

## **“Renewal at Home”**

Rev. Laurel Gray

September 27th, 2020

My grandparents came from a lineage of Scottish people who traveled to Canada, leaving their small island homes in the seas between Scotland and Norway, sailing across the Northern Atlantic and settling in the Canadian plains.

My grandmother had more siblings than I could ever remember and grew up learning to make the most of what she had. She loved to tell me of repleating her school kilt every year when she was a child. As the story goes, at the end of each school year, she and her siblings would take their school kilts and remove all the seams, returning the skirt to a single stretch of tartan. They would wash it and carefully store it for the next year. Come fall, they would take out their tartans and repleat their skirts, making them bigger as they grew, careful to shift the folds, so the fabric never wore through in one spot.

Unsurprisingly, my grandmother was a person who taught me to value precision - she is the one who taught me to sew, on this very table where we now have church.

She was fierce and stubborn, resourceful and deeply pragmatic. She used to take my dad and his sisters on solo camping trips to the Cape, leaving grandpa at home to work. Finally, after their campsite and car flooding during a particularly bad storm, she told my grandfather it was time to build a house here.

It was that boldness that, decades later made it possible for me to spend quarantine here. And this was before Ruth Bader Ginsberg had won women the right to have our own credit cards and mortgages.

After she died, my aunt gave me her sewing machine, saying that she thought I would appreciate it most. It's the only machine I've ever owned, and that skill she taught me, how to make my own clothes, to create something beautiful and practical out of a single flat cloth, it's been one of the single most helpful things in these long months of quarantine and chaos.

What reminds you of who you came from?

I took an anti-racism training a few years ago and they asked that everyone bring an object to share that reminded them of their culture. They talked about how

assimilation into white culture, into the so-called norm, required giving up cultural heritage and specificity, and that remembering our heritage was an act of joyful resistance.

It wasn't something I'd ever really thought about, but it was a surprisingly beautiful exercise, because it was incredibly humanizing. As we went around the circle, sharing who we'd come from, it felt like a collective centering, a kind of grounding and authenticity that made connection amongst strangers possible. And in knowing ourselves and each other, we were more able to weather the intensity of doing an anti-racism training together, holding our own defensiveness or grief, each other's stories of racial discrimination.

And so when we think about renewal at home, I invite you to recall not just the places that have felt like home, or practices you do at home, but the people and the stories that remind you of your ancestors, as Rev. Daniel exemplified in our reading.

Many cultures the world over have practices of building altars to honor ancestors. I think of the movie Coco and images of marigolds, of the Jewish practice of honoring Yartzeit - standing every year to say the name of an ancestor on the anniversary of their death and reciting the mourners kaddish in community.

Assimilation into culture that claims to be neutral, or normal, one without culture - asks us to shed these details, these clear markers of specificity and lineage and difference. That is the price of whiteness, of being granted privilege, of being considered part of the "norm" and not a deviation from that norm.

The transfer of intergenerational knowledge, of the skills and stories that remind us that we are not untethered beings is of profound importance, even sacred. Because it reminds us that we are humans woven from deep lineage, connected across time and place, and that we are not the first to struggle.

As we enter this new church year, we as a community are practicing being adaptive, especially as we shift our own religious education programs to meet these times.

We've purchased a few different curriculum this year so that we can support family ministry in the home, and we will all be working with the same themes each month. Because truly, what happens on Sunday morning and what happens over dinner, or during a Religious Education class, they're all part of the whole that is

this community. They're all part of the weaving, the transfer of inter generational knowledge. So this year we're being more intentional about doing this whole thing together.

We know that the most important religious educators are not the ones at church, but the family you have around you. It's grandmothers telling stories, grownups sharing our moral compasses with kids and asking them to share in return.

And it is a powerful thing for us as Unitarian Universalists to claim our spiritual lineage and remember that we can light a chalice at our kitchen tables, we can show our children that our faith calls us to live lives of kindness and justice.

Before Covid hit, Sunday morning was something we did at church - spiritual renewal was something we collectively sought outside our home, in our being together in our beautiful building. But now, even when we do gather on Sunday morning, we do it from our homes.

And yet, thinking about this idea of how we find renewal at home felt almost absurd this week, privileged in a way that left me queasy, a little lost. Because this week a jury returned a verdict saying a black woman can be killed in her home by the people who claim to be protectors and there will be no consequences. And this on the 65th anniversary of Emmet Till's killers going free.

And even the idea of owning a home, having a place in which to create a sanctuary, that history is one of redlining, of refusing to let black homebuyers take out mortgages, of a wealth gap between white americans and black americans that started with slavery.

And it is also true that Covid has been an extraordinary horror for those experiencing domestic violence.

So I want to invite us to build a different kind of foundation, a different kind of altar. One that's not so much about space as it is about people, about ancestry, about recalling our specificity, and our relationships. Because a culture that says whiteness is normal and everything else is deviant, is a culture that severs our connection from ourselves and each other.

The price of assimilation is losing touch with humanity - our own and each other's - that is the cost of this kind of power. Because a culture built on a foundation that says being white is what makes you count, is a culture that says a person's inherent

worth, a person's humanity, is conditional. So killing a black woman is not a crime because for it to be a crime she would have to be human. That is the horror of this week.

I am reminded of the author James Baldwin who said, "I imagine one of the reasons people cling so their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain."

So I cannot speak easily of finding renewal at home this week, not as a Universalist, as someone whose spiritual lineage is rooted in the idea inherent worth, that humanity, is unconditional.

And that spiritual lineage, the Universalist roots that we in this congregation share, calls me to push back against a culture that asks us to trade our heritage for power, that coerces us into silence with the idea that black people are not kin, that their humanity is a deviation from the humanity of whiteness.

My spiritual lineage roots me in a foundation that cannot be swayed by that lie. And my familial lineage roots me in a foundation that knows of specificity, that remembers a culture and a heritage that cannot be generalized, one that I won't trade for power.

And when my spirit feels untethered, when the horror of the day leaves me weary and numb, returning to my lineage - remembering my universalism and my grandmother's kilt - returns me to myself.

What helps you?

Amen.