

## Sermon: Becoming Good Ancestors (Rev. Erica Baron)

Good morning. It is so good to be with you today. As you heard, I'm Erica, and I am one of the congregational consultants for the New England Region of the UUA. There are five of us in this position, and our job is to support New England UU congregations. We help congregational leaders to clarify their goals and plans. We help when there is conflict, or in times of transition. We facilitate discussions about mission and vision. And occasionally, we get to join you for worship.

I first heard the story about the woman who weaves the world and her dog who unmakes it very recently. And when I did, it felt so viscerally true to me. Not true in the way facts are true. But true in the way myths and stories are true. That they find some piece of human experience and tell it in a way that allows for reflection and insight. This story felt true, because I feel like I am in that moment when the old pattern has been unraveled, but the Woman has not woven a new pattern that I can understand yet. This is how the world feels to me in late 2022. Waiting to see the new pattern that will emerge.

Now in our story, we have just one weaver. She has created the old pattern, and when she returns from stirring the pot, she sees the chaotic jumble of threads. She chooses the one to begin the new pattern. The new pattern takes shape in her mind. She has the skill to weave this new pattern all by herself.

This is where the factual reality of life in 2022 diverges from the story for me. I am certainly not one who weaves the whole world by myself. Indeed, I do not even know how to weave beyond the simplest versions of childhood crafts. So, in the story I get to be just

one of the threads. Waiting for the Weaver to decide how to weave me back into the new pattern.

But the fact is that collectively, we are not only the threads. We are also, collectively, the weaver. Though each of us individually is quite a bit too small to weave the whole pattern of the world. At least on the level of human community and its impact on the life of our planet, there is no single entity making the pattern. We create it together, all 7.9 billion of us. Each one of those billions of people creates a small part of the pattern with every interaction we have, in every decision we make, in all the momentous and ordinary days of our lives.

And what we do now matters.

When I think about my place in creating the future, I have two paradoxical reactions. The first is: “Oh no, I am way too small to have any impact at all. I mean, really, if I were in charge of the pattern, this is not what it would look like!”

And the other is: “Oh wow, I have a lot more power than I thought. That’s scary. I don’t want to be held accountable for this whole chaotic bundle of threads on the floor - or what they turn into next!” Maybe you have similar reactions.

Here’s the real paradox. Both things are actually true. I have - we each have - very little power over the course of world events as individuals. And also the course of world events is woven tiny stitch by tiny stitch, and in that sense, I do have - we do have - the power to contribute to the pattern of what comes next. And yes, that is an important responsibility.

One way to think about our place in the current moment is to realize that we will be the ancestors to those who come after us. The

way we live now, and the choices we make now will determine the world they live in. So, we might ask the question, what do we want them to see when they look back at us? How can we become a memory that offers courage and strength?

My team at the New England Region has been working for a number of years now within a framework for understanding congregational life that we call “Spiritual Leadership.” Spiritual Leadership is our name for living with deep integrity, finding and offering our unique gifts in community, and navigating the paradox of our power and our powerlessness.

Spiritual Leadership is not just for people identified as “leaders”. Every one of us can nurture and develop our spiritual leadership. We believe that congregations have a special role to play in nurturing the spiritual leadership of everyone in the congregation. And we believe that there are some specific practices that can help us find and nurture the spiritual leadership ourselves and in others, knowing that, in the words of T. Thorn Coyle, “practice makes possible.”

I want to look at some of these practices and how they can help us become good ancestors.

First is the practice of centering in gifts. Our teacher in this practice was Malidoma Somé, a self-proclaimed “reverse missionary” who brought the wisdom of his indigenous West African Dagara people to the United States. He taught that every person has a gift or gifts, things we are born with that are meant to serve our community. Another way he said this was that we all have unique genius, and it is a human need to have our gifts acknowledged, confirmed, and received in community.

Centering in gifts, then, is the practice of learning to find your gifts, and learning to see the gifts in others. By gifts here, we mean something more fundamental than skills or competencies. We mean the things you can't not do - in a joyful way. Or the things that help groups that come naturally to you. Perhaps you are the host, always ready with a warm smile and something to eat. Perhaps you are the teacher who can find a way to help everyone understand. Perhaps you are the good listener who can just be with people in whatever state they find themselves.

