

Legacies of Trust and Love

Sunday, September 15, 2019

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Roger D. Jones

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #21 For the Beauty of the Earth, #86
Blessed Spirit of My Life, #121 We'll Build a Land.

Reflections by Jed Shapiro and Linda Klein (printed
after the sermon).

Words to Launch the Year in Religious Education
and to Bless the RE Community (contact Roger)



14 Martin Place, Franklin, Indiana (built 1902)

Sermon

We build on foundations we did not lay.

We warm ourselves at fires we did not light.

We sit in the shade of trees we did not plant.

We drink from wells we did not dig.

We profit from persons
we did not know.

We are ever bound
in community.

Written by the late Peter Raible, a UU
minister, these words are his version of a passage
from the Book of Deuteronomy, in the Hebrew

Scriptures. These words evoke the legacies that
others have left to us. Even if we have worked long
and hard to become the persons we are today, *who
we are* would not be possible without those who
came before us. This is the case whether we like it
or not. Which brings me to my trip home to the
middle of Indiana last month.

During every visit I make to see relatives
and friends in central Indiana, I'm constantly
thinking about my identity as a person who moved
away long ago.

"Am I really from here?" I ask. I *know* that
I am, but I'm also happy to have moved away.

So, every time I visit, I'm asking myself:
what aspects of this area and these people are part
of me? What legacies have I received? Which
legacies would I rather not recognize? What do I
owe to this place? And, thinking about the future,
what legacies do I wish to create and leave for those
who come after me?

When I visit Indiana, I stay with my brother
and sister in law in their house in Indianapolis. But
I make trips to other cities, including Franklin, my
small hometown. Driving there in a rental car last
month on a warm Wednesday afternoon, I had a
meal with one older cousin on her lunch hour.
Later I visited her sister in her nursing home.

I also stopped in at the local cemetery. It's
grown a lot since my childhood, now extending
several more city blocks on gently sloping land.
Yet I could still find the section where my relatives
are buried. I walked around reading the dates on
the tall granite stones. There were a few shorter
stones, like the one for Tillie Jean Bryant, my
mom's sister, who lived three days in 1915. I re-
learned my great grandparents' years of birth and
death and calculated how old they were when they
had my grandmother and her siblings. Gravestones
of aunts, uncles and cousins brought memories out
of my childhood—fond memories and bad ones.
Both of my parents' ashes are buried there too.
Instead of tall stones, they have low markers, flat on
the ground. These markers were subsidized by the
Veterans Administration, as my father had served in
World War II. The concrete base is a rectangle, and
on top of it is a raised metal plaque with bronze
lettering of each parent's name, plus dates of birth
and death.

Some crabgrass was creeping over the gray stone and on to the bronze plaque of my father's marker. "Someone should trim that grass back," I thought; "I'm sure someone will. Someone else." Yet grass clippings were scattered around, showing me the groundskeepers had already been through and done all they were going to do. I thought, "Who visits my parents' graves more often than I do, which is only once a year? Who else would tear the grass out? It's me or nobody." I knelt and pulled away the intrusive crabgrass. Then I wandered around a bit more, reflecting on my past, and what it means now.

Before leaving town for my brother's house in Indianapolis, I drove by the two houses in which I had grown up. Didn't stop, just looked at them. Five minutes later I passed the house where my mother and her four siblings had grown up. I decided to stop and look. It's a big Victorian house, built in 1902. I've never been inside the house, but Mom had talked about it so much. When I was growing up in the 1960s, the house was no longer in the family and had been divided into apartments. I remember it had been all white, and the big front porch was in disrepair. That was a long time ago. Now, all three stories of the house are painted in blue and gray, with yellow and purple trim on the windows and massive porch.

I got out of my rental car and walked up the steps and onto the porch. On a white sign on the porch wall, black letters read: *Murray-Bryant House, built 1902, restored 2013*. Bryant is my mother's family name. Never heard of Murray at all and hadn't known the house had been owned by anybody before my grandparents. Next to the sign, a metal plaque from the historical society noted the architectural significance of this Victorian.

