

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

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Remembering the Future

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Remembering the Future

[Today's *Reading*, Ted Kooser's poem, *Mother*, is excerpted below.]

A picture in the newspaper shows a portrait of five adults, all smiling, laughing, casually dressed, with intelligent, friendly faces, inviting faces. The caption states that they range in age from 55 to 82, that three of these people have Alzheimer's Disease and two do not. (One is the husband of a patient, one is a doctor who works with them.) It is impossible to tell from the outside looking in at these pleasant, very bright-looking people, who is lost in the fog of dementia, never to return; who is on some days fairly high-functioning and at other times can no longer button her own jacket, which makes her furious and very scared; who is the partner railing and reeling and grieving, raging at doctors and God all day long, weeping with loneliness at night, missing his wife so profoundly though she's standing right there next to him; who was once a Broadway actor, but now can't tell you what city Broadway's even in, though he can still sing all the songs. This picture does not say a thousand words, it doesn't even begin to tell five stories. These people all look "normal," they look like all of you, like all of us, which is why the photo is so disconcerting, so haunting and horrifying and in some ways beautiful, as is any image or insight that calls you up short and levels the field where we play at being human.

What makes us who we are, as humans? What matters most? What's required at the baseline? Intelligence, happiness? The ability to engage the complexities of love and grief and justice? The Buddhists say, *Abandon all attachments, all desire; be here now, not looking backward not looking ahead, but in this very moment.* That's exactly where these patients in the picture live; they will never again leave the confines of the present moment, though this can't be what the spiritual teachers intended. Are you defined essentially by your mental capacity, your agency, or by your capacity for joy - or reason, or compassion, forgiveness, mercy? It turns out that even the simplest virtue requires rigorous and complex thought.) I love the metaphor that tells us that human beings are made of stories, one by one, and communities are built of interwoven stories – but what if you can't remember any? Could you entrust your story to another person if you couldn't hold it on your own anymore? Would you still be a person then? And before you answer too quickly or too fiercely that question about personhood, consider what you'd say if the person were your mother or your father or your lover or your friend. A poet, Ethna McKiernan, writes:

*Someone is weeping the kitchen.
It is my father, crying quietly
as he peels the dinner potatoes.
He pierces their white hearts with a fork
and steam rises upward toward his beard.
Below, hot tears salt the bowl.
The intimacy of the moment staggers,
as when I stumbled once as a child,*

*upon him cupping my mother's face
 in broad, noon daylight as they entered
 the deep, private zone of a kiss.
 How could he have known, when he made
 that vow fifty-seven years ago,
 how suddenly and readily she'd leave him –
 pork chops burnt, potatoes blackening
 over gas – for that thin stranger
 called Alzheimer, waltzing through
 the kitchen door like a suitor
 who has never lost a single lover's hand
 he's played?*

From another writer come more gentle lines, a blessing called *Prayer for My Mother*:

*Let every moment of every day
 break upon her with the dazzle of
 utter newness, and let her exult in it.*

*Let wonder rule: the sky more lovely
 than she's ever seen, the birds that
 come by the hundred to her feeder.*

*Please let her forget that she does not
 remember. Let her lose somehow
 the torment of losing her mind.*

*Let there be insight in the one page that,
 over and over for days, she reads
 for the first time, never gets beyond.*

*Let the living past be vibrant in her
 dreams each night, her mother, her brother
 at her side, showering her with love.*

*Please let her eyes open in the morning
 not to the despair of the lost at sea,
 but to the familiar play of sunlight
 in the leaves outside her window,
 the solid sense that she is safe,
 the firm ground of home.*

The poet, Rick Kempa, adds this note: *For nearly two years, until she moved to a nursing home, my mother lived with my wife, our two teenage children, and me. Her presence was a gift: we coalesced around her, sharing the pleasure of her boundless love, the challenges of being her caregivers, and the sadness as her health declined.*

Where do they go, these loved ones who are still right here, who stay with us but don't stay, who may go on looking the same but who are not the same? What becomes of a mind when it goes, and memories and character? What becomes of those left behind? What remains?

