

First Parish Unitarian Universalist, Bridgewater, MA

“In the Middle”

Sunday, November 15, 2015, 10:30am

Thought for Contemplation: “The very air surrounding us and moving the flame is the air our Ancestors were breathing. There is no other.” — Mi-Shell Jessen

Reading "The Seventh Generation Principle," Molly Larkin, co-author of the international best-seller *The Wind Is My Mother; The Life and Teachings of a Native American Shaman*, blog post May 15, 2013.¹

Whenever I mention the 7th Generation principle to most people, they think I’m talking about laundry detergent.

I’m always surprised that more people don’t know the origin of the term....

The “7th generation” principle taught by Native Americans says that in every decision, be it personal, governmental or corporate, we must consider how it will affect our descendents seven generations into the future. So that the pristine sky, field and mountains in this photo will still be here for them to enjoy.

A generation is generally considered to be 25 years, so that’s 175 years.

It is clearly not embraced by most governments and corporations in the world today. I mean, when was the last time any of us thought about who’s coming along seven generations from now?

The 7th generation principal was so important to Native American cultures that it was codified in the Iroquois Great Law of Peace....

Long before environmentalists got us thinking about “carbon footprints” and “sustainability,” indigenous peoples lived in balance with the world around them....

[There are words in many native languages that] mean, “we are all related to, and respect, everything in life.”

Native American tribes didn't even have a word for "ecology" – respect for the earth was so ingrained in their lifestyle that one word would be too limiting.

The earliest recording of the 7th Generation principle dates back to the Great Law of Peace of the Iroquois Confederacy created in the 12th Century. When our Founding Fathers looked for examples of effective government and human liberty upon which to model a Constitution to unite the thirteen colonies, they found it in the government of the Iroquois [Confederacy], which, at that point, had stood for hundreds of years.

Ironically, in drafting our constitution, our founders left out one of the essential principles of the Great Law of Peace: the 7th Generation principle.

It is ironic, because it is the heart of this very successful model of government – the Iroquois Great Law of Peace has today stood for 1,000 years.

It is the omission of the 7th Generation principle and the role of women in government that led Native Americans to say that, the U.S. copied the Great Law of Peace but didn't really understand it....

To live by this principle, one would ask, prior to any undertaking, how it will affect the land, water, air, animals, birds, plants and the future for our children seven generations into the future?

How does it apply to you?

Think about where you build a house, what kind of car you drive.

Do you throw out or recycle?

What kind of impact are you making on the earth?

What kind of message are you giving your children? Teach them by example....

Always ask: Will the decisions we make today be beneficial for our descendants?

Remember that everything we do matters. If we live our lives from that idea, we will leave the world a better place....

Sermon “In the Middle”

Rev. Paul Sprecher

Our reading two weeks ago introducing our November theme of Ancestry started with this quotation by Ralph Ellison:

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.

“Choosing” ancestors is one of the ways we can place ourselves in our own place within the long history of human life on earth both before us and after us.

One of the ancestors I choose to honor is Theodore Parker, Unitarian minister in Roxbury and Boston and fervent abolitionist who died in 1860 just before the Civil War began. One of the stories told of Parker in one of our UU storybooks repeats an experience Parker recounted in his memoirs. When he was four, as he recalled, he was walking in the fields on his father’s farm – loving all of the sights and sounds and smells of a summer day – when he came across a turtle sunning itself on a rock. He was curious and decided to try hitting the turtle with a stick to see what would happen. But just as he was about to strike, he seemed to hear a voice saying “It is Wrong!” Startled, he dropped the stick and went to find his father, who told him that what he had heard was the voice of God – his conscience – telling him what was right and what was wrong to do. His father told him he must always listen to that voice

and honor it. When he came to manhood, Parker listened to that inner voice telling him that slavery was wrong and that he must do whatever he could to end it. In particular, he became deeply involved in resistance to the Fugitive Slave Law, which compelled every citizen to turn in any slave who had run away. He personally sheltered one such escaped slave; he said that he kept a pistol by his side when he wrote his sermons to ensure that no one would dare come to capture the slave he was harboring. Parker was the first mega-church minister in the United States; at one point the 28th Congregational Society in Boston had 2,800 members. Parker said,

I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.

