

## **“Countless Generations”**

*The Rev. Dr. Stephanie May*

*October 29, 2023*

*First Church in Boston*

“We are built of countless generations,” writes the Rev. Catharine Clarenbach in her reflection, [“Samhain, Ancestors, and Descendants.”](#) However, these countless generations are a mixed bag. Some we may simply remember for the lives and actions which inspired our own. We might think of Rosa Parks daring to stay seated on a bus. Or of Ghandi resisting violence and transforming a nation. Yet, we may also remember the moral complexity of the extramarital affairs of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King or the advocacy of Margaret Sanger for birth control *and* its use in eugenics. Sometimes our ancestors are not pure exemplars. Sometime the ancestors we would like to remember with honor remain entwined with ideas and behaviors we now question or even condemn.

Drawing on the pagan tradition to write today’s opening words raised this question of ancestors for me. As I wrote, I texted a clergy friend that I was experiencing some trepidation. After all my ministerial ancestors of First and Second Church once advocated punishing and even killing women deemed to be witches, which is to say those engaged in pagan rituals. I imagined many of my ministerial predecessors would be horrified that the minister was 1) a woman and 2) honoring pagan spirituality. My colleague texted back, “It’s cool to think of all the ways we are defying them now, right?”

Yes, cool, in some ways for sure. But I also find the tension challenging. How do we make sense of the call to honor our ancestors, but also to question or even defy them?

I have felt this tension of honor and defiance in relationship to my Grandma Sibley, a beloved ancestor. When she was alive, I loved my lively, fun, witty grandma. I even spent my college Spring Breaks with her and my grandpa at their Florida condo. But she was also known in the family for sending letters of “concern” when our choices strayed too far from her conservative Christian morality. When she lay dying from cancer, she composed a letter expressing her steadfast belief in the role of Jesus as *the* path to salvation and eternal life. Written from a place of genuine concern, she sent copies of the letter to each of her children and grandchildren. Tipped off to the contents of the letter, I set mine aside unread. I loved her *and* I disagreed with her. Years later, as I discerned becoming a Unitarian Universalist minister, I had an active internal discussion with her. I knew she would not have approved of UU theology. I finally made my peace with her when I realized that while we may never have agreed on theology, I had received from her a love of theological questions and a conviction to take religious life seriously. I could honor her as my ancestor for these gifts.

Even so, had she been alive when my son came out as gay, I would have openly defied her if she condemned him as a sinner. Perhaps her theology would have become more liberal, modified by the reality of love for me and for him. I will never know if a different situation or social context would have changed her mind. All I can know is why I believe, think, and act as *I* do in my own time and place.

As I move now into my new roles as a member *of* and Minister *to* First Church, I am deeply moved by the complexity of our ancestral story. With pride, I share the news of this new ministry and its deep history. I also find myself catching my breath as I walk past the John Winthrop statue, whose unmissable presence at our front entrance beckons me to wrestle with his story—a story of bold religious conviction entwined with legacies of enslavement and catastrophic consequences for the Indigenous peoples of this land. And, when I walk up Beacon Hill, I make a point to look over the State House fence to the statue of Anne Hutchinson. By pausing to look, I seek to remember the cost she paid for speaking her religious truth even as I also consider the ways our theologies do not exactly align.

“We are built of countless generations.” And those generations are full of ancestors whose imperfect humanity and limited understanding pervaded their ideas and their actions. These limits could serve as an excuse to just let them all off the proverbial hook. Or they could help remind us to be more mindful of our living and of the legacies we are leaving for future generations. How humble are we in all we do not know? How open are we to the possibility that we may in fact be on the ‘wrong side of history’ regarding a moral or societal issue? How committed are we to insuring we do our best to leave the world a better place, or, at least leave our corner of the world a bit better?

The older I become, the more aware I am that we will not “fix” or “perfect” the world. But neither do I think this means we surrender our efforts to make it better. Looking more deeply into various historical moments, I am often struck by the presence of significantly more tension and resistance to dominant ideas than I initially understood. We learn about the “winners” but do not always register how close or vicious the fight to win was. For example, we learn about the great success of the ratification of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment granting women’s suffrage. However, the simple fact “it was ratified in 1920” elides that it became law only after Tennessee ratified the Amendment because a 23-year-old Tennessee state Representative [unexpectedly voted yes](#)...allegedly because his mother urged him to vote for its passage. The more history I read, the more I realize that human society has always been made up of people with conflicting ideas, passions, and values.

Nonetheless I do not give up on our ancestors or surrender any hope for humanity in the present or future. Instead, I agree with Rev. Clarenbach who writes,

[We] must be mindful of what we leave when we shuffle off this mortal coil. We too will die. ... And we will leave [for] our legacy, whoever it is we have been and whatever it is we have done.

We are between the Ancestors and the Descendants. We are in a holy place.

These moments of our living are a gift that we receive from those who came before us. Our world emerges from those whose ideas and actions gave us life-giving penicillin *and* the violence of the Coliseum. We receive a world from those whose beliefs built the majestic beauty of the Taj Mahal *and* the hellish destruction of the atom bomb. So also, we receive a world from those whose dreams fostered democracy *and* those who used the democratic process to create Jim Crow laws. Recognizing the range of moral possibilities in the world we inherit; might we be more mindful of the choices we make and the legacies we leave behind?

These moments of our lives are a holy and sacred gift. We are neither our ancestors, nor are we our descendants. We are the ones who bear the weight of this moment on planet earth. We can seek to learn from the wisdom and the failings of our ancestors. And we can seek to leave behind a bit more of what we understand to be good, loving, and life-giving for this generation and the next.

May it be so.

Amen