

Soul Matters June 2013

What Does It Mean To Live A Life of Inheritance?

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We are launching themed worship and the Soul Matters program this month with the theme of INHERITANCE. This month's worship services will focus on "Inheritance," in a variety of its aspects. Over the summer, the monthly materials will be available for you to read and think about. Starting in September, we will be forming Soul Matters groups to consider these issues together. The purpose of Soul Matters is to do more than just get you to think about the themes; rather, it is to provide opportunities for you to act, change, and grow with the themes.

You'll notice in the "Wise Words" section, that there are quotes from "A Soul Matters Member." These are UU's who are participating in Soul Matters groups in other UU churches. Soul Matters began with the Rev. Scott Taylor, co-minister of First Unitarian Church, Rochester, NY. When High Plains Soul Matters groups are formed, I can include quotations from your members, as well.

INHERITANCE...

Only about 10% of Unitarian Universalists were raised in this faith. In the past, most UU's came out of some other religion. (Today we see more and more young people who were raised without any religion.) The Unitarian Universalist "come-outers" often talk about the "religious baggage" with which they were brought up. We think of ourselves as progressive, forward-looking people.

And yet... We all stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us. The "interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part" includes the past (and future) as well as the present. Those who came before us made choices that influence us today. We have been inspired by their work and passions. The choices we make today will impact future generations. Our churches are part of something larger than ourselves. How can we take part in that 'something larger' without acknowledging and honoring all that we've inherited?

We do Unitarian Universalism a disservice when we speak of it as a community of individualists who have broken free of our pasts. Indeed, we do ourselves--our deepest selves--a disservice when we talk and think this way.

So this month we are invited to take seriously all that we've been given, all that has been passed on to us – the good and the bad.

Simply put, real spiritual freedom comes not from breaking with our pasts but from actively and consciously choosing what we want to keep and what we need to give up from our pasts. It's about being in control of our inheritance rather than our inheritance controlling us.

This month we will consider the inheritance you have in High Plains Church, our Unitarian Universalist heritage, your own family histories, and a cultural musical inheritance.

It's also worth thinking about the origin of the word "heirloom." Loom was the old English word for "tool." This offers a new light on those things we inherit. What if we saw our inheritance as "tools" given to us to build something, create something, fix something, heal something. Would we treat our inheritance differently? Would we learn to use it better? Would we pull our inheritance out of our spiritual toolbox more often?

Yours with curiosity and hope,

Beatrice

Our Spiritual Exercise(s):

Stop Squandering Our Inheritance!

We begin our spiritual exercise with “Questions Worth Wrestling With.” We are asked to let the Questions Worth Wrestling With lead us into action--into some real life action that engages us with our “inheritance,” that makes it come to life. The goal is to get us not just thinking about our inheritance but also living it. I’d love to hear about what you discover. ~Beatrice

Let’s be specific. Here’s your challenge:

1. Read over all the Questions Worth Wrestling With.
2. Focus on the one that “hooks” you.
3. Turn that emotional reaction into some kind of real life action. In other words, do something with the thoughts and emotional responses that get stirred up inside you.

To assist us and get our ideas flowing, there are “suggested actions” listed beneath each of the Questions Worth Wrestling With.

The idea behind this exercise is simple: Our physical, material and spiritual inheritance contains great power, often untapped power. Like the well-known prodigal son from the Bible, we squander our inheritance all the time. We’ve been given a physical gift that we’ve never fully developed. Our grandmothers passed on a love of writing or painting to us that we’ve never actualized. We have a great family history that we’ve never shared with our children or taken the time to document. Our loved ones gave us a leg up with money, support or values and we’ve never said thank you to them for this great gift. We have the power and the privilege to further inherit a social justice cause but choose to stay focused on our personal security instead. Or we’ve been burdened with a “cruddy childhood” and instead of turning it into a chance to grow beyond it and become more, we’ve allowed the wound to dominate our story and too often serve as an excuse for us never getting the life we really want. Or how about the “big inheritance”? Life itself! We’ve been given this great playground called our lifetime and we treat it like a burden or problem, rather than an adventure, toy box or treasure chest.

You get the point: We’ve all inherited great gifts. Have we noticed those gifts?

This exercise is an invitation to take one small step toward pulling these treasures of inheritance off the shelf and out of the box...and into our lives.