To help weave the pattern into something beautiful and life-giving, we need all of our gifts. The pattern is at its strongest when each of us is centered in the things we love to do and do well, and offering that to each other. The pattern would be boring and the garment unusable if we all had the same gift. So our job is not to find the one most perfect way to be the best person. We have to find the best way to be ourselves.

According to the Hasidic story Reb Zusha was nearing the end of his life, and he wondered how he would be received by God. He told his students that he was anxious not that God would ask him why he was not more like Moses or more like Abraham. But rather that God would say, "Zusha, why were you not more like Zusha?"

It is not our job to give the gifts that others carry. And no one can give our gifts for us. To be good ancestors, to do our part to weave a beautiful pattern, Zusha must bring Zusha's gifts, and I must bring mine, and you must bring yours.

Centering in gifts is a practice because it takes practice. I love the insight in the Zusha story about Zusha's calling not to be Moses or Abraham but to be Zusha. But I don't want to take on - or pass on -

the anxiety. I am not perfectly myself in every moment. I do not have complete insight into my own gifts. The insight I do have comes mostly from being on my team where we think and talk about gifts a lot. This has helped me see my own gifts - and the gifts of my teammates - by practicing over time.

You may not know your own gifts at all. They may be so close to you that you can't perceive them. Or they may have been hidden because they were not honored appropriately in some context of your life. You may just never have thought about it this way. That's okay. You don't have to have it all figured out at once. You can practice noticing the things that you offer that bring you joy and energy. You can practice noticing the special gifts of others, and pointing them out when you see them. If you all do this together, it will get much easier over time, as it has for my team.

Practice does not, in fact, make us perfect. But practice does make more things possible. And it becomes more possible to notice and offer our gifts if we practice.

The other practice I want to talk about today is Tending Our Tradition.

Unitarian Universalism is often called a "free faith." And it is true that we have a lot of freedom in Unitarian Universalism. The freedom to follow our minds and hearts as we construct or discover our own ways of making meaning of the world. The freedom to find and pursue the spiritual practices that best meet our individual needs. Even being a Unitarian Universalist is something that is freely chosen. Whether raised in the Unitarian Universalist tradition, or coming to it later in life, either way at some point we are Unitarian Universalists because we choose to be.

Once we make the choice to claim this tradition, it also makes claims of us. As we inherit our tradition from our religious ancestors, we are becoming the religious ancestors who will hand it on, in turn, to the Unitarian Universalists who come after us. And although there is a lot of freedom in our faith, this is also an important trust. Or to paraphrase Spider-Man's Uncle Ben, "With great freedom comes great responsibility."

When we named this practice on our team, we wanted to lean into the metaphors of gardening that come with the word "tending." When you tend a garden, you are nurturing plants that also nurture you. They become food or provide soul-sustaining beauty, and give you oxygen to breathe. Nurturing a garden means caring for specific plants with water and fertilizer and by making sure they get enough sunlight. It also means weeding or pruning what is unwanted or what is not helpful to the plants you are trying to grow.

So it is with tending our tradition. We are nurtured by Unitarian Universalism, and in order for that to happen, we must also nurture it. We make sure that the lessons, stories, practices, and insights we value have enough water to flourish and not wither. Enough fertilizer to be strong. Enough sunlight to continue to grow.

What is precious to you about Unitarian Universalism? And about this congregation in particular? In this time when patterns are shifting, what do you think it is vital to hold on to and to pass to the future? Perhaps most importantly, how do our principles, values, and practices help you to live with integrity in challenging times? These questions will help you decide which parts of the tradition to nurture, and how.

We also must discern that which is unhelpful in our tradition and weed it or prune it out. Some weeds are easy to pull. Some of them

are not really even weeds in the right context. Like the mint that you want in one garden bed that is encroaching on the lawn, a once-beloved but no longer thriving program was great in its place but needs weeding now. A committee whose function has shifted might need just some gentle pruning of old habits to grow in a new and fruitful direction.