I took a few pictures. Then a large black pickup truck pulled up at the curb. "Can I help you?" said a voice from the truck. "I live here." A young white woman emerged from the truck and walked up the steps. I walked down and said my name. "My mother grew up in this house," I said. She brightened up and we spoke for several minutes. She and her husband had bought the house a decade ago and had been fixing it up, she said.

"If you have any pictures of the house or your family in the house, I'd love to see them

sometime," she said. She referred me to her online blog where she had posted pictures of the renovations inside and out. She also had found old black and white photographs, including a few which a cousin of mine had posted of his father and mother and an uncle of ours. I've been reviewing her site.

I've learned things about my family history, thanks to her curiosity about her house. Of course, while talking with her, I thought of the secrets I know which could make the history more dramatic and somewhat sordid—who did what to whom, what bad choices people made, which bad habits killed which relatives. Maybe I won't tell her of this part of the legacy, or maybe I'll wait for a later visit.

She apologized that the inside of the house wasn't in shape to invite me in right then. But she said if I let her know in advance of my next visit, she'd show me around and we could have lunch.

I asked, "Before I leave could I take a picture of you on the steps of the porch?" She was happy to do so.

In the picture of the house, you can see the colors they chose carefully, and the landscaping, and the sign in the yard that says *Love More*, which is part of a local campaign to promote civility. I asked what they do for a living. She is the director of high school bands at a school 10 miles away, and her husband works in software. No kids yet, she said. With six bedrooms I guess they've got room for them.

I was touched and pleased to know how much she cares for the house but also to see how she cares for the history of the people who had lived in the house. Also, I appreciate that in her passion to restore the place, she's adding beauty to the town. That's part of her own legacy.

Susan V. Bosak is a social researcher and a co-founder of the Legacy Project. This is her definition of legacy. "Legacy is an interconnection across time; [we have] a need for those who have come before us and a responsibility to those who come after us."

Yet legacy is a complicated matter. Legacies can be unwelcome. Some legacies can be the cause of grief and regret. For example, in this

country, some of us live and prosper from legacies that others had no choice in creating. I'm thinking of the native or indigenous peoples whose lands were colonized and waterways taken over and families decimated. And of the generations of enslaved Africans and African Americans forced to labor for the profit of European Americans, and whose families were often split up and sold off to labor under different owners. We build on foundations we did not lay, says the Book of Deuteronomy. The U.S. Capitol in Washington, the domed house of the people, was built by people who were enslaved.¹ Franklin, Indiana—my hometown—was not segregated legally to my knowledge, but the culture of white privilege prevailed. My white grandfather was a business owner and a noted builder. In the 1930s he was even the mayor of our town. Yet a person of color with the same talents or ambitions as my grandfather would not have had the same opportunities or the same freedoms that he had enjoyed. That includes buying a big house for his growing family in a white neighborhood.

It is up to us to make sense of the legacies we have received. Furthermore, it is up to us to shape our own legacies, to consider what we wish to leave to the world after we leave the scene.

Earlier we heard the names of Barbara Amberson and Paula Squire, who left money to the congregation in their estates. They passed away last year. Paula had moved away to Oregon many years ago but retained her affection for UUSS and for the friends she knew here in Sacramento. Barbara lived here many years and was a church member for many decades, though she hadn't been able to attend services in her last few years. Their legacy gifts have enabled us to pay down part of our mortgage debt, saving some future interest expenses. The impact of their generosity will endure for a long time. Yet that's not their only legacy.

Paula, for example, worked as a physical therapist and brought up three children. She was a musician most of her life, starting piano at age five. She was committed to social justice, peace and a sustainable environment. As a volunteer, she managed the UNICEF shop in town. She loved organizing parties and holiday celebrations, here at

UUSS and at her home. She's remembered as direct and strong willed but also warm, loving and joyful.