Good Luck!

Questions To Wrestle With (and act upon!):

The “suggested actions” are only to stimulate your own thoughts. If the suggested action feels right to you, fine--go ahead and make that your project for the month. But don’t feel constrained by it. The goal is to listen deeply to the question and figure out what it’s asking of you, inviting you to do, or even wants from you.

1. What’s the best thing your child has inherited from you? The worst?
SUGGESTED ACTIONS: Tell your child a story about your lineage that you’ve not ever shared before. Show them pictures of your relatives from generations ago. Ask your parents to sit down with your kids and tell them a story from their childhood. Record your parents doing this so you can hold on to the story in their voice even after they are gone.
Be honest with yourself about that “bad habit” of yours that your child is starting to imitate. And do something about it. Or notice one of the great gifts you’ve given them and engage it with them: read together, cook together, paint together, make time to throw the football around.
2. What part of “bending the arc” have you “inherited”? Social change takes time, many generations even. This is what Martin Luther King Jr. meant when he said that the arc of the universe is long but it bends toward justice; we all need to pick up where others leave off. What justice-making, world-changing mission have you picked up from others? What “little bend” are you trying to make?
SUGGESTED ACTIONS: Figure out what your “ministry” is. Figure out your “calling.” Make time for at least one small action to move that dream/movement/vision of a better world forward.

3. Have you said thanks for your inheritance? Knowing and being grateful for what you've inherited is one thing. Thanking those who have passed on precious gifts is another.
SUGGESTED ACTIONS: Write a letter to your family member saying thanks for the gift they passed on to you--the value, talent, love, perspective, strength or passion. Or better yet, sit down with them and say thank you. If your loved one is dead, honor their gift in another way. For instance, set a day aside to visit their grave and leave a symbol of thanks behind.
4. Is your inheritance really to blame? Who's really responsible for our bad habits, our screwed-up reactions, and our silly choices? Is it true that our lives would be better "if only we'd had better parents"? Is it true that our genes have doomed us to inevitable outcomes? Have you ever used "inheritance" as an excuse to escape personal responsibility?
SUGGESTED ACTIONS: Apologize for being too hard on "them." Tell your mom/dad/sister/brother that you didn't mean that thing you said. Put aside your experience of betrayal and your lack of trust in relationships, and finally get out there and ask that guy or gal out on a date. Put down that story line given to you by your parents about you "not being the smart one" and go online to see what it would take to go back to school. Put down that inherited storyline about what success is and do that thing you really love.
5. Have you forgiven your loved ones for what they inherited? We've all been hurt, let down or wounded by parents, siblings or close friends. We're mad that they passed on or our burdened us with "their stuff." But someone likely passed on that "stuff" to them. How's that fit into the equation? Is it possible they did the best they could given their negative inheritance?
SUGGESTED ACTIONS: Read over the suggestions under #4 again. Maybe twice. Read Beatrice's sermon on "Finding Forgiveness" located in the brochure rack or available electronically by request: minister@hpcuu.org.
6. Has a painful inheritance ever turned out to be a blessing in disguise? Have you turned it into a blessing? Have you found a way to turn your "burden" into something that has made you stronger?
SUGGESTED ACTIONS: Share your painful inheritance with someone who needs to know that you went through it too--that they are not alone, that someone else understands. Figure out how your inherited wound is related to a greater social cause, and use it to mobilize your passion.
7. Have you ever inherited a secret? Would you like to "dis-inherit" it?
SUGGESTED ACTIONS: Watch the TED talk listed under **RECOMMENDED RESOURCES:**
http://www.ted.com/talks/frank_warren_half_a_million_secrets.html. Then make your own postcard and send it in. Maybe share that postcard with a trusted friend before you send it in. Or finally tell your spouse, sibling or family about it.
8. Is guilt something you've inherited? Fear? Distrust? What have you learned about letting it go? Do you need to ask someone for help in learning how to let it go?
SUGGESTED ACTIONS: Finally deal with it: find a therapist or a spiritual director.
9. Is there an inheritance you'd like to re-claim? Maybe it's your belief in God or Christian upbringing. Maybe it's your mom's working class background. Maybe it's your cultural heritage. Maybe it's your dad's practical jokes. We've all got some aspect of our family or cultural past that we rejected or looked down upon. But now, years later, maybe what we rejected is worth a second look, worth picking up again. So, is there anything in your life asking for a second look? A second chance?
SUGGESTED ACTIONS: Call up your minister and tell him or her you'd like to have a chat about God. Learn about your cultural heritage; find a book, watch a movie, sign up for a class. Tell a few of your father's "stupid" jokes to your kids.
10. How deeply have you tapped into your UU inheritance?
SUGGESTED ACTION: Learn enough to say you have a favorite UU "saint." Read a book by or about one of our forebears: Susan B Anthony, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau, Thomas Paine, Ray Bradbury, Alexander Graham Bell. (see more at <http://www.famousuus.com>)
11. What's the best thing you've inherited? The worst?
SUGGESTED ACTION: No suggestions needed for this one. If one single inheritance stands out way above others, you will know what to do. You will just know.

