



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Honoring the Ancestors”

© by **The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen**

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Centering Thoughts

If we stand tall it is because we stand on the backs of those who came before us. Yoruba proverb

The ancestors may annoy you but don't make a mistake of annoying them back, they may annoy you forever. African proverb

For I am my mother's daughter, and the drums of Africa still beat in my heart.
Mary McLeod Bethune

*Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave, I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise. I rise. I rise. Maya Angelou, from “Still I Rise”*

Sermon

Have you checked your Twitter feed this morning? Do you know what's trending? If you don't know, you're so yesterday!

Being ‘yesterday’ means not being hip or ‘with it’, something many Americans aim to avoid. Yesterday's trends and news, ancient or recent, are considered to be stale and irrelevant history.

But not every culture thinks only about today or tomorrow. Some look equally to the past, or at least to the people of the past.

This past Friday, Chinese people observed ‘Tomb Sweeping Day’ when they visited the graves of loved ones. Hindus will observe Pitri Paksha, a September holy day to remember ancestors. In November, many Christians will observe All Soul's Day or the Day of the Dead. Americans as a whole will remember those who have died in war on Memorial Day, a civic holiday. While these are once a year events, in African Traditional Religion, or ATR, remembering one's ancestors is an everyday activity.

I should explain that there really isn't any such thing as African Traditional Religion, like there is Roman Catholic religion or Unitarian Universalist religion. ATR, like Native American religion, has no one uniform set of beliefs for all Africans. Variations exist between ethnic and geographic groups, but sub-Saharan African peoples share many common religious ideas which

allow for some cautious generalizations. Ancestor veneration is one such practice in this region, particularly in West Africa where this morning's music originates.

Furthermore, ATR is not a religion as westerners frequently conceive it, for it is not separate from everyday life. African traditionalists don't recognize a division between the sacred and profane. They don't engage in religious activity only one set day of the week, either. Nor do they need a special building, like a temple, to practice their religion. Just living is a religious practice because religion and culture are inseparable. And even for those who also follow Christianity, Islam, or another religion, their traditional understandings and relationships to the living and dead form a backdrop to their practice of the newer religions.

In America, when loved ones die we experience a healthy period of loss and grief, but in time we adjust our lives and carry on without them. In memorial services we remember those who have died, and remind ourselves that they live on in our hearts and in our memories. For many of us, that is the entirety of a person's afterlife. For others, the dead may have a soul or spirit that lives on in some divine realm. Although both these ideas fit within our UU diversity, neither fit into a traditional African view.

Particularly for Yoruba peoples of western Africa, the dead do not quietly lie in their graves nor do they go to some supernatural realm with the gods. They remain alongside the living as long they have descendents to honor them.

Because the dead don't go away, they can and do intervene in the lives of the living. They can help, harm, or just cause mischief to a descendent. To insure the ancestors' kindness, they must be honored. To ignore them is to risk their ire. If your milk cow dries up or your house burns down, you may have angered an ancestor. If your harvest is plentiful or your children numerous, you must have pleased the ancestors. Prayers, offering gifts, and libations help keep the ancestors happy. If a person wishes to speak to or consult with an ancestor, diviners act as intermediaries. Tossing cowry shells and reading the signs inform the diviners of the ancestors' advice. During festivals, the diviners wear masks to enable the unseen ancestors to communicate with the living as if they were actually behind the mask. Communication between the living and the dead is considered both real and symbolic. To say it isn't real would dishonor the ancestors.

A rationalist might say these beliefs are superstitious nonsense, evidence of primitive thinking. When Christian Europeans first encountered indigenous African beliefs, they criticized them as infantile, mistaken, and evil. Their own sense of superiority blinded them, just as it had when Europeans encountered traditional Native American beliefs. Enlightened Christians and Muslims who continue to convert or educate Africans today are less pejorative. They recognize similarities between their own faith and the traditional beliefs and practices in Africa. Ancestors, for example, are not much different from saints in the Catholic tradition. They are intermediaries between the one supreme god, named Olodumare (*uh-lah-duu-mar*) by the Yoruba, and the lesser deities called orishas.

And, call it what you will—good or bad luck, the will of Allah, the stars' misalignment, or God's grace—unexplained events all carry an element of superstition. We all look for reasons that explain the unseen and unknown. We hope for logic and scientific answers, but few of us are

beyond crossing our fingers or praying to whatever gods might exist. Science cannot fully explain why some things happen to some people on any given day. Why do you trip one day over a threshold you cross every other day without incident? Some things just remain mysteries. Perhaps the ancestors simply enjoy a little mischief.

