

Tomorrow's Ancestors
Why What We Do Now, Matters Most
By
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It is my privilege to be with you today, especially during these trying times. So I want to begin first by thanking all of you for being here, and express my wish that you and your loved ones continue to stay healthy. I also want to thank UUMUAC for inviting me to participate and for the courageous work this organization is doing to unite the human family. As a lifelong activist, I've often said, "Nothing makes enemies quicker than promoting peace." I know as individuals and as an organization you have sometimes been maligned, your intentions misrepresented, and your organization ostracized. Amidst all of this, you remain undaunted in your worthy and admirable cause.

I've entitled my address, "Tomorrow's Ancestors: Why What We Do Now, Matters Most." We are, of course, tomorrow's ancestors and should remain thoughtful about our obligations to the people of the future. But this phrase also reminds me of something I heard the heretical Catholic Priest, Matthew Fox say in one of his classes some years ago. "The ancestors are not speaking to us from the past. They are ahead of us, reminding us of the way forward." I've long remembered this image of the ancestors calling us forward. So this address isn't about ancestor worship, or clinging to old ways or social evils that are best left dead and buried. As one of Liberty's greatest ancestors, Thomas Paine reminds us, "Every age and generation must be free to act for itself, in all cases, as the ages and generation which preceded it. The vanity and presumption of governing beyond the grave, is the most ridiculous and insolent of all tyrannies."¹ Understanding this, that we are not bound to forever obey the echoes of dead ancestors, epitomizes what it means to be Liberal, to be progressive, to let go of the habits and false ideas that prevent us from advancing.

"If one dwells on the past then one robs the present," and old Taoist saying reminds us, "but if one ignores the past one may rob the future. The seeds of our destiny are nurtured by the roots of the past." This is why Judaism's Kabbalistic Tree of Life grows upside down, with its roots reaching toward *Ein Sof*, the Infinite, because this is the course of our own lives, moving forward in time toward the roots of our past, which hold us steady amidst the uncertainty encountered as we venture forward into new and unknown territories. We're all on the long wilderness journey through a vast spiritual desert, guided by nebulous forces—a cloud of unknowing by day, and an everchanging fire by night—toward a new promised land, toward the promise of creating a better world for ourselves and others. But to get there, the sages of

¹ Paine, Thomas, *The Rights of Man* (1791)

yesteryear remind us that we must remember where we came from, which reminds us who we are and why we're on this journey to begin with.

Moving forward, truly forward, means remembering where we've been and what we've been through. If not, if we are not tethered to the highest aspirations that have accompanied and been pursued by humankind since our ancient beginnings, then we become like an unanchored ship tossed about on stormy seas, or a sojourner wandering aimlessly through a clouded night with no stars to guide our way. Without an anchor to hold us steady, or the primordial constellations to guide us on, our journey becomes aimless and our lives pointless. If we ignore tomorrow's ancestors calling us forward to achieve what they could not, then we are doomed only to repeat their worst errors.

Consider the Hebrew parable of Noah and his Utopian dream. Noah projects his animosity toward human society upon his punitive idea of God. His anger and fear of others is so extreme it leads to the kind of apocalypticism today's researchers consider a characteristic of the fundamentalist mindset, which is also extremist, authoritarian, and punitive. Noah doesn't believe there is anything good in the world, or in humankind, but that everything and everyone ought to be wiped out so he can start over and establish his perfect Utopian dream, a world with none of life's prior disappointments.

In his need to see himself as the hero of his story, as is true for all of us, he warns everyone of the calamity he predicts is coming. Today's psychologist would call this *catastrophizing*, blowing our concerns and fears so out proportion that we think the world is going to end if others don't see things our way. Noah believes those who disagree with him are so evil they deserve to be wiped out, or what today we would call, *cancelled*. It's not his fault they disagree with him, after all. He warned them. He can't help it if they are unbelievers. They're making the choice to disbelieve. He told them to get on board, or else. It's the same kind of belief that would justify the eternal punishment of others who simply don't hold the right ideas in their heads. Fortunately, the Universalist side of our tradition rejects the belief in everlasting Hell, and the Unitarian side holds freedom of thought sacrosanct, so Unitarian Universalists don't ever have to worry about being punished, ostracized, or cancelled just because we don't agree with certain ideas. Right?