Recommended Resources:

This is not “required reading.” They are simply meant to get your thinking started--and maybe to open you to new ways of thinking about what it means to “live a life of inheritance.”

Wise Words:

Our ideals, laws and customs should be based on the proposition that each generation in turn becomes the custodian rather than the absolute owner of our resources - and each generation has the obligation to pass this inheritance on in the future.

- Alberto Moravia

The best inheritance a parent can give his children is a few minutes of his time each day.

- Orlando A. Battista

We are all gifted. That is our inheritance.

- Ethel Waters

I keep thinking about all of the unnamed heroes that break cycles of abuse in their families. To live a life of inheritance, you may be grateful for the pieces of your ancestors that are alive in you, and you may also be grateful for the gift of your own life and the power you have to shape how others will remember you.

-A Soul Matters Member

One of the aspects of inheritance that haunts me is the fear of inheritance. All parents know the feeling of seeing something in our children that reminds us of a scary train in ourselves, in a sibling, or in a parent. I'm not given to anxiety or panic, but I feel it in those moments.

I remember when my wife and I were expecting our first child, our pediatrician did a long interview with us about personal and family health histories. When it was done, he said, “So, the reason I do that is so that at the end, now, I can tell you how completely unlikely it is that your child will have any of those problems.” So, we inherit, of course, but we DO NOT inherit so much, and there's a danger in over-focus on what we MIGHT inherit.

-A Soul Matters Member

When I think of inheritance, I think of gifts and baggage, fate vs. freewill, and the Greek play “Oedipus.” In that play, the idea of freewill vs. fate is actually open to interpretation. In modern society, when individuals break out of poverty while others can't, is that freewill-driven or fate-driven? Nature or Nurture?

-A Soul Matters Member

As a retired person with an adult son, I'd always thought that leaving my home for my son was the absolute necessary and best inheritance I could provide. A couple years ago, I was discussing with a friend a few things I might do... in general, around self development, but

worried that it might mean a significant portion of the house's value would be spent. I always remember her comment.... "The best inheritance you can leave your son is the example of yourself.... fulfilled and evolved."

-A Soul Matters Member

In considering this theme, I have been contemplating what I've inherited about my interpretation of God - what I've kept from this inheritance, what I have not kept, and what have I adopted from other sources to grow in my own spiritual understanding of God. Who God is for me has changed, from a childhood version of a man with a beard, sitting in the heavens, to an energy that I see in myself and every living and non-living thing - an energy that as I grow into myself, I can feel more and more. I have moved from a punishing and restricting God that I had to please by being good, to a loving and friendly God, that is always with me and if I pay attention to her, our relationship will be strengthened. One thing that I have realized, is that if I do not spend time contemplating this topic, I just adopt other people's views, rather than strengthen my own. I am sure that in another few years, my view of God will change yet again.

-A Soul Matters Member

You don't need to accept what you inherit--in fact it is really your right, responsibility and opportunity to refuse what is offered (foisted, dumped, laid, imposed) and replace it with better stuff.

-A Soul Matters Member

I have some lovely antiques from my husband's family that I now cherish and know that my children do. But I must admit there was a time that I resented those antiques because they were not of my choosing and determined what our home would look like---feels silly now--but of course they have been determining my home for 35 years!!!

