Chalice Lighting > Bell Lynne, Youth
Call to All Souls, Greeting of Zoom Audience Rev. Ron

We are….
I am…
If you value honest ritual…
Then come, let us make it.
If you find ease in trusted relationship…
If you unfurl in reflective space…
If you delight in beautiful sound…
If you strive for earnest justice...
And if you sparkle in abundant fun…
and who does not?
Then come, one and all,
To this care home and carnival of the soul,
This service of All Souls UU.

And this is our sacred hour, our holy place where beloved community cultivates meaning and makes, of this experience, a kind of magic. The eco-theologian and mythologist Sophie Strand writes that, "Magic is an escape from this world, into this world. Magic doesn't take us out of our ecosystems, it roots us more deeply into them."

This soulful ecosystem welcomes your magic as well as the magic of those rooted into it before, those who brought us here, those brought here, and those who were here already; the *Ute, Comanche, Arapaho, Apache, Cheyenne, Kiowa, Pawnee, and Lakota.* And before them, the aspen, oak, and pine, the waters, the soil, the air. We are their water and soil. We breathe their breath.

May our welcome, heal, and celebrate them as our welcome seeks to heal and celebrate each and all of you gathered here. Let's give a special welcome to those with us remotely today. Can we turn and wave to our viewers at home?

Reflection: Ancestors **Rev. Ron**

My job, from this location - sanctuary, chancel, altar, pulpit - is primarily, I think, to prepare us to do a thing or to <u>keep</u> doing a thing… or sometimes to - dear god! - please stop doing that thing!

And then, sometimes we actually do the actual thing here. When we do the thing here, it's called ceremony. Ceremony is the doing of a thing that is both in and of itself the experience of the

thing and deep, embodied, muscle-memory building trajectory-setting that the thing points us towards.

For instance, next week in our All Souls/Samhain ceremony we hope to do the thing; to conjure a real, felt, experience; to jar the window open a bit so a little transformation and grounding can get through. You might earn yourself a surprise. You might have a genuine spiritual experience. In a UU church!?! You might. You might not. But that is our invitation. And I tell you truly, I have seen it happen.

Ceremony is analogous to setting the table - which, in fact, is what we will literally do next Sunday - in the hope that a "visitor" will sit to break bread. The visitor may or may not show up. But at least we are prepared to receive them and can thereby devote our entire attention to the news they bring.

In this case, "the visitor" is my generic term for an encounter with life that may go by many names; god, spirit, Fae, cloud & wind, coyote, coincidence. Whatever its name, whatever its face, it is, in essence, a messenger, a message. And in that sense, no different from you or me; all intertwined expressions of being.

But these ones… these messengers are special. What we're courting in ceremony are holy transmissions of concentrated potency, experiences that are pointedly and personally relevant. They matter much. Experiences of this kind have formative, transformative power.

Certainly it is the case that we receive such messages without arranging the cup, plate, or table cloth. Visitations do indeed occur outside of ceremony. But in those cases we tend to not be prepared to receive their potency and so experience them as somewhere between unbidden and violation.

It's like when someone just pops over and your house is a mess, you haven't done your hair, and there's underwear on the lampshade. The cat litter hasn't been changed in too long and you have to choose to pay attention either to the visitor or to dinner prep and the load of laundry that's two week's past due. It's hard to pay attention in that case. It's hard to make sense. It's hard to be polite.

Ceremony, on the other hand, is spiritually considerate. As a proper invitation it allows both visitor - god, spirit, Fae, cloud & wind, coyote, coincidence - and host -us - to prepare for the exchange, to make space and do honor. Ceremony turns visitation into embassy. As such it comes with an extra ladle of responsibility at its conclusion. Some follow up. A promise. A commitment.

And that, my friends is what we are about next week. This week we are still in prep. Not only for ceremony. But certainly for ceremony.

Today we focus on the idea of Ceremony and Ancestors to prepare us for next week.

This is the right time for it. As proclaimed by the leaves's spectacular death flourish, the shortening days, the quality of light, summer is perishing. Death is in the air. And we are in a time of transition, a liminal time. Our ancestors saw fit, in this season, to turn their attention to their honored dead. This makes sense. It makes bone sense.

Thankfully, ancestor veneration, connection, and healing seem to be making a return to prominence. It's a thing again. Though I can't help but wonder if it is because we sense that our world is dying.

Or maybe it's due to our recognition - perhaps too late - that we are not the masters of fate, that our claim to dominion is unwarranted and destructive, and that our being is and always has been precarious - and thus miraculous! And that in reckoning with that frailty and uncertainty our eyes have once more turned to the one certain thing, death, in order to transform it from terror and defeat into honor and creation.

Or maybe it's just my algorithm.

I don't know. But effectively, ancestors, as "other," as "visitor," as messenger are an ancient mediating story between us and being. Remember stories are mediums and lenses for how we comprehend the world. Ancestors may be more than that. But they are at least a story.

In this sense, the ancestors do the work, for a season at least, that the god of Abraham did for a time. But, culturally speaking, in a classic, "it's not you, it's us," maneuver, we fired that guy. It just wasn't the right fit anymore.