Other weeds are harder to pull. They have taproots that go down and down to the very foundations of our tradition in this place. Like the arrogance and violence that displaced the indigenous peoples of this part of the world to make way for the settler towns and their churches, which have now become our churches. Or the human trafficking that was the source of wealth for the tycoons of the New England shipping industry which in turn endowed professorships and public institutions and churches. Taking out these weeds requires digging to uncover and tell the truth, and then some work to repair the soil and the foundation by offering heartfelt apologies and practical reparations to those harmed along the way.

Unitarian Universalism lives and is handed on in so many ways. From professors teaching students in seminary, from the words in the hymnal and spoken at General Assembly and written in online messages from the most eloquent among us.

But most of all, Unitarian Universalism lives and is handed on through the day to day, week to week, year to year life of our congregations. From people gathering together as we are gathered here today to practice living in community together and living our values in the world. We pass on our faith by living it and demonstrating by our example what our Principles mean in practice.

I want to share with you a particular way of getting in touch with our tradition, past and future. This is a guided meditation based on one created by Sage Hayes.

So, I invite you to get into a position that will allow you to be in a meditative state. You can close your eyes if that is comfortable for you, or simply soften your gaze. If any of my suggestions are uncomfortable or difficult for you, you always have permission to ignore them, or to imagine something different instead.

To start, pay attention to your breathing. You don't need to breathe any differently than normal, just notice what your body is doing. Feel your connection to the earth, whether that is through your feet on the ground or the chair supporting your body.

Now imagine yourself in your congregation. If you don't belong to a congregation, imagine another community that you belong to or have belonged to in the past. Imagine yourself surrounded by the other members of the community, doing the things you do together. You might be singing in worship or talking at a potluck or engaged in social witness together. Some activity that for you is the essence of this congregation or community. Take a moment to feel yourself deeply in the midst of your community.

Now travel back in time in your mind. You are looking for an ancestor or ancestors whose choices made the community possible. You can go back 50 years or 500 or 5000. You can find someone whose story you know, or you can imagine someone unknown to you. Find an ancestor or ancestors who made choices that enabled your community to be here, together, engaged in its activities. And imagine that you can have a conversation with the ancestor of your community. What wisdom do they have to share? [Long pause]



Perhaps they have a blessing for you. [Pause] Thank your ancestor or ancestors for this time together, and say farewell.

Now come forward in time. Come back to this time and place. Come back to the present for a moment. Come back into your body. If you want to look around the room to anchor yourself, you can do that. Or you can just rest with your breath for a few moments.

Now travel forward in time in your mind. You are looking for a person or people in the future whose way of life has been made possible by your community. You can go forward 50 years or 500 or 5000. This is someone whose life is freer, richer, more meaningful, or perhaps even physically possible because of the work your community is doing now. Imagine that you can have a conversation with them. Imagine what they might say about how your community enabled their life, how your choices made their choices possible. [Long pause] Do you have a blessing for the one or ones for whom you are an ancestor? [Pause] Thank them for this time together, and say farewell.

Now come back. Come back to this time and place. Come back into your body. Follow your breath, and when you are ready, look around and anchor yourself back in this place.

I know guided meditation is super effective for some people and not for others. If you did find that meditation meaningful, you can lead yourself through it whenever you need to be reminded of your connection to the past and to the future.

This meditation and our story about the woman weaving the world both offer a peek at a longer view of time than we generally have. Let's return to the paradox that both reveal. We are at the same

time individually tiny and very limited in our power from the perspective of the whole world and all of time. At the same time, it is the small acts, the single decisions, the ways we show up for our values that determines the pattern of the world, and so we have the power to help shape that pattern.

The path of spiritual leadership invites us to hold the truth of our power and our powerlessness, and to find the ways to show up that matter. When we bring our unique gifts to community, when we hold close the blessings of our tradition and hand them on, when we make repair for the harms caused in the name of our tradition, when we do these things together, we weave a pattern of beauty and strength.

Let us practice together the ways of being that will make those who come after us proud to call us their ancestors. So may it be.

Amen.