We all know what happens next, Noah and his small band of followers shut themselves off from the world by entering the ark he's constructed for this purpose. They remain cloistered within the exclusive box he's created, shut off from the empirical world of facts and reason, until he sees a rainbow, which his magical mind interprets as a sign. "I have set my rainbow in the clouds," he imagines his vengeful God saying, "and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth... Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life."² The world has been rebooted. Noah gets the do-over he wants, and the new world is full of promise. Things are going to be different from now on. They're going to be perfect.

² Genesis 9:13-15

But do you know what happens next? Not later in *Genesis*, not in its next chapter, but in the very next verse following the rainbow promise we find Noah drunk, passed out, and bear-naked inside his tent. So much for Utopia. When his son Ham discovers his father's embarrassing condition, he immediately goes out to inform his two brothers about the patriarch's drinking problem. "But Shem and Japheth took a garment and laid it across their shoulders then they walked in backward and covered their father's naked body. Their faces were turned the other way so that they would not see their father naked."³ That's what I call the backward coverup, when a community refuses to acknowledge or address its problems by turning away to avoid looking at them.

Instead, they demonize and punish anyone courageous or stupid enough to point them out. "When Noah awoke from his wine and found out what his youngest son had done to him, he said, 'Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers.'" Canaan is Ham's son, Noah's own grandchild. That's how angry Noah was. Anyone who dares follow in Ham's footsteps will also bear his wrath in the new and perfect authoritarian Utopia. Notice how Noah portrays himself as the victim of Ham's truth telling. The truth hurts and Ham's words are, therefore, to be considered harmful. And as someone who is harmful, he is therefore dangerous. We must protect ourselves from danger. We must punish him. We must cast him out. It reminds me of something conveyed to me in a letter signed by over 500 of my UU colleagues shortly after the release of my book, *The Gadfly Papers*: "those who cannot or will not commit to developing the musculature of resiliency, humility, and lifelong learning required may indeed find that UUism is no longer the appropriate home for their ministries."

That's the problem with Utopianism, it's premised on the belief that everything before this historic moment of purification is part of the problem and must be abandoned and destroyed before perfection can be achieved. *Utopia*, a word that means "no place," has no roots to hold it steady and no ancestors to call it forward. It has forgotten the hard-earned lessons of the past and is, therefore, doomed to repeat its same mistakes. Whether its fictional rainbows that falsely promise, "never again," or real life tragedies, like World War I, the "war to end all wars," or World War II, after which we said, as Noah heard, "never again," the wisdom of our ancestors cannot guide us forward if we do the backward coverup, refusing to see our own faults, while demonizing and punishing anyone who dare's point them out to us.

Today, our ancient aspirations for freedom and democracy, the best values Western culture has strived for, are being trashed in the name of a rootless Utopian vision that seeks to force a twisted version of equality on us at the expense of Liberty. This is happening to liberalism and its institutions throughout the Western world, including within Unitarian Universalism. I call it a "twisted version of equality," because, as the great social psychologist and philosopher, Erich Fromm pointed out, it confuses equality with "sameness" rather than "oneness." That's why I know UUMUAC is on the right track, because it is NOT trying to make

³ *Genesis* 9:23

everyone the same by forcing us to speak and think alike, but by uniting us as one human family that can celebrate and support and be inspired by our unique differences. *Sameness* means oppression and segregation. *Oneness* means genuine diversity and inclusion.

So the taproots that have held us steady and called us forward for centuries are now at risk of being severed, and with them—and I don't think I'm being hyperbolic—may come the end of Western civilization as we have known it. In his book, *The Demon in Democracy*, about totalitarian temptations in free societies, Polish philosopher and Statesman, Ryszard Legutko talks about the similarities between today's liberal democracies and the communist society he grew up in:

Both are utopian and look forward to 'an end of history' where their systems will prevail as a permanent status quo. Both are historicist and insist that history is inevitably moving in their directions⁴ ... It goes without saying that everything—in both communism and liberal democracy—should be modern: thinking, family, school, literature, and philosophy. If a thing, a quality, an attitude, an idea is not modern, it should be modernized or will end up in the dustbin of history.⁵

