

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

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Leaving, Losing, Choosing, Coming Home
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Leaving, Losing, Choosing, Coming Home

Some years ago I wrote a letter to the editor of a conservative Catholic magazine. I wasn't a Catholic, obviously; I subscribed for a while because I admired the rigor of the writing. My letter was in response to a piece about adoption, which was also a piece about abortion. It was about absolute right and wrong.

As an adopted child myself, and as a woman who has had an abortion, I read your article with great interest. When people exclaim about how grateful I must be to the mysterious woman who "saved my life," I find myself responding (usually in silence, and usually long after the conversation is over) that what I feel for that woman, whom I have never met and long to know, is not so much gratitude as compassion: compassion for having to decide alone about a pregnancy she did not create alone; compassion for her fear and courage; compassion for the ache she may feel for her missing child who is me. What gratitude I feel for the gift of life I offer to a larger sacred source of life. But for her, I feel a loving empathy, the same empathy I feel for the women (and I among them) who have chosen a different, and equally fearful, painful way. I believe that no woman can be "for" abortion, just as no woman can easily relinquish a child she has borne in her body, under her heart. But we can be for choosing – making honest, human, responsible, faithful, fearful, brave choices, based on what our reason and our God tell us may be right. I may never know my birth mother. I want to believe, and on most days I can, that as we stood separately before the same terrible, lonely choice, she and I faced our choosing in the same spirit. For her I feel not gratitude so much as deep respect and boundless compassion.

I was surprised and grateful when the letter was printed. The response that followed were thoughtful and kind.

In my imagination, the woman or girl who is or was my birthmother remains forever young. When I was a child, of course, she was old, as all mothers are; she was a grown up, like my mother and father, the parents I have always known. At some point, though, I overtook her: I've grown up and grown older, while she remains 17 or 18 (or 14 or 25, whatever she was), young (I think) and frightened. When I think of her now she's closer to my daughter's age than mine; I think of her with a concern that feels maternal – that poor girl, that brave young woman. I hope her mother stood by her. If I could I would embrace her and comfort her, and of course I would thank her again and again. Only once in a while does she come to me as she must surely be now, if she's alive: a 65 year-old person, or a woman even older, looking back in retrospect at her life and her choices. She's a shadow who maybe has my same bone structure. Do we share the same spiritual structure, sacred wonder, sense of humor, anything interior? I have no idea. Her pain, her regret, her relief when I was gone, her questions about the child she gave up - these may all be figments of my own imagination. I don't know if she ever marks her birthing day, my birthday, but I think of her then, and the candles I light are for her.

Dick Haskett, a member of our church, wrote to me this year:

Like many families in our congregation, including your own, one of our family members is adopted. In the decades since our daughter's adoption, I have often wished I could thank her birth parents for their great gift. I lament that they have never known their wonderful child, now woman and mother, and have not been able to share in the pleasures of her growth and life. I hope you might be able to offer a sermon of recognition and gratitude for parents who were compelled to make the heart wrenching decision to surrender their child...

When a naming ceremony is held at church, I sometimes think of that distressed young couple who entrusted our family with the greatest of ... gifts. [Silently], I offer them compassion... and assure them that... we have tried to be faithful to our covenant with them. ... During the ceremony I silently name them: They are the Bestowers of Blessings, the Trusting Ones, they are the Greatest Givers. At the

conclusion of the [dedication] we pray for the child saying “May you know great joy, great peace and great love.” For the birth parents of my child and for birth parents around the world: “May you know great joy, great peace and great love.”

I spoke these words at the dedication of my own child. I have whispered them, like Dick, to my birth parents, the mother and also the father who is even more shadowy and mysterious. (I imagine he was young.) I spoke these words out loud when my father died in 2002. *May you know great peace...* Families are complicated, in the ways they come together, in the ways they hold together, in the ways they sometimes come apart, but if you drill down deep enough there is this common ground of humanity where we all stand, and the blessing all of us require is quite simple: *may you know peace. May you know love.*

Dick said it saddens him that his daughter’s birthparents will never know her and delight in her as he does, never know their grandchildren, and how the story will turn out. But no one, in any family, ever really knows. We’re alive in the story of our lives for such a brief time, and generations that we can’t imagine stretch ahead of us, just as they stretch out behind us. Some of us are afforded a longer view than others. Very few of us have known our great, great-grandparents, their stories, their struggles what they meant to pass on. You somehow assume that it’s embodied in you somewhere, part of your physical construction. Very few will know our children’s, children’s children. Our legacy spins out of our control. And so we go on faith and trust, and out of our choices, we make a life that we hope will be worthy for future lives to build on- but you never know, not even if you’re bound by blood.