Unitarian Universalist Laura Randall wrote in a recent issue of the *UU World* about her job in a nursing home: *...Alzheimer's forces us to confront some of the hardest ... lesson[s] ... learned in a society that prizes superior intellect, self-reliance, and individuality above all other qualities. ...Does human worth lie within these values? Or does it reside somewhere else? Beverly Bigtree Murphy, whose husband has Alzheimer's, addresses the spiritual mystery ... in this way, "If you believe in the concept of a soul, then you have to believe that the soul doesn't get Alzheimer's any more than it gets cancer..." She quotes a college professor who has Alzheimer's disease, who compares [his] diagnosis ...to being on a spaceship without enough fuel to return to earth. "We know we will perish in the interstellar void," he writes, "yet we hope to radio back to earth images of beauty never seen."* Randall goes on: *Alzheimer's is sometimes described as "death in slow motion" and in so many ways it is. ... But we would do well to remember that [it] is also life. It is sometimes life in slow motion. It is sometimes life at a blinding speed. It is sometimes a life of numbing repetition. It is sometimes a life of unexpected grace. In other words, it is life. It is life through a unique and challenging lens, but it is life all the same. [It] has taught me that the worth of a human life lies not in human potential, as so much of our culture teaches, but in human presence. It is human "being" in the truest sense of the word. Laura Randal, adapted from a sermon delivered on March 8, 2009, at the UU Area Church at First Parish in Sherborn, Massachusetts and printed in the UU World, Spring 2010.*

I'm thinking about memory, as I do each year on Mothers Day and Fathers Day, and about how much of what we pass from one generation to another is verbal; it's narrative, it's story, genealogies, family history remembered in words, whether authorized versions written down in family Bibles or bootleg variations which may be made up or may be more true, and no one really will ever know, and they surely won't all agree. When one person's memory flickers and fades, entire generations may disappear with it, just vanish. It's not just one life that goes dim. So much is lost when we no longer know, can no longer remember, the stories, and this is one of the great cruelties for families of Alzheimer's Disease. And yet we carry other legacies within us, other treasures from our loved ones and our elders in addition to the stories, the chronologies, the names and dates and anecdotes. We've been given and we will pass on things that are less tangible even than memory but which are more durable than memory, ways of being, ways of seeing, ways of looking at the world and moving through a life that come to us often through our parents, gifts we choose to honor by holding them intact in our own lives and then passing them along.

I think of my mother, who has little interest in family history. This is maddening to me, because she's got a good, clear memory (short-term and long-term, far better than mine), and the things she knows are fascinating. Last year, when I was on sabbatical, I was able to spend some time with her. She had just gotten in the mail a shoebox full of family photos sent by distant relatives in England, pictures of herself as a little girl in the 1920's and 30's, pictures she'd never seen of her parents, grandparents, and also dogs, babies, brides, old people who were surely born in the middle of the 19th century, people posed near new automobiles in their flapper clothes, and

uniforms from the First World War as well as World War II. There was a little girl who looks exactly like my 6 year-old niece in Connecticut, same haircut, same smile, only the back of the photo said “1910.” My brother’s face appeared again and again, but it wasn’t him; it was some other boy from some other time, some other planet. I kept pulling my mother down on the couch to narrate this history, tell me the stories, fill in the names, and she was interested, but not excited, as I was. She’d say, “That’s Uncle Hubert there, that’s Bill who died in Belgium, that’s my aunt, Ethel Dingley Dingley Dingley,” and I said “*What?*” “Oh, it’s a family name, and she married her first cousin... That’s my father, after he came out of the German prison camp in World War I... They put on plays with the German guards and half the men had to dress as women for *The Taming of Shrew*,” and I said, “*What?*” and she’d say, “Why do you care about all this ancient history?” She is 88 years old. An only child, she is the last survivor of her generation. She carries within her, physically and mentally, generations of memory, much of it conscious, most of it not, none of it permanent in this world.

So I wonder, what legacy do I carry from this person who is not much compelled by stories? What has she given me that I can hold and in time pass on? I realize there’s something in her way of being that I try to emulate (and there are other things I’ve worked for decades not to). There are physical gestures I know I’ve picked up, even though I was adopted and we are not blood-related. And there is her character, which is generous and joyful and outward-looking, which seems so natural to her, and so hard for me to imitate. I remember her turning to me once when I was really little, saying, “Did you know that Mrs. Kennedy [the First Lady] has said that the most important thing in social situations is *to truly care* about the other person, to turn the conversation always back to the person you are with, to be more interested in what the other person has to say? That’s what she does at dinner parties. Don’t you think that’s a good idea?”