Last June, like Ham, I attempted to expose the flaws in our liberal religion's impossible Utopian vision by reminding us of our roots and of tomorrow's ancestors calling us forward. I thought I was pointing to the canary in the coalmine, but it turns out the unfortunate creature was already stiffened with *rigor mortis*. I was far too late. Shem and Japheth, my own UU brothers and sisters, immediately came behind me to perform the backward coverup, and the next day Noah publicly cursed and banished me as a warning to anyone who might follow my example. And, as Legutko predicts, they did so by shockingly and unabashedly tossing our most ancient values—freedom and reason—into the dustbin of history.

Within hours of giving away my book, before most, if anyone, had time to read it, two letters emerged that were signed by hundreds of my colleagues. Like Ham being cursed the morning after, the first letter libelously claimed “clergy of color” were “faced with the dissemination of racism, ableism, and the affirmation of other forms of oppression, including classism and homo- and transphobia, in a book called *The Gadfly Papers* by Todd Eklof.” The second, so called, white minster's letter, literally called logic and reason “one of the foundational stones of White Supremacy Culture,” and went on to call “freedom of speech arguments” a perpetuation of “oppression.”

A month later I received a letter of censure from the UU Ministers association, which repeated the claim, “that logic has often been employed in white supremacy culture to stifle

⁴ Legutko, Ryszard. *The Demon in Democracy: Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies* (p. viii). Encounter Books. Kindle Edition.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. viii)

dissent.” (I’m glad to know the UUMA is concerned about stifling dissent.) I remain astonished by these claims about two of our most cherished Unitarian Universalist values. Reason, to my knowledge, is still listed in the UUA bylaws as one of our fundamental sources of spiritual growth that helps “warn us against idolatries of mind and spirit.” Instead of a flood, it would appear the new Utopian Universalists, or Unitarian Utopians, if you prefer, are holding a rummage sale, and everything must go, including our past commitment to reason and freedom. Reason and freedom are part of the problem, they say, equating them to racism and oppression. These cherished principles, the taproots that nourish our faith, are now considered to be among the evils that have gotten us into whatever apocalyptic mess these neo-Utopians dread.

Alas, Unitarian Universalism is not alone in this troubling development. It is occurring within liberal societies and organizations throughout the Western world, including in England and Australia, and began in the U.S. on college campuses at least as far back at the 1980s. Philosopher Lou Marinoff has called the period we’re now in, the “Endarkenment,”⁶ because it is the antithesis of the Enlightenment philosophy of reason, freedom, and the humanistic ethic, which American Unitarianism is rooted in.

One of our ancestors, whom I previously alluded to, was the great liberator, Thomas Paine. As Bertrand Russell once pointed out in an essay on Paine, his contemporaries were “shocked” by his “Unitarianism,”⁷ which he expressed most boldly in his 1791 publication, *The Rights of Man*. Still, you would think after all Paine had done for the cause of Liberty in the United States and the world at large, his weight would have given him some grace. Liberty for all was in his very bones and sinews: a principle he remained dedicated to and fought for his entire life, even when it wasn’t popular, not even among his liberal friends.

Upon first arriving in the U.S., Paine became a publisher. Russell says, “His first publication, in March 1775, was a forcible article against slavery and the slave trade, to which, whatever some of his American friends might say, he remained always an uncompromising enemy.”⁸ 1775 was also a time when there was increasing talk among the colonies of separating from England. Most were against the idea of becoming disconnected from, let alone at war with what was the homeland of many. But a year later, in 1776, Paine wrote *Common Sense*, arguing, what else, American independence only made common sense. It immediately became the most published book of the time and remains an all-time bestseller. It came at the start of the American Revolution, just in time for almost singlehandedly turning sentiments in favor of Independence. A few months later, during the harshest of winters, two days before Christmas, when it appeared the Revolution would end in defeat, Paine published *The Crisis*, which began:

⁶ Marinoff, Lou, *Philosophical Practice*, Academic Press, San Diego, CA, 2002, p. 7.

⁷ Russell, Bertrand, *The Fate of Thomas Paine*, (1934)

⁸ Ibid.

THESE are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph.