Heid Erdrich is a professor at the University of St. Thomas, and a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibwe. She writes about what she calls “the mother’s tongue,” the language of her people, a beautiful inheritance which must be cherished to survive:

*Mother, if you look it up, is source,
(fount and fountainhead – origin,
provenance, and ...
root) and wellspring.
Near her in the dictionary you will find
we all spring mother-naked,
(bare stripped, unclothed, undressed, and raw)
with nothing but mother-wit
... our native wit
with which we someday might mother
(nurse, care for, serve, and wait on)
if we don’t first look it up and discover
the fullness of its meaning.*

“Such interesting language,” she says, “this *tongue*,”

*which was English or Ojibwe,
either way, both spoke forward our mother country,
our motherland, (see also fatherland,
our home, our homeland, our land)
called soil in English, our mother tongue*

*our native language that is not my Native language
not the mother language Ojibwe:
wellspring of many tongues, nurse, origin, and source.*

[from “Offering: Words” in *The Mother’s Tongue*, Cambridge, UK: Salt Press, 2005]

The language binds her back across the generations, back to her origin and source. She’s writing about how communities hold legacies together, how people hold in common everything that truly matters – stories, music, ways of being, ways of walking on the earth, ways of raising children and sometimes even those children themselves.

Like all languages, Ojibwe is specific to a certain people; it holds their original identity, just as the veins in their bodies carry their blood. It is a powerful, fragile container. But something in the way she describes “the mother’s tongue,” the way it holds the ancient names of animals and plants, rivers and birds, the way it describes and thus defines the texture of human relationships, suggests a deeper truth, more universal and essential. The mother’s tongue, this most unique treasure of the people, is exactly what connects them to all other peoples who may speak in other tongues, but who talk about the same essential, human things. Beneath the bonds of blood and tribe, there is this reminder, that we are one family.

I remember thinking as a child about how people are connected. Sometimes, like all children, I indulged a lurid fantasy about dis-connection. When I was mad at my parents or in trouble for something, I knew that this family I’d landed in was absolutely the wrong family for me, these people who never understood me, never appreciated me. How sorry they would be when my real parents – the birth parents – came back on their black stallions to take me away to their castle, my true and rightful home. (Adopted kids are not the only ones who think like that; my youngest brother Greg, the biological child of my parents, thought exactly the same thing.) But I also had another thought. I remember wondering when I was maybe 10 or 12, how far back I’d have to go in the forest of family trees to find the clearing where my parents and my birth parents, my two brothers, all of us, were all related. A hundred years? A thousand years? A thousand miles? I sometimes think about this still. And I think of a young couple tossing their baby out into the universe, hoping that their desperate choice was right, clinging to a thread of trust that she would be caught in the web of human care, that somebody would sing to her in the mother’s tongue, some variation of their own heart’s song.

In the Atrium now there is a beautiful exhibit, photographs of immigrants to Minnesota, from Cambodia, Somalia, Mexico, from Germany, Norway, Sweden. There’s an interactive timeline on the wall, inviting all of us to fill out a slip of paper saying when our families first came to the United States, and where they came from and why. This is a simple act of memory, but it breaks down all assumptions about who belongs here, who has standing, who’s entitled, by what right. Almost all of us come from people who have left one home to choose another, or who lost one home to make a new one. Almost all of our families are fairly recent immigrants to an adopted land. The pictures raise good questions: When did “illegal aliens” alighting from the Mayflower become “colonists” and “citizens?” What’s the difference between pioneer settlement and hostile occupation? When did the first peoples, those truly native to this place, become outcast, their mother tongue a foreign language?