-A Soul Matters Member

What I have been thinking about is the different types of inheritance we have--immediate family and genetics, extended family, community, friends, religious community, national and global, how these all interact negatively and positively to make us who we are. One of the things that I noticed growing up was that there was a dissonance between my family inheritance and the community inheritance and maybe even the national one. This could be common to second generation Americans, I don't know. However, we heard several languages spoken growing up--Dutch (Flemish), French and Italian. Dad's family was from Calabria, Italy, and Mom's from Flanders, Belgium. Both spoke only their family's native languages before they

started school. My sister and I grew up hearing old country stories and myths, seeing old country ways of decorating, etc. It took us some time to realize that this is part of what set us apart from our neighbors and classmates. We had a European upbringing! In addition my immediate family was deeply spiritual without caring a hoot about church. Dad hated priests and Mom said there was no reason why you had to worship God inside a building.

However, I attended Catholic schools from kindergarten through high school. The atmosphere in my home enabled me to see past the religious indoctrination. The atmosphere in the home enabled me to see past the American indoctrination also. We came to think of the other classmates and community members as the "Americans." Odd, yes, but liberating and alienating at the same time. This gives you an "outsider looking in" mentality.

I think this carries forward into a way of looking at America and the world. I could never be a super-patriot or a religious bigot. I am deeply disturbed by both, and so became a political activist--civil, gay, women's, animal rights. My deep respect for the earth was, I think, inborn, but amplified by my Belgian Grandfather who tended his farm and the earth with such care, and my Great-Grandmother, who grew and gathered herbs and was a midwife and healer.

So it leaves you with a lot of questions: How do you work with being or feeling like you are an "outsider"? How do you keep up the strength to do what you think is right even though everyone else thinks you're crazy? How do you stay on a spiritual path when the pull is away from that toward mindless consumerism? How does inheritance enable you to reject what everyone else believes?

-A Soul Matters Member

When my mother died, she excluded me from her will and left everything to my two sisters. She actively hated my then husband, and I guess she wanted to let me know how much she didn't approve of my staying married to him. When the lawyer said she left me out of the will, I was stunned at first. I was the only daughter who lived stayed in Rochester (my other two sisters both left Rochester at 18 and never returned) and I had been supportive, helpful and included her in my life's events. But then realized it really spoke about my mother's unhappiness. Both my sisters and my father were also stunned. My father (who hadn't been married to my mother for 40 years) offered to give me what would have been a third of the estate, which I obviously didn't take. My sisters responded by promptly gifting me the money I would have received if the estate had been divided among the three of us. What generous and loving response from my family.

Even though my father was absent for a large part of my growing up, his strong values about how to live a life of integrity and how to treat people is deeply instilled in me and guide my daily actions. He cared deeply about family and worked hard to create reunions with our small number of family members spread across the country. When he died, in addition to leaving his assets among the three of us

daughters, he left his IRAs to just me. My sisters and I talked about how to deal with this, and we decided that we would take the mandatory withdrawal monies each year and do something collectively to celebrate life. The three of us have had some great adventures together. Most recently we had a long weekend together learning how to blow glass funded by my father's generosity and our collaboration. It feels wonderful to use his money to carry on his values.

When you hear awful stories about families getting torn apart by estate issues, I am SO grateful that is not the story in our lives.

-A Soul Matters Member

Online Resources:

TED Talk: Frank Warren: Half a million secrets
About the secrets we inherit and how sharing them gives us power over them rather than them having power over us.
http://www.ted.com/talks/frank_warren_half_a_million_secrets.html

Wellspring Blog on "Cultural Wounding"
<http://www.uuwellspring.org/2007/12/peace-on-earth.html>
"When I think of inheritance, I think about the experience of generational wounding. Where whole populations inherit a cultural wound that passes through the generations because of what they've experienced. I think of Native Americans or African Americans. My experience of this is with people from Jewish heritage who all seem to carry a spiritual wounding from the Holocaust. My husband's family were survivors, his parents fled Germany in 1939 and lost many relatives in the camps. Here's part of our story of inheritance and maybe deliverance: [the Link](#)

Movies

Everything is Illuminated
http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/everything_is_illuminated/

A powerful example of generational inheritance told from the perspective of a descendent of the Holocaust.

The Way
<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1441912/>
A father heads overseas to recover the body of his estranged son who died while traveling the "El Camino de Santiago," and decides to take the pilgrimage himself, carrying the ashes of his son, sorting out what his son inherited from him and what he might now inherit from his son.