But the absence of that story left a gap. We tried to fill it with materialism. But no matter how much we wanted it to, materialism simply could not fill the gap adequately because it misses on fulfilling our need for connection. Materialism mistakenly conflates meaning with knowledge. It left us cold.

And so we have this unmet need. And we live in collectively perilous times. Turning to the story of our ancestors is a means of meeting this need for connection even as we reckon with our inevitable mortality.

And then, we've also been coming to a reckoning of how we are on the planet, how we are with each other. We are recognizing that cultural patterns that once comforted us are in fact laden with iniquity, separation, fear and selfishness leading to violence, genocide, and ecocide.

These patterns are obviously not in line with our own hopes and expectations for ourselves. They're not in line with the story we've told about us. And a story of this kind and purpose, no matter how fanciful, must carry bone truth in it, must have resonance and integrity with matter and history. Otherwise it's so much delicious poison.

And our story and the patterns are out of line. We are not in alignment with the Tao, the organic and earthly unfolding and perpetuation of an intricately interdependent reality. We're out of whack! And we know it. We do not want the world we have created.

And yet… and yet… we are also grateful, and rightfully so I'd say, for our being in it. It's a puzzle. And we wonder how we got here.

So we turn to our ancestors as messengers, as personalized conduits. We turn to our ancestors as personifications of meaning. And we turn to our ancestors to respectfully inquire, what the actual F?!! What were you thinking? Why? Why?

But of course, we know why. We know why. It's because they were scared. And scarred. And we know this because we are scared. And scarred. And we know <u>that</u> because, in ways both spiritual and practical, both material and meaningful, numinous, cellular… they are us.

Do you all know the thought experiment that ponders; if Odyseus, on his long journey home, had to gradually replace every plank and piece of his ship, is it the same ship? In some ways, like the tale it alludes to, this same question can be put to us about… well… us.

Most of our bodily cells are replaced every 7 - 10 years. By the time you are 50, almost every one of the 30 trillion human cells in your body has reproduced and died at least once. There are a few cells, in your heart, brain, and eyes, that are with us from Troy to Ithaca. But, materially speaking, you have already died and been reborn. But I imagine that you sense you are still the same you. Even though the road be long and winding, you experience yourself as an uninterrupted continuity.

But that is just materially not true. It's more true that what you sense as you… is a story. Now, this should not diminish what you sense as you. Rather, it should illustrate the reality, the experiential potency, of story.

You are an experienced story of yourself. A narrative understanding of actual events; a historical fiction, where fiction is sacred. You are like one of those movies that has the opening caveat, “Based on real events,” which is intended to secure both the authority of fact and the permission to fib a bit so the facts are allowed to communicate most powerfully.

So you are a story. You replace yourself materially, god willing, at least once in your life time, like Odyseus’ boat. And yet you are you. Now, let’s broaden the aperture a bit and apply that same kind of thinking to ancestry.

Bodies perish. Material composts. Flesh to soil. And from that; life, yes. New material, yes. Fruit. Such is the way of things. But more to the point, there is a continuity of identity over generations, a story, even when it is unwanted.

Much like our own reproducing cells, our ancestors do pass on DNA. That DNA carries not just blueprints but experiences, or at least their epigenetic impact switching on or off aspects of our genes. So, in a sense, we are more materially ancestor than individual. We are formed by their experiences, their decisions, and the story we have about them.

And this is certainly not limited to genetics. At all. We carry in us lineage and culture and history. We’re not just formed by it. We are it. It is our story.

And that packs in two crucial considerations. For as robustly populated with acts of courage, love, sheer brilliance, and generosity as our ancestors were… they were also deeply troubled and trouble making… likely as are we. Trauma causes trauma, makes for poor conditions for decisions, and often leads to repeated violence, either interpersonally or genocidally.

We are a product of that trauma source. And since we are maybe understanding that we are the same ship as our ancestors, in a meaningful way, we are that trauma source. And while that is a cause for sorrow, it is also a cause for hope. Because recognizing it means that we have the opportunity to change course. But to do so, we must heal the past. Reckon with it. Make amends. Change direction.

This is deeply entwined with the work of anti-racisim, ecological relationship building, and spiritual enlivenment.

And it is absolutely critical that we do so. Because if it is true that our ancestors live in and as us, it is also true that we live in and as our genetic and cultural descendents. Same ship. If there is to be a future, it's in the past. To heal the future, we must heal the past. The past lives in us. The future lives in us. It’s a story. With life and death consequences.

Stories need structure. We are a structure. Our ancestors are a structure. Expressions of being. Bodied messages. Visitors.

So. My job, from this location, is primarily to prepare us to do a thing. I hope I've done so. Because next Sunday, we will do the thing. We will invite a message, a messenger, a visitor and make of it an embassy and engage with that visitor as an opportunity to transform the past, or ourselves, or our future… or maybe just to say hello.

And as with any embassy, this will come with that extra ladle of responsibility at its conclusion. But this commitment will be easy, or at least, organic. For as we experience the dissolution of those chronological categories, we will sense an expansion of identity, of connection, of responsibility and hope. It is an opportunity afforded us by this liminal season, a time of turning into death, turning even into tragedy, and finding there, not only life but, ultimately, hope, which is to say, love.