

Joy in the Great Family

Let this be a day of love. In the season of Dia de los Muertes, as we honor and grieve and celebrate those who came before us, let us love. Love those we miss. Love family members. Love ancestors we never knew. Love them all! Let us love one another, here, everywhere. Let us love ourselves.

Humans say goodbye in different ways to those we love. Facing our own mortality, we reach for meaning and understanding. Ultimate answers elude us even as new discoveries bring more knowledge and ancient stories to light. Stories of fellow travelers fascinate us – their rituals, the lives they led, their deaths. Boy kings in pyramids. A mysterious Chilean girl who lived thousands of years ago. In Greece, the remains of a young soldier laid out in body armor.

In college, a Chinese Hawaiian friend, brought up Roman Catholic, described annual family picnics at the graves of relatives. How they'd bring them food and burn fake money and paper clothes to ensure a happy and prosperous afterlife – a custom also in Vietnamese and Buddhist traditions and parts of Europe. Those picnics seemed exotic. Did I think them primitive, too? Probably. I see in my schoolgirl reaction my whiteness, an idea that my way was somehow more civilized, a supremacy even.

Once upon a time, people only knew their own ways with death: what their people, their village, their tribe, did or believed. And while some humans along the way have delighted in learning each others' customs, we don't always lead with curiosity and compassion. Imagine the European colonizers' reactions to the customs of the indigenous people of North America.

The New England Wampanoags buried their dead with tools for cultivating their land in the afterlife. The body of an Abenaki-Pennacook Native would be buried in a roll of birch bark, armed with a weapon – a sharp stone, a bow and some arrows; later, a gun. On the Great Plains, the Sioux would place a person's body in a tree or on a high platform and bury it in a year. Different tribes and nations have different beliefs and traditions. What did Spaniards invading what is now Mexico make of the Aztec custom of making noise once a year to wake the dead so they could help loved ones, feeding them and praying for their spiritual journey?

Ancient traditions may feel fundamentally “other” to us. Yet you'd think that, if anything could bring us together, it's dying. After all, we'll all do it, as has everyone before us.

Speaking of *them*, who here has checked out your DNA? DNA reports surprise people. Someone proud of their English pedigree discovers an Irkutsk relative six generations back. A white person has a 100% sub-Saharan African ancestor. A church-going evangelical finds pure Azhkenazi Jewish DNA.

According to the *New York Times*, in South Carolina, 13% of those who said they were white had African ancestry. Those who said they were black also had 24% European DNA and 0.8% Native American. “The large proportion of European DNA found in African-Americans,” said the *Times*, “traced to before the Civil War and the rape of enslaved African women.”¹

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/28/science/dna-tests-ancestry.html>

In the Southwest, Latinos have been found to have high levels of Native American DNA, while in the Southeast, they have high levels of African DNA.²

Now I'm no scientist, and I struggle to understand how genetic information can pinpoint our ancestry within 60 years. My surprise Sardinian ancestor, for instance, lived between 1760 and 1820. Some say these distinctions don't matter, but looking at the math can change how we think of our own stories. We think we know who we are, but our family trees six or seven generations ago are huge. Going back that far, who amongst the 500 people in my family tree was that Sardinian who connected with that Swede? Most of us are an unexpectedly rich mix, sometimes with mind-blowing connections once unknowable, maybe a secret, and now in plain sight.

We know the feeling of belonging, being with our kind. We might enjoy that around the Thanksgiving table. Or at a wedding. Or with family at the bed of a loved one. We may feel that kind of connection at a school reunion. Or at a protest with kindred spirits. We may have been lucky enough to feel that sense of belonging upon finding a spiritual home. We may also feel it when with people whose skin color looks like ours.

But how different *that* sense belonging, to a particular slice of humanity, is from knowing that we're part of an infinitely greater whole, as DNA suggests for so many people. There's nothing in the world like really being in the mix – carried along on a New York sidewalk or standing in the TSA line at a big airport, brought together, physically close together, from different cultures and lives.

In his new book, *The Nickel Boys*, Colson Whitehead calls this feeling “kinship.” His main character loves the New York Marathon, not so much for the fastest runners in the world as for the crowds:

“He came out...for the crowds on the sidewalks and street corners, those New York mobs so oddball and lovely that they summoned him from his uptown apartment by a force he could only call kinship. Every November the race pitted his skepticism about human beings against the fact that they were all in this dirty city together, unlikely cousins....

...Here everybody was around and by some miracle you didn't want to wring their neck but give them a hug. The whole city, poor people and Park Avenue types, black and white, Puerto Ricans, on the curb, holding signs and national flags and cheering the people who had been their opponents the day before in front of them at the A&P checkout, grabbing the last seat on the subway, walking...too slow on the sidewalk. Competitors for apartments for schools for the very air – all those hard-won and cherished animosities fell away for a few hours....”³

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/25/science/23andme-genetic-ethnicity-study.html>

³ Colson Whitehead, *The Nickel Boys*, NY: Doubleday, 2019,180-1.

How stirring to feel that oneness when in a crowd! We can also a oneness in the natural world, part of something bigger and grateful for our humble place in the web of life. Oneness with people, not just the ones we choose to be with, but the whole rich mix – when, as Whitehead puts it, we're not feeling angry or skeptical of each other – feels good. Our mind relaxes, our mental boundaries soften. We let go, however fleetingly, of our tendency to sort and to look for security in the comfort of our own kind. Think of a time you have felt this. When something primal has taken over and elated you with your place in the great family of humans.

Yesterday a bumper sticker caught my eye: "Practice Unlimited-Ness," it read. Unlimited-Ness. Putting aside our differences. Celebrating the big, unlimited picture. Letting go of our last names, our racial characteristics, our limited family trees, our degrees, our resumes, our addresses. What if we took a break from our need to be right and splashed into the ocean of Unlimited-Ness? That's belonging of a different order. The interdependent web of all existence invites us into a belonging like no other.

We close with another story of family. Today is a milestone. 466 years ago today, our Unitarian ancestor, Michael Servetus was burned at the stake in Geneva for challenging the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. His books, considered heresy, fed the fire. The roots of Unitarian Universalism go way back. Like our biological family trees, they are old and have grown in many directions from their beginnings in the land of the Israelites and Jesus of Nazareth.

So, my sisters and brothers....How big is *your* family? My biological family, you ask? That would be a long story. Our thousands of ancestors have been walking this earth since the beginning. We might also ask, how big is OUR family, our UU family? How many threads of beliefs and values describe it? How many colors? How many unique and sacred identities? And how has this faith family of ours informed the way people live? How has it inspired social change or the progress of human rights?

May the passions and struggles and good works of those who came before us inspire us to do our part today. And may we pause to take in the grace of unlimitedness. There is joy in the great family of humanity.