These words – which I have adopted as part of my email signature – were the inspiration for Martin Luther King, Jr., famous saying, “The arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice;” and it was Parker who first formulated the description of our United States Constitution incorporated in Lincoln’s Gettysburg address: “government of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

That’s an ancestor I choose for my life and my ministry; if only I could be as brave and as clear about what is right, what is wrong, and what is most important to dedicate my life to as Parker was.

Each of us stands in the middle of the history of the human race; we inhabit the “In Between.” We inherit what has come before us and we sow the seeds for what

will come after us; we have ancestors from the past and we are becoming the ancestors that future generations will either come to honor or to blame for the world they will inherit. It therefore behooves each of us to consider what seeds we are sowing for the next seven generations who will inhabit this beloved earth of which we are stewards in our generation.

Our first task as ancestors-to-be is to find our own place in the long history of human life on Mother Earth. As we consider what our lives are like today, we can look back at the hard work of many generations in bringing about the material prosperity we enjoy today. In the United States, a lot of that work – and a lot of the capital the undergirds our own prosperity – was created by slaves and by workers who were compelled to work long hours under harsh conditions. We can be proud of ancestors who – like Theodore Parker – labored to end the curse of slavery in our land, and those who helped to organize unions and built labor solidarity to equalize the playing field between employers and workers. This required struggle; as Frederick Douglas put it,

Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet deprecate agitation, are people who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning; they want the ocean without the awful roar of its waters. This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand; it never did and it never will. Find out what people will submit to, and you have found out the

exact amount of injustice which will be imposed upon them. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.”²

Ancestors like Douglas helped to create the future in which we now live. But we have also inherited a world in which freedom for many is constrained by the excessive wealth of a few. Not all of the consequences of generations of slavery are behind us; our work here at First Parish in helping to disrupt the school to prison pipeline; helping incarcerated fathers to stay in relationship with their children in our “Read to Me, Father” program at the Old Colony Correctional Center here in Bridgewater, and our willingness to search for ways of supporting *Just Mercy* – as the title of the UUA Common Read we will be discussing in December puts it – are all ways we recognize that we can help to right some of the injustices we also inherit from our ancestors. So we need to find our place in the middle – between the past and the future – and to discover in ourselves what gifts and capacities we have been given to play each of our respective roles, bolstered by ancestors we choose, burdened by ancestors whose lives were less honorable.

Second, in becoming ancestors to be honored we need to commit ourselves to cleaning up our own messes. We benefit greatly from the extraordinary growth of productivity from the industrial and technical revolutions that have radically improved the standard of living for people all over the world – though certainly not for all. But this increase of wealth has bequeathed us with burdens as well, most notably the burden of the carbon dioxide pollution that is the proximate cause of the rapid and devastating climate change that we are just beginning to experience and

that will certainly encumber the lives of the descendants of whom we are becoming ancestors. We each need to find our place in the chain of benefits and responsibilities our own inheritance entails. Each of us can do our small part toward reducing the burden of pollution from which our descendants will suffer, and this congregation can play a part as well, notably from the efforts of our Green Sanctuary Committee, and hopefully by installing solar panels to reduce part of this community's reliance on fossil fuel energy.

It's not only climate change that will be a consequence of our stewardship of this earth. Environmental Lawyer Carolyn Raffensperger provides a concrete example of how a failure to consider the seven generations coming after us – descendants of whom we will be ancestors – can leave enormous burdens on their shoulders. The Giant Mine is a large gold mine located on the Ingraham Trail just outside of Yellowknife, Northwest Territories. Seventy years of mining gold there – ending in 2004 when the last owner went bankrupt – have left over 17,000 tons of arsenic trioxide dust and threatened to dump large amounts of arsenic into Yellowknife Bay. This substance will remain toxic for 25,000 years – not seven but 1,000 generations during which the potential for devastating harm is entailed by just three generations of exploitation. Raffensperger cites this as one example of why we must adopt the Precautionary Principle – assuring that choices we make now will not leave devastation in the future, thinking of at least seven generations rather than only our own.

