

## **“Ancestors and a Spiritual Plan B”**

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Welcome to November, friends.

Welcome to Daylight Savings Time, both sunrise and sunset coming an hour earlier than our bodies might be ready for that to happen.

This weekend, in this year, feels like the ultimate in liminal spaces.

We are in that sacred space between the living and the dead, celebrated in Mexico as Dia de los Muertos or All Saints Day among Catholics worldwide. It is a time for remembering those who have died and for communicating with our ancestors.

It is said that the veil between the living and the dead is at its thinnest, and communication between those two realms is most fluid.

We are two days before the final casting of ballots in the US presidential election, as well as many other races down the ballot, and it seems like a good time to seek out and consider the wisdom of our ancestors.

What do you think our ancestors might offer us today, in consideration of our current political reality?

Let's take a look at who our ancestors are, shall we? For some of us, our ancestors include early colonizers on this continent, people who came to settle and expand, and to create a new world in the Christian mold of a “shining city on a hill.” They faced hardships unimaginable to us today, including disease and starvation, as well as wars fought with the original people of this continent and with other colonizers seeking to exploit the same pool of resources as them.

The ethos of colonization aside, they did face hardships and managed them in whatever way they were able. They survived.

For others of us, our ancestors came to this continent as refugees from any of a number of wars, famines, or oppressive economic situations in other places. My people arrived fleeing the second potato famine in Ireland, and probably arrived penniless, illiterate, and filthy. They managed to survive, with the support of others from the old country who had arrived earlier, and by integrating themselves into the power structures that existed in their new home.

Still others came against their will: stolen from their homes, enslaved, and shipped across the ocean in the most inhumane manner imaginable. Stripped of family, culture, religion, and dignity, people from Africa were subjected to the worst that humans can do to one another. And they survived. They managed.

Some of our ancestors were here before Europeans invaded. Four hundred years later, they have come through all that brutal colonization did to them. Some survived, against all odds. Some did not, overwhelmed by the invasion of white supremacy. Native peoples in North America continue to survive, despite official policies and programs designed to exterminate them. Connected to this continent in ways deep and beyond the understanding of colonizers, they persist and survive.

Other ancestors have survived different things. Some survived Pogroms and the Holocaust, some survived dictators and revolutions, wars both hot and cold, but all survived, at least sufficient to produce us, present here in this moment.

What wisdom might they offer us today?

Former Secretary of State Madeline Albright wrote in her 2018 book “Fascism: A Warning,”

“We all value the right to push against boundaries and go boldly where none has preceded us; however, that is not all we value. Especially when we are afraid, angry, or confused, we may be tempted to give away bits of our freedom – or, less painfully, somebody else’s freedom – in the quest for direction and order. Bill Clinton observed that when people are uncertain, they’d rather have leaders who are strong and wrong than right and weak. Throughout history, demagogues have often outperformed democrats in generating popular fervor, and it is almost always because they are perceived to be more decisive and sure in their judgements ...

In the lives of nations, the origins of anger do not have to be deeply personal to awaken the desire for instant solutions. Mussolini and Hitler drew on the anguish of their citizens following the carnage of World War I. Kim Il-sung played guardian and guide in a country scarred by four decades of strife. Milosevic and Putin tapped into deep wells of nationalist outrage in the aftermath of the Cold War ... Going much further back, the ancient Israelites – surrounded by enemies – pleaded with Samuel to give them a king, so that “we will be like all other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and to fight our battles.” The prophet cautions the Israelites to think twice, warning that the monarch they are demanding will certainly take their sons to be warriors, their daughters to be cooks, and their vineyards, fields, cattle, sheep and servants to satisfy his own needs. Still the people persist, and their prayer is answered. A century later, their kingdom is split and careens toward destruction.<sup>1</sup>

Albright is an immigrant, a refugee, who fled Czechoslovakia with her parents as a child. Her wisdom is based not simply in her first-class education and professional life, but in her deep, lived experience, and in her heritage as the descendant of Jews who hid their identity and fled fascism in the generation before her own.

Our ancestors have wisdom to share, if we are able to absorb it.

This week I participated in a conversation that offered a sense of perspective about the times we are in.