I must have been about five years old then, and I did not think it was a good idea at all. Not at all. But I’ve remembered it all these years later, this way my mother has of expanding her perspective. I’ve not mastered it, as she did, but still I want to pass it on and imagine a future where habits like this, old fashioned habits of kindness and courtesy, prevail. There are many other things, not memories, not stories exactly, but nuances, threads of her personhood.

Ted Kooser writes in his poem a kind of letter to his mother. He’s telling her what’s happened since she died a month before, what’s happening right now:

*Mid April already, and the wild plums
bloom at the roadside, a lacy white
against the exuberant, jubilant green
of new grass ...
You have been gone a month today
and have missed three rains and one nightlong
watch for tornadoes...
... the peonies are up, the red sprouts
burning in circles like birthday candles,
for this is the month of my birth, as you know,
the best month to be born in, thanks to you,
everything ready to burst with living...*

*... you asked me if I would be sad when it happened
and I am sad. But the iris I moved from your house
now hold in the dusty dry fists of their roots
green knives and forks as if waiting for dinner,
as if spring were a feast. I thank you...
Were it not for the way you taught me to look
at the world, to see the life at play in everything,
I would have to be lonely forever.*

He's remembering not anecdotes, but gratitude, a daily habit of gratitude. She may have left him many stories when she died, but she also left him something else- this way of looking at seasons, of waiting for birds, noticing sky. *Were it not for the way you taught me to look at the world... I would have to be lonely forever.* And you sense that this was not a mother who didactically dragged her boy out to the yard and forced him to catalog plants; this was a woman in love with the natural world, who couldn't help herself, who taught by example and herself may have learned by example, how to be reverent, how to be thankful, how to be glad and suitably awed, absolutely awake. He thanks her for that, though it's nothing you can really teach a person; a child just puts on the habit of it when he's young, and sees if he likes it or not. And when the child grows, he remembers and realizes this way of being is rare, so he passes it on to his children, or to all kinds of people, if he's a poet like Ted Kooser.

What is the essence of a person, the legacy that's left behind, even after the stories are forgotten, not only by the person, as he ages, as she forgets, but by everybody else? What lives on and on? I think of families who gather to tell me about their beloved person before a memorial or funeral. I write everything down, try to gather it up, press them for more till there's a narrative there, a coherent body of memory. But it's not the person who's gone, it's not even the essence of the person they've lost. I look around at them, sons, daughters, grandchildren, siblings, spouse, and it's so clear that their person lives on in their living, in their faces, their voices, their choices. ***This is the eternal legacy.*** The unspoken memories began long before this person was born, and will continue far, far into the future, by grace and by their will, what they pass on on purpose.

❧ Question ❧

I want to invite you to think of something you've been given, some beautiful inheritance from your mother or your father, or from someone else, some way of being or way of seeing, something that matters to you, perhaps something she taught you, or he taught you, something you hope will endure in the world, long after you are gone – not a story, exactly, but something perhaps even more durable. Say them out loud, if you're willing.



These words in closing come from Will Barbour, a poem called boundlessness:

*I lie here in my body bound, and yet –
My mother's smile- eight decades gone –*

is clear and warm.

How can this be so?

She's dead (or so I'm told) these eighty years. And yet-

Her great niece has three dimples in her cheeks:

She always hesitates before she speaks

I see her smile and see my great grandfather,

(who died before my birth and left no tintype likeness on this earth).

I lie here in my body bound, and yet –

I feel again the squish of cool spring mud between my childhood toes.

I smell again the spice and cleanliness bequeathed by a wild pink rose.

I feel again the texture (sun-hot, lichen-fringed) of gray stone wall.

I cringe at shock of ice-salt surf;

I glow, I splash – the seagulls call.

I lie here.

I wonder if thoughts have their chromosomes?

A seedlet through the worlds and eons roams and brushes by my mind

intangible to this I call my brain – and inklings of its kernelled truths remain

(and will not be cast out by any mortal doubt).

One year

it's likely I shall not be here in body bound, and yet –

The galaxies will whirl in cosmic cadence plain.

I know I'll still be part of that – without the pain.

For things of value of not fade and die and end, but blend into the great continuum called God

by some – by others left unnamed, lest naming limit and define the endless goals of love.