This is a second part of what we must do as we craft our ancestry of the future – cleaning up our own messes. We teach our children to clean up their own messes; we take it as a matter of course that we should leave natural places we visit at least as clean as we found them; and we need to take broader responsibility as generations and as individuals to do the same. We are, as our Seventh UU Principle puts it, part of the interconnected web of life, and we humans of every generation have the ability to harm or to heal that web, to damage it or to repair it for the seven and hopefully many more generations whose ancestors we are becoming.

We also sometimes make or inherit emotional messes. Some of our families are torn apart by large or trivial arguments; or by abuse by one generation of the next; or by mental illness or addiction. We need to do our best to right the wrongs that we have a part in and also the ones we have inherited. We need to listen to what Theodore Parker called the Voice of God as we find our own place in the great chain of human beings behind us and in front of us.

And we need to recognize that our nation has left messes in other parts of the world, most obviously today from our foolhardy intervention in Iraq during the last decade, an intervention that sowed some of the poisonous seeds that came to maturity in Paris two nights ago, fruits of our own foolishness that have helped Iraq and Syria to descend into barbarity and hatred. Many of us foresaw some of these consequences when we opposed that war before it began, but all of us are reaping the evil consequences that have flowed from it.

And so, finally, we must commit ourselves to making peace when it is possible. Our religious tradition traces its history back to the Unitarians in Transylvania – among whose successors are the members of our partner church in Haranglab, whom we remember each week by lighting a chalice in their honor. King John Sigismund of Transylvania issued the Edict of Toleration in 1568 as his contribution to ending the potentially lethal conflicts between contending religious sects within his own kingdom, thereby preventing at least some of the devastation from religious wars that raged in many other parts of Europe.

Toleration alone will not end wars or terrorism or the environmental devastation – especially severe drought – that is behind much of the unrest in the Middle East and Africa. But as we attempt to apply our First Principle – affirming and promoting the inherent worth and dignity of every person – we need to do what we can to counter the demagogic attempts of some to denigrate all Muslims, or all immigrants, or all of those whom they make into Others, into strangers, into enemies for their own political or personal gain. As the Buddha says, “Hatred does not cease by hatred at any time: hatred ceases by love – this is an ancient and unalterable rule.”³

We stand in the middle, between the past and the future. We have inherited both good and evil. We need to find our place in the great stream of humanity and in the web of life of which we are a small but critical part. We need to clean up the messes that we have inherited and that we would otherwise bequeath; and we need to make peace whenever we can.

Thich Nhat Han, the great Vietnamese Buddhist monk who has striven for peace all of his life, offers these five awarenesses to help us find our place:

Students of the Buddha are aware that life is one and that happiness is not an individual matter. By living and practicing awareness, we bring peace and joy to our lives and the lives of those related to us.

The First Awareness: We are aware that all generations of our ancestors and all future generations are present within us.

The Second Awareness: We are aware of the expectations that our ancestors, our children, and their children have of us.

The Third Awareness: We are aware that our joy, peace, freedom, and harmony are the joy, peace, freedom, and harmony of our ancestors, our children, and their children.

The Fourth Awareness: We are aware that understanding is the very foundation of love.

The Fifth Awareness: We are aware that blaming and arguing can never help us and only create a wider gap between us; that only understanding, trust, and love can help us change and grow.⁴

So may it be with us, and blessed be

¹ <http://www.mollylarkin.com/what-is-the-7th-generation-principle-and-why-do-you-need-to-know-about-it-3/>

² Frederick Douglass, (1818 - 1895), August 3, 1857, "West India Emancipation" speech at Canandaigua, New York, on the twenty-third anniversary of the event. "Blackpast.org - An Online Reference Guide to African American History," <http://www.blackpast.org/1857-frederick-douglass-if-there-no-struggle-there-no-progress#sthash.4Wflwkj4.dpuf> - accessed 11/15/15

³ Dhammapada, "The Twin Verses"

⁴ <http://www.mindfulnessbell.org/wp/tag/five-awarenesses/> accessed 11/15/15