I was filling out my form on Friday and then stumbled over an old obstacle: where do I come from? Can I claim the rich stories of my father’s family and my mother’s? Not exactly; there’s no bloodline there. When my mother emigrated after World War II, when my father’s ancestors came to Canada, no part of me was with them. Can I go on the slender file from the adoption agency, which reads like a “personals ad” for infants: *English, white, Protestant, female?* There’s no story there.

Where do you come from? Who are your people? Who is your tribe? Where is your native land, your home-land, motherland? To what story, landscape, government, do you pledge your allegiance? Who are your kin, your compatriots, companions (from *com – pane, those with whom you share your bread*)?

I remember Maya Angelou, speaking to us all from Washington:

*Each of you, descendant of some passed
On traveler, has been paid for.
You, who gave [the land its] first name, you,
Pawnee, Apache, Seneca, you
Cherokee Nation...
Forced [away] on bloody feet...
You, the Turk, the Arab, the Swede, the
German, the Eskimo, the Scot,
You, the Ashanti, the Yoruba, the Kru, bought,
Sold, stolen, arriving on the nightmare
Praying for a dream.
[This land is] yours – your passages have been paid.
...History, despite its wrenching pain,
Cannot be un-lived but if faced with courage need not be lived again.*

*Lift up your eyes upon
This day breaking for you.
Give birth again
To the dream.*

Who are your people? Who paid your passage so that you could claim your place in the world? Who belongs in the family?

Dick Haskett writes, *Our family has grown by marriage, by birth, by adoption and by remarriage. We have great grandparents, grandparents, parents, his children, her children, brothers, sisters, step brothers, step sisters, half sisters, half brothers, cousins, aunts, uncles, dogs, cats and fish. Can you preach a sermon in celebration of all the ways families grow and include committed couples [gay and straight] and those who choose to be single – include everybody?*

He gave me a definition. Dick said that for him, and for Kathleen, his wife, in their house, “family” is “who comes in the door and gets loved here.” And Kathleen said, “Yes, but then there are all these other circles.” She talked about neighbors and colleagues and this church, and what she calls her “pew family;” some of you are in it. Kathleen and Dick tend to sit in about the same place every Sunday, and they’re aware that some of the people around them sit in that same place, too. She doesn’t know all their names, but she notices when they’re not there. She and Dick have enjoyed watching, from year to year, as children they recognize have grown. They smile and exchange little Sunday greetings with these people, they stand and share the hymnal, sometimes Kleenex. There’s a familiar almost-intimacy in this “pew family,” who are not in any way related, who may not even be like-minded, but who, she senses, are like-hearted. All of them landed here, somehow, from somewhere else.

I think of how a congregation forms, or any family of strangers. For most of us, this is a chosen faith, a way we have adopted, a house that has adopted us. We’ve lost and left one home to come home to another. Some have come broken and embittered from the churches of their childhood; some have come more gladly. For some, this is their first religious home. All of us have equal standing now; we own the church together. It is constructed of all our stories, as surely as of the stories of its founders, as surely as it’s made of glass and steel. When we’re at our best, we look back at the traditions we were raised in, the homes that we came from, and say, “*Namaste*. The light in me still greets the light in you with thanks and with respect.” This life is a continuum from one home to another, one moment to the next. With every

loss and every leaving, every arrival and every warm welcome we offer or receive, we become more fully who we're called to be.

I may never know my birth mother. It's getting late. But I do know I stand in a line of women who make choices, hard, life-giving choices. It may be a long line, it may be very short – I know just this little fragment: her, and now me, and now my own daughter. And somehow that line intersects and is braided into the lines of the people I was raised with, who gave me a name and a home and a story, and that line is braided into the life of my partner Ross, and into our lives here. *To make choices* is the root meaning, in Greek, of the word *heretic*. I stand in a line of women and men who have made radical choices about what manner of people they will be, what manner of love they will make and hand on. It's good company, a good family.

What we call the beginning is often the end,

said a poet (who himself left behind the faith of his childhood, which was Unitarianism, and the land of his family, which was America, to become an Anglican in England)

And to make an end, said T.S. Eliot,

is to make a beginning.

Home is where one starts from ...

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*