

# All Souls Church Unitarian

Covenant Theme Guide

November 2016

## “Ancestors”

### RELATING TO OUR ANCESTORS

Some people are your relatives but others are your ancestors, and you choose the ones you want to have as ancestors. You create yourself out of those values.

Ralph Ellison

Every book is a quotation; and every house is a quotation out of all forests, and mines, and stone quarries; and every man is a quotation from all his ancestors.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

What I call my ‘self’ now is hardly a person at all. It’s mainly a meeting place for various natural forces, desires, and fears, etcetera, some of which come from my ancestors, and some from my education, some perhaps from devils. The self you were really intended to be is something that lives not from nature but from God.

C.S.Lewis

I feel all generations of ancestors and all future generations. Together we will find a way.

Thich Nhat Hanh

Our greatest responsibility is to be good ancestors.

Jonas Salk

### Our Ancestors, Our Humanity

Our ancestors are on the one hand terribly alien to us, yet we are also profoundly connected to them. They confront us with the full span of human diversity, in beautiful, frustrating, and challenging ways. We do not need to excuse them for their various sins and omissions, treating them as if they came from some wildly exotic civilization. We have the right — and the responsibility — to disagree and complain and rail against them within the framework of our common tradition, that extended argument constantly unfolding across both space and time. Even though they do not literally talk back, it is still possible to learn to hear their voices clearly.

Without our ancestors, we can’t really know what it is to be human. Some linguists argue that the Latin word for human (*humanitas*) is related to the word for burying (*humando*). In other words, it’s not a stretch to say that to be human is to bury our dead — and, even

more important, to remember where they are. Archaeological evidence suggests that the earliest hearths and the earliest homes were built over those ancient graves.

Humanitas is also related to humus: in other words, being human means possessing a deep, rich soil, layers and layers of all that has gone on before we were born. This is the kind of soil that makes life out of dead things, that connects them in a cycle of fertility and growth. We are, after all, born of the dead, taking over their physical space, their languages, and their ideas — and we are the ones who will hand these over to our unborn. We the living are a ligament between the generations, the only connection between what was long ago and what is yet to come.

Margaret Bendroth, *The Spiritual Practice of Remembering*

### **Cause and Effect**

[Now] contemplate the truth of cause and effect. You yourself are a result of an endless chain of causes and effects involving your parents and ancestors stretching back through time. Before your human ancestors, there were animal and plant ancestors. And before the ancestors of mammal and blue-green algae, there were the elements. This chain of cause and effect is endless. Your relations are endless, and your past actions are like a shadow that follows you everywhere. Your future is also being laid down at this very moment. Consider that kindness and compassion give rise to good effects, and aggression and greed give rise to suffering. Do what you can to decrease suffering for yourself and others. Realize that you can purify your life by doing good for others and by atoning for the suffering you have caused yourself and others. You can transform this suffering into wisdom. Realize the truth of consequences.

Joan Halifax, *Being with Dying: Cultivating Compassion and Fearlessness in the Presence of Death*

### **Tuning In . . .**

It is only in the intentional silence of vigil and meditation, or in the quiet places of nature, that we encounter the song of the universe. Like the wind through the telegraph wires, this song echoes along the pathways of the cosmic web: it includes the celestial spinning of the planets, as well as the hum of insects and the dancing song of the grass; it includes the song of all the ancestors and spirits as well as the beating of our own hearts.

Caitlin Matthews, quoted by Julia Cameron

### **The Living Dead and the Wholly Dead**

Many African societies divide humans into three categories: those still alive on the earth, the *sasha*, and the *zamani*. The recently departed whose time on earth overlapped with people still here are the *sasha*, the living-dead. They are not wholly dead, for they still live in the memories of the living, who can call them to mind, create their likeness in art, and bring them to life in anecdote. When the last person to know an ancestor dies, that ancestor

leaves the *sasha* for the *zamani*, the dead. As generalised ancestors, the *zamani* are not forgotten but revered.

James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*

### **Bonding Between the Generations**

In the village the intimate relationship between the very young and the very old is kept alive by constant bonding and through rituals. Like any relationship, it is subject to renewal... Throughout the year grandparents and their grandchildren do what is called a 'back bonding' ritual. They sit back-to-back, usually grandmother to granddaughter and grandfather to grandson, and allow their spine bones to protrude and touch each other's. In this way they are able to deeply communicate. They stay in a meditation posture for as long as needed. Sometimes they sing or tell each other stories. Bones in our culture represent memory; bones carry stories in them. When you sit with your spine touching another person's spine, it is like transferring information from one computer station to another.

Sobonfu Some, *Welcoming Spirit Home:  
Ancient African Teachings to Celebrate Children and Community*

### **Beings of the Future**

You live inside us, beings of the future.

In the spiral ribbons of our cells, you are here. In our rage for the burning forests, the poisoned fields, the oil-drowned seals, you are here. You beat in our hearts through late-night meetings. You accompany us to clearcuts and toxic dumps and the halls of the lawmakers. It is you who drive our dogged labors to save what is left.

O you who will walk this Earth when we are gone, stir us awake. Behold through our eyes the beauty of this world. Let us feel your breath in our lungs, your cry in our throat. Let us see you in the poor, the homeless, the sick.

Haunt us with your hunger, hound us with your claims, that we may honor the life that links us.

You have as yet no faces we can see, no names we can say. But we need only hold you in our mind, and you teach us patience. You attune us to measures of time where healing can happen, where soil and souls can mend.

You reveal courage within us we had not suspected, love we had not owned.

O you who come after, help us remember:

we are your ancestors. Fill us with gladness for the work that must be done.

Joanna Macy, *Widening Circles*

## **FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION**

1. What does your relationship with your ancestors have to do with your spiritual life?
2. Do you cultivate relationships with loved ones you have lost? With any ancestors? If you do, how and why do you do this?
3. Do you celebrate Day of the Dead? Part of the tradition is to create an altar to attract the spirits of those who have died? Who would you want to attract and why?
4. Do you feel a kinship with those who have been important in the development of Unitarian Universalism? Or those who have come before you at All Souls? Can you imagine yourself as an All Souls ancestor?

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