Like Paula, Barbara Amberson was direct and strong willed. She was a science teacher with a curious mind, reading voraciously. As a gardener and lover of the outdoors, she was passionate about exploring and promoting the native plants of California—and protecting them. Barbara had strong opinions. Religiously she was a humanist and a staunch agnostic. Though Barbara was devoted to UUSS, I'm not even sure she'd *use* the word "religious." Yet in making requests for her memorial service, Barbara asked me to do a reading of the 23rd Psalm, the one that goes "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures." She must have gained comfort from the images from that ancient poetic prayer. I don't think it was a deathbed conversion. Indeed, on one of my last visits with her, Barbara told a joke. "Have you heard about the agnostic's prayer? Oh God...if there is a God...save our souls...if we have souls." Then her eyes twinkled.

Longtime UUSS members recall Barbara's insistent attention to parliamentary procedure at our congregational meetings, making more than a few church presidents nervous. She had a gruff manner, but inside she had a tender heart. As a child she had years of deep loneliness and fear—a legacy of her parents. As an adult, she cared about those who were left out or hard up; she gave people money, took people in. That's *her* legacy. Among her legacies to us at UUSS is the tradition of a potluck dinner here on Thanksgiving Day, which in recent years has brought 50 to 100 people together for food and fellowship. Given her loneliness, this congregation was deeply important for Barbara. "It's my family," she told me.

The legacies of both women extend beyond their generous bequests. That is, the ways they participated here at UUSS have made subtle impacts on how we come together and what we do to deepen our lives and be a force for healing in the world. They shaped how we live together in community. *So do you*—by the ways that you participate here. You shape how we live together in community. Moreover, by leaving their gifts us, Barbara and Paula have asserted their faith in this

congregation and in our mission. Every time any one of us makes a planned gift or a bequest, we are putting our trust in people we will never know. Such gifts are legacies of trust and love as well as legacies of money.

A legacy is an interconnection across time. We have a need for those who have come before us and a responsibility to those who come after us. No matter how much we make or how much wealth we have, all of us have opportunities to leave a legacy. We have such opportunities every day.

We don't have control over *where* we've come from and *whom* we've come from, or over the origin of the legacies we've received. If we understand our legacies, we can grieve those that come with pain. We can give thanks for those legacies that have been sustaining, helpful and inspiring to us. But we can also shape our own legacies. The ways we live, share, show up, speak and give will give shape to the legacy of our days.

We don't control or choose how it will be received or remembered, but we can choose the intentions with which we live. Johann von Goethe is quoted as saying: "Choose well; your choice is brief, and yet endless."²

What impact would you like to make on the future, even if it won't make you famous? This is a spiritual question we might reflect on and respond to in the days ahead.

Knowing the needs of others and the needs of our hurting world, to which of your values, concerns and commitments would you wish to give shape and strength in service to our connections across the generations?

What are the spiritual and moral contents of the legacy you would wish to build, even if you were not remembered for it?

Our choices may not shift the history of civilization, but that's a heavy standard for any person. It's unrealistic. We can't be sure how our lives will touch our descendants and communities in future generations, but we can be intentional about how we give shape and form to our values now.

We can practice living and growing in ways that are peaceful, just, generous, courageous and kind. In choosing how we will act, speak and live in

the days we are given to live, we fashion our own legacy.

Our choices matter. As we move through our days, let us remember those who have come before us, be mindful of those now sharing life and this world with us, and make choices in faith and solidarity with all those who will come after us.

So may we live—with intention, gratitude and faith. Amen.

Two UUSS Members' Reflections

Reflection by Jed Shapiro

One afternoon long ago, I picked up my kids from after school care. My 11 year old son was distraught.

Apparently, a kid had grabbed Micah's new book, stuck it in his backpack, then denied taking it – even though my son watched him do it.

Micah appealed to the adult in charge, who took the kid into another room and returned to report, "He says he didn't take the book." Case closed.

On our way home, tears of frustration fell as the story came out. This was much bigger than a stolen book. Micah's belief that he was entitled to due process was shaken and his expectation of fair treatment denied.

