituality.

This idea is to explore how as a culture, and how we as individuals, can each build a usable past from the people we lay claim to as ancestors and "family," as well as the myths, stories, and legends that inform our character today.

Who in-forms us -- spiritually, psychically, culturally? On whose shoulders do we stand, as Unitarian Universalists? What heritage do we claim as individuals?

A usable past is a frame of reference that makes one's own personal history comprehensible. A garment that fits. This is a lens, perhaps historical, perhaps ahistorical, through which we can view our lives in the present and better understand who we are, how we got here, and where we are going.

As a congregation and as individuals, let us consider the various ways in which we can compose our own usable pasts.

It will perhaps include our Unitarian Universalist ancestors, those who helped to shape and form our faith tradition, as we hear them speak to us through history, through literature, through worship services.

As a Unitarian Universalist convert, I claim Ralph Waldo Emerson as my spiritual ancestor. I carry Emerson with me as I walk through the world as an emerging minister and chaplain.

When I first read him in high school, he opened up a new world for me -- his writings espoused as truth what I had long felt in my heart and mind as my own, personal truth:

God was in everything, and everything contained God, and God was therefore transcendent and immanent – we are all, as he says, “part and particle of God.”

Emerson said in his journals, "The purpose of life seems to be to acquaint a man with himself. He is not to live to the future as described to him, but to live to the real future by living to the real present."

My fellow chaplains and I are called to be with people in the moment, meeting them just where they are, and I know that in carrying Emerson's wisdom I am a better giver of pastoral care.

We may also build a usable past by considering the concept of a cloud of witnesses, as presented in the Hebrews passage.

We may carry our Unitarian Universalist ancestors with us, but of course, there are others who compose our beloved community of witnesses.

A friend of mine used to have this awesome card hanging in her office at the University: it depicted, in watercolor, a woman's silhouette, followed by many other silhouettes of people and animals (all lined up behind her), and the caption was, "When I step, they all step with me."

I have often thought of this image and phrase, and have shared it with others in pastoral care situations when dealing with something really stressful, as it is a reminder that we never walk alone through life -- because "they all step with us."

It is worth considering who and what inspires us, who fills us with in-spiration, the in-filling of spirit. Who inspires us to keep reaching out, to keep hope alive, to be of service in the world?

Flinders shares the story of another woman, Tina, as she is inspired to carry on by her adopted ancestors, those who step with her. I'd like to share with you her story (pseudonym):

Every night, after sunset, Tina would sit cross-legged on the bare wooden floor of her bedroom and light a candle on a saucer placed in front of her.

She would watch as the candlelight pushed back the darkness, the shadows in the room, and held them at bay.

Tina would take a deep breath, close her eyes, and begin reciting slowly and mindfully some short prayers, such as the St. Teresa prayer ("let nothing disturb thee").

She would light that candle every night, and call into her circle of light the spirit of one saint after another, summoning them into her own deep darkness and grief and loneliness.

In calling down these saints, she created a circle of spiritual supporters, each of whom she placed herself at the feet of and asked for their strength and their wisdom in her time of need.

She was saying to the spirits, "Be here with me now -- stay with me through the dark night, and walk with me through my days."

She was calling individuals out of the cloud of witnesses to not just be with her, but to inspire her -- meaning to fill her with their holy spirit, to bring their gifts to bear in her life.

Tina was asking these beloved saints to accompany her on her life journey, to be for her the "light that shines in the darkness."

For her, these people were her "Cloud of Witnesses," the people who got her through the long, dark nights of the soul.

When you think of the "Cloud of Witnesses," who supports you, who is there?

I see Ralph Waldo Emerson and Hosea Ballou, Francis of Assisi and Teresa of Avila.

Yet another way we can create a usable past is through reflecting upon myths, legends and fairy tales, and considering in what ways they ring true to our lived experience.

Folklore tales come from our common human experiences across time and cultures, and contain a boundlessly useful past for us to draw upon.

Creating a usable past is part of constructing our own narratives, the stories of our lives, the stories that we tell about ourselves; folklore and fairy tales provide a sort of inroad to our deep selves through provocative images, symbols and language.

My friend Ramona loved the story of the Bone Woman and it became part of her usable past.

This story as told by Estés is titled *La Loba*, Wolf Woman, and it is a story about one of the bone people,

a sort of clan of shamans who collect bones from those formerly living things, animals or people, who most need to be preserved for the benefit of the larger culture.

Once *La Loba* has collected the bones she needs, she arranges them and decides what song she will sing over them, to sing them back to life.

The promise of the bone woman, *La Loba*, is that if we sing the song of our need, if we sing our truth to power over the remains of our beloved dead, we can call up the psychic remains and reclaim that which we need from our dead.

Ramona had suffered a lot of loss in her life, the loss of her family, the loss of her Mexican and Irish cultures, the loss of her spiritual faith.

This story came to her as a spontaneous gift of spirit, by which she was reminded that all was not lost -- just buried -- and that if she was willing to spend the time and energy recovering the bones of all these things, and had the heart to sing the song, she would be able to reconstruct a usable past.

She would not feel so isolated and lonely, so disconnected from her spiritual and cultural heritage.

We draw on many things to create our usable past: our collective history, our imagined reconstruction of that history, our personal history, myths, folktales, and fairy stories.

In our readings, in our reflections, in our spiritual contemplation, we may discover or uncover ancestors that we wish to carry with us on our journeys.

These may be ancestors of blood, people of our family heritage; or they may be ancestors of spirit, those who we draw upon from our spiritual and religious heritage.

We call ourselves into being as we sing over the bones.

We can reconnect ourselves to the wisdom, the love and support of our ancestors, and renew our spirits if we are willing to light the candle, gather the bones, sing the songs, and call out to the cloud of witnesses.

We have all the resources we need to build our usable past, in our hearts and minds.

When we stand in our truth, we are strong.

Rooted in the fertile ground of our forbearers -- be they beloved ancestors, saints or angels, or kindred spirits -- we have been sustained by them all, by their courage, wisdom, love, blood and tears.

When we step, they all step with us.

May you find your beloved ancestors and walk with them through the world.

Let's sing together.