For the African traditionalist, treating one's ancestors well contributes to a balancing effect on the energy in the cosmos. Balancing and strengthening this vital energy or force is the purpose of all that exists. Forces in the world create imbalances in the cosmic energies. Nature and life contains dynamic energies that can upset or restore this balance. The orishas, the minor deities, and the ancestors can correct or cause imbalance. Humans hold a privileged place in this cosmology because of our skill at changing the imbalance through actions, but we remain connected to all that exists in an echo of our own UU Seventh Principle of interdependence.

Not everyone who dies becomes an ancestor. Generally, three criteria must be met:

1. The person must have lived a good, moral life to warrant this honor.
2. The person must be old enough to have experienced a full life, fulfilled their destiny, and gained wisdom.
3. The person must have at least one child, preferably a male, who will fulfill the ritual functions that acknowledge the ancestor's life, carry on the family name, and honor their other ancestor kin.

Simply put, to become an ancestor, you must be good, be a parent, and live a long life.

We know today how abhorrent slavery is. Africans were forcibly brought to this country to be possessed by masters. If treating people as possessions isn't evil enough, understanding the ancestral connection Africans had to their homes and history adds more profoundly to my recognition of how terrible this experience must have been. With ties to Africa and the ancestors severed, the misery they experienced was compounded when slave owners refused to recognize marriage or families. Children born to the enslaved Africans were sold off, thus they were unable to honor their parents. Generational connections were destroyed. The living and dead were both set adrift. The spiritual harm done to thousands of people is nearly unimaginable.

But here and now, how does African Traditional Religion relate to us, American UUs? Can their worldview inform our own spirituality or understanding of life? Besides helping us better understand the tragedy of slavery, I think several elements echo our own principles and lift up some ideas we might be better to consider in our own context.

As I said earlier, we share a sense of interconnectedness with all that exists. An African traditionalist's link to the ancestors expands our connections, it widens our circle of interdependence. Modern therapists and organizational analysts use family systems theory to gain insight in why people act as they do. Family systems theory recognizes that how our parents and grandparents acted, we are likely to act, too, because they taught us by their example. Knowing our ancestors helps give us the ability to choose whether to maintain these family patterns or not. We need to know our ancestors for they are speaking to us, if we would listen.

Our modern American culture easily dismisses history. We remember a few cultural icons, such as Founding Fathers. We do ask, "What would George Washington or Thomas Jefferson

do?" Martyrs and UU founding fathers like Norbert Capek, whom you learned about last Sunday, and Transylvanian Francis David, who ministered in the first official Unitarian Church in the world, we remember these ancestors. But many other ancestors lie forgotten. Remembering and honoring those who struggled or died to further the liberal religious cause could occur more often.

I appreciate historical photos of my ancestors. Their faces adorn a wall in my house. I know photos of me and my kids will one day be someone else's historic pictures. I hope I am remembered. When I die, I'd like to know that my life had meaning, that I transformed the world just a bit. A toast to my life by my survivors could be in order. Paul, make note, a little pinot noir libation on the ground when you scatter my ashes might be fitting.

Speaking of memorials and ashes, some of you may have noticed the building of our new memorial wall outdoors, behind the sanctuary. The wall itself is finished, though the walkway still needs more work. Soon we'll select brass plaques to carry the engraved names and dates of loved ones you wish to memorialize. We'll mount these on the stone wall. When someone dies, if their family chooses to memorialize them, we can hold ceremonies there, too. We'll purchase two benches to sit upon, as well. This memorial space is the generous gift of two members and friends of the Fellowship. We'll hold a dedication ceremony most likely by summer. Details on how you might memorialize a loved one will be communicated.

I want to close my remarks with a brief passage by another Unitarian Universalist minister, Joshua Pawelek. He wrote:

I believe it is a sign of spiritual health when we practice remembering and honoring those upon whose shoulders we rest. I believe it is a path to spiritual wisdom when we seek to know our ancestors' stories. What obstacles did they face? If they were enslaved, how did they achieve liberation? If they wandered in the wilderness, how did they survive? What was their relationship to the Most Holy? For what were they thankful? What did they pass on to us? As we know more clearly who our ancestors were, we know more clearly who we are. As we know more clearly who we are, we make ourselves ready to face the challenges of our time.

May we remember and honor the ancestors, whether those we were born into or those in which we were adopted, and to all those who gifted us with something of value. May we remember and honor them as African traditionalists honor their ancestors.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What do you know of your ancestry and do you feel connected to it?
2. Does your heritage inform or impact your life in any way? If so, how; if not, why?
3. Do you feel your ancestors watching over you (literally or figuratively)? Please describe.