Now he demanded that I explain how a grownup could fail so miserably to grasp the urgency of his crisis, use their head, and compel a search.

Micah's angst followed us into the house as I wished for an explanation to pop into my head; one that would restore his faith and reaffirm his respect for authority. He sat on the couch next to his seven year old sister, both waiting expectantly for me to speak.

Then it just came to me. "Buddy, you've reached an age where you'll encounter adults that are – uhh – not as smart as you are... you too, Caitlin. This caregiver just couldn't see what you could."

In your life not everyone will be able to keep up with you. But your big brain comes with big responsibility: You have to accept each individual's limitations – and help them if you can."

It was quiet, as two bright kids tried to digest this new perspective of the world, and their place in it. Of course, I didn't realize any of this at the time, I just felt lucky to have stopped the waterworks and slain the dragon.

The idea that smarts come with responsibility has been a recurring theme. Recently Caitlin, now 31, said, "Dad, do you remember when you told us we were smarter than most people?"

"Well," I replied, "it wasn't exactly like that, but do you remember the rest?"
Dutifully she intoned, "With intelligence comes responsibility."

Anyone remember that old saying, "Leave your mark on the world?" Of course, it predates the environmental movement. At the time it meant: write your Magna Charta, compose your New World Symphony, achieve leadership in industry, politics, medicine, advocacy...

Once I thought that anything less was failure. Today, I recognize that very few people distinguish their lives in this way. And that's ok.

Because we are all capable of building legacies – and enhancing the meaning of our own lives – by simply striving to understand what the person next to us needs in this small moment... and trying to provide it.

We all have the tools:

Encouragement. Empathy. Compassion.
Optimism. Honesty. Kindness.
Regret. Apology. Remorse.
Shared tears. Hugs. Appreciation.

We need only the will to act – and the mindfulness to dream, think, and then reach beyond ourselves – to simply extend our hand and engage.

Reflection by Linda Klein

Good Morning!! Even though it's a beautiful morning, it is still easy to feel some despair aching within this beauty considering the nagging constant of our toxic political climate, the widespread socio-economic disparities we see around us, and the prominence of greed, anger, division, and hatred in our world today. In this sea of negativity, UUSS is my place of sanctuary and hope. This congregation empowers me. It reminds me that I can join with others to effect change, that I can live in a way that reflects compassion, kindness, and love for others.

These values are the legacy I hope to leave to those I hold close and dear. These are the shared values of our UU tradition, and I want those values to continue to influence the world after I have passed on. Well-supported, this congregation can extend its courageous work for justice, freedom, reason, and compassion for generations to come.

For that reason, I am leaving some of my assets to UUSS in my will and trust. I encourage you to do the same. You can do this in your will, trust, insurance policy, or investment account beneficiary designations.

Of course, I want to help my four sons and their families financially after I'm gone, but I also want to help the church that has given me so much, that is a source of learning, growth, friendship, and inspiration. UUSS can give to others long after I am gone. It will sustain the values so urgently needed in this world. I truly believe that liberal religion can heal the world.

I encourage you to pass the grace and gifts of life that you generously received on to the institutions, like UUSS, that have sustained you, so they can make life better for those to come. Many of you have already joined me in doing this. You can find a list of the Legacy Circle participants at UUSS in the beautifully bound book of special donations to the congregation that has just been placed in the library. *Last* year our members Barbara Amberson and Paula Squire each left a bequest to UUSS in their wills. Their generosity has enabled us to pay down a part of our mortgage debt for this renovated building

Listing UUSS in our wills is our way to ensure that our future congregations will extend our values and sustain the coming generations. Please join those of us who have done this. Pick up a brochure explaining the process at the table in the Welcome Hall, and I'll be at the Welcome table if you want to ask any questions. Thank you for considering this life-changing decision.

¹ See <https://www.aoc.gov/art/commemorative-displays/slave-labor-commemorative-marker>

² See https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Talk:Johann_Wolfgang_von_Goethe, accessed September 14, 2019.