General George Washington was so moved by this that he ordered it be read to all his regiments, even as they were frozen and starving. It was enough to inspire them to forge ahead and win the Revolution. As John Adams once said, "Without the pen of Paine, the sword of Washington would have been wielded in vain."⁹

After the successful American Revolution, the people of France decided they also wanted to be free of Monarchy. But Thomas Paine was the only prominent American revolutionary willing to support it, despite the thousands of troops and millions of dollars that King Louis the XVI committed to the American revolution. Washington and Jefferson both sided with England, which fought against France. So Paine went to France on his own, to help win its independence and establish an egalitarian society.

After succeeding, however, he insisted the victors treat those they'd defeated humanely, including, Russell says, "opposing the King's execution down to the last moment."¹⁰ For this act of charity, Paine was imprisoned by the enraged new rulers, the Jacobins, a radical and ruthless wing of victorious democrats. Washington and Jefferson left him to linger in prison because his deist theology had made him a political pariah in the U.S. He was scheduled for execution but became too sick to kill. Eventually James Monroe, U.S. Ambassador to France, secured his release, and spent 18 months nursing him back to health. Hated anywhere he went, his life under constant threat, Paine eventually made his way back to the U.S. where he died a recluse in his cottage in New Rochelle, New York in 1809. Only six people attended his funeral.

Years later, his fair-weather friend, William Cobbett, troubled by the desecration of his grave, secretly took Paine's remains back home to England, but no cemetery would allow them to be buried. To this day we don't know what happened to his bones. Although, in 1884 a Unitarian minister claimed he was in position of his skull and right hand. This was never verified. Yet during the years that followed, his vital importance to the cause of liberty in the U.S. and in France had been buried and forgotten in a haze of crushing animosity. It wasn't until the 1930s that historians rediscovered his significance and he again became celebrated as a key Revolutionary hero whose commitment to freedom and reason embodies the best of the American spirit.

The point here is that even someone as pivotal to the success of Liberty as was Thomas Paine, can pay a heavy personal price when challenging his own compatriots to live up to their

⁹ <http://libertyonline.hypermall.com/Paine/Default.htm>

¹⁰ Russell, *ibid.*

highest values. Paine was a victim of the 18th century version of the cancel-culture. A hero who stood for liberty became demonized, ostracized, and all but forgotten because he dared to stay true to his values and challenged others to do the same.

So those of us who pay the price today for sticking to our values, even if it means challenging our own friends, are in good company, if that can be of any solace. But solace is not what revolutionaries crave for. Nor is power, which is the solace of rebels who act very much like revolutionaries, but really only wish to gain power for themselves. "A rebel" Erich Fromm says, "is one who wants to overthrow authority because of his resentment and, as a result, to make himself the authority in place of the one he has overthrown. And very often, at the very moment when he reaches his aim, he makes friends with the very authority he was fighting so bitterly before."¹¹ But a true revolutionary, like Thomas Paine, wants to turn the world around for the good of everyone, in a way that remains devoutly committed to the welfare and freedom of humanity, friend and foe. Napoleon, Vladimir Lenin, Chairman Mao, Fidel Castro, and Hugo Chavez were merely rebels who ended upon replacing one authoritarian regime with another. Thomas Paine, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Nelson Mandela are among humanity's true revolutionaries.

I consider myself a true revolutionary. At least I strive to be. In my book, I narrow our Unitarian Universalist values down to reason, freedom of conscience, and the humanistic ethic, which were also the values of Thomas Paine, whose "shocking" theology was Unitarian. As my fellow heretic, Rev. Richard Trudeau reminded me some months ago, the renowned Unitarian minister, historian, and theologian, Earl Morse Wilbur once similarly narrowed the essence of Unitarianism down to "freedom, reason, and tolerance." I agree, though I prefer to call the later the humanistic ethic because tolerance is under this larger umbrella. We tolerate one another, that is, because, we recognize we are one, one species, one human family of brother and sisters and our beautiful nonbinary cousins of every color and creed.