The conversation happened on the VUU, a weekly online talk program produced by the UU Church of the Larger Fellowship. It is broadcast on YouTube on Thursdays at noon eastern time, and you can find the live broadcast and all the archived programs at the CLF website through an easy google search.<sup>2</sup> I also placed a link to the page in the chat portion of your screen just now.

I am one of a group of regular hosts on the program, and always finish the broadcast feeling as though I have learned far more than I have contributed.

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<sup>1</sup> Albright, Madeline, with Bob Woodward, *Fascism: A Warning*, 2018 Harper Collins, New York, p. 242-243

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.questformeaning.org/vuu/>

At any rate, one of the most powerful things said this week was offered by co-host Quiana Perkins. We were talking about how challenging it is for progressives in general to deal with what can feel like a never-ending barrage of small and large defeats.

Quiana is a Black Woman who works at our congregation in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She offered this perspective. I am paraphrasing here, to the best of my recollection:

I have, deep in my embodied history, the experience of giving birth in the fields in the morning, and selling my baby in the afternoon, while being expected to work all the hours in between. This [current political situation] is nothing worse than I've seen before.

That puts a whole new lens on it, now doesn't it?

So with the wisdom of these two women – Madeline Albright and Quiana Perkins – how might we craft a plan for our spiritual care in the aftermath of the US election day?

I speak now of a spiritual “Plan B,” a preparation for whatever we think (or hope) will NOT be the outcome of Tuesday's election.

I know that four years ago, I was one of millions of Americans blindsided by the results of the electoral college.

I was utterly unprepared.

I was prepared, that election eve, to do what I always do: make some popcorn, sit in front of the television, with every other electronic device I own tracking various sources of election results and watch history be made. I had friends dressed in white waiting in the New York City celebration site with the very real and metaphorical glass ceiling overhead, all watching the results trickle in.

I was not prepared.

I had no spiritual plan for what happened that night.

And I find no comfort at all that there was no plan in place for that outcome in the camp of the party that won.

I remember feeling betrayed and alone. I remember feeling like I had been fooled into believing that my neighbors held the same values that I did. That they supported my right to marry, that they supported my right to not be fired or evicted because of my identity. That they supported my decision-making capacity when it came to my own medical care.

It was a hard, abrupt, painful realization to learn that I was wrong.

It was the year of miracles, remember? I mean, the Cubs won the World Series. Surely that was a sign.

But no. Actors both foreign and domestic worked to yank the rug of hope out from under voters, and we ended up with the guy who was – and remains – the least competent, most corrupt, most compromised, most vicious and cruel candidate in living memory.

And so here we are, friends. We again are on the cusp of something very significant. We are in liminal space – poised between fascism and something that looks

like it might still be democracy. Poised between policies of justice and compassion and those of exploitation and capricious cruelty.

Are you prepared for whatever might come?

What will you do if the election does not turn out the way you hope it will?

How do we brace our hearts for that kind of crushing terror, the kind that puts some of us at very real risk of personal harm?

Well,

We rely on the wisdom of our ancestors, for starters.

We remember that humans have survived through other terrible times.

We remember the words of Theodore Parker – that the arc of the moral universe is long, and we might not be able to see where it ends, but we know that it bends toward justice. Theodore Parker was one of our early Unitarian ministers here in North America. He preached in the years leading up to – and through the American Civil War.

He took – quite literally – the long view when it comes to justice.

He understood that he was not likely to see the glory of final justice in the world, but he knew that it was still his job to work toward that goal.

We must remember that we are in a long struggle – much longer than the length of any of our lives. The struggle was in process when we were born into this world, and it will continue long after we leave.

The work of justice is never done.

We – humans – have been through nightmares before. While we do not welcome a new nightmare, or the 2020 version of one, we can know in our bones that we will persist. We will continue. We will overcome.

And we will do it together. Because healing is not done in isolation. Healing – and survival – is done in community.

Let us remember today, and each day in the coming weeks, that the race we are in is not a sprint, nor is it a marathon. It is a relay race. We each take a turn, hand off the baton, rest, and then come back for another shift.

The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward love.

Love wins in the end – always. If love does not win, we are not at the end.

May this be our mantra in these days and those ahead.

Love wins.

Amen.