It is this third part of our holy Unitarian trinity I want to speak a bit about before closing, because I've been asked to talk about the way forward for our liberal religion, and I believe it is the humanistic ethic that is the only way forward. This group already has a good start, because this is also the UUMUAC ethic, the ethic of including all humans, multiracial unity, with the goal of establishing equality through Unity, not sameness, which only results in segregation. It is the humanistic ethic that is also the shared root of both Unitarianism and Universalism. Remember, it was the Unitarian's who gave us the first religious toleration law in human history, in 1568. And it was the Universalists who insisted God's love is for everyone, that everyone is embraced by it, and no one should be utterly condemned. And, as I point out in *The Gadfly Papers*, it was this principle that finally catalyzed the merger of these two faiths after flirting with the idea for more than a century. Beginning in the 1870s, according to Church History professor Ernest Cassara, "A new type of Universalism is

¹¹ Fromm, Erich, *Escape from Freedom*, Avon Books, The Heart Corporation, New York, NY, 1941, 1966, p. 140.

proclaimed which shifts the emphasis on universal from salvation to religion and describes Universalism as boundless in scope, as broad as humanity, and as infinite as the universe.”¹²

If it is going to be possible for Unitarian Universalism to survive, it is going to have hear the call of our ancestors calling us forward toward our common humanity, the humanistic ethic that recognizes we are all more alike than we are different, and that we are not so different from one another that we can't empathize and understand each other's suffering, no matter what our gender, color, sexual orientation, or income. This isn't to say that some groups of people don't suffer greater injustices in some areas than others, but that it is only by recognizing our common humanity that such injustices can end. It also means acknowledging that everyone suffers, no matter what our prejudices about them might be.

And it means we can't help but influence and inspire each other. It is no more possible for a person of one color *not* to be moved and inspired by the music or art or culture of a person of another color than it is to prevent them from communicating ideas, or communicating colds, or sharing genetic information to produce beautiful offspring. For all of us born with millions of mirror neurons that enable us to build bridges between ourselves and others. This is why, even before they're able to crawl, babies begin recognizing the emotions they see in other faces. Have you ever smiled at an infant and had them smile back at you? Humans are natural born empathizers. To expect us to behave differently, or to believe we can't understand each other because of arbitrary genetic or cultural differences, is as inhuman as it is impossible.

The humanistic ethic is humanism with a small “h,” not the capital “H” Humanism founded in the 20th century. Some people are Humanists with a capital H, but all people are capable of being humanitarians. “Materially,” according to Erich Fromm, the humanistic ethic “is based on the principle that what is ‘good’ is what is good for [humanity] and ‘evil’ what is detrimental to [humanity],”¹³ which he insists includes the proper care of the Environment and our fellow creatures. Hence, he says, “*the sole criterion of ethical value [is human] welfare*”¹⁴ and “the unfolding and growth of every person is the aim of all social and political activities.”¹⁵ This, I believe, is what our religion is all about. It's what tomorrow's ancestors are calling us toward: a world where, as Dr. King dreamt, people of all colors, and might I add, all kinds of other qualities too, can join hands together as part of one human family, each seeking the wellbeing and each nurturing the full potential of one another.

Human welfare means we each must have what we need to survive each day—healthy food, safe shelter, adequate clothing, medical care, education, and employment, but it also means the freedom and respect of our persons, the ability to find meaning and to fulfill our chosen

¹² Robinson, David, *The Unitarians and the Universalists*, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1985, p. 171.

¹³ Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, Henry Holt & Company, Inc., New York, NY, 1947, p. 13.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 229.

potential by fully expressing ourselves. The humanistic ethic understands human beings need both equality and freedom, which can only be achieved through true unity *of* and respect *for* the entire human family.

That's the way forward, keeping the values that hold us steady. Like the Stoics of old, who recognized meaning and contentment have little to do with the amount of pain or pleasure in our lives, but comes from keeping our greatest values no matter the costs. Listening to the voices of tomorrow's ancestors reminds us who we are and where we've been, so we too can be worthy of being the ancestors of tomorrow's children. That why what we do now matters most, even if it means, like Thomas Paine, or Dr. King, or Gandhi, or Nelson Mandela, and other like them, that we must suffer the consequences of fulfilling our most cherished values, freedom, reason, and the humanistic ethic. May they anchor us in the storms we face and guide us through the darkest of nights. Amen.