On the Shoulders of Giants

Leela Sinha

February 3, 2008

UU Church of Ellsworth, Maine

what would it be like
if we really truly started from scratch,
from a blank slate
from a *tabula rasa*
--no influences
--no extras
--no training
--no principles.
Who would we be as a people?

It is unknowable, because we are social, learning creatures. It is who we are; it is what we do. Raise a human infant among wolves and it will be socialized there, with them. We are curious. We have mutable brains. Who we are matters, and where we are matters. It also matters whence we have come. Our elders and our ancestors have a profound effect on how we understand our world. They give to us culture and personality, expectations and training. They give us boundaries and possibilities—roots and wings. They communicate in a thousand thousand different ways.

They share out of love and obligation and hope and even irritation, but they share because they believe something is good—or at least better—their way. They are trusting the accrued wisdom of the ages before them, and unless we have a lot of extra energy, we carry the tradition forward. So today I am calling the ancestors, inviting them to be here with us; not just our usual bearers of wisdom but the obscure, the unheard-of, the parents, grandparents, aunts, mentors, the family gods, the neighborhood storytellers, the servants, the administrators—the bearers of family and institutional memory and hope and possibility.

May the ancestors rise up from their places of rest
grace us once more with their presence
their wisdom
their crotchety comments
their crazy grins.
May the elders speak their minds
through the years and beyond the grave
may they make love to the years
and give birth to us again.

***

Yesterday was Groundhog Day. For traditional Catholics it was Candlemas; for pagans it was Imbolc. For both Catholics and Celtic pagans, Imbolc is the feast of Bridgid, goddess or saint, and keeper of midwives and fire and purity. Obscure even among the obscure, February second doesn't seem to be much of anything. It's still cold—not the bursting-forth of summer, not the harvest of early fall; it's not Christmas and not yet Easter, and what on earth do groundhogs have to do with any of it?

Apparently the groundhogs are German in origin, but the question of shadow—of clouds or sun—has roots in Celtic tradition: they say the winter goddess goes out to gather wood for the remainder of winter; if she needs to gather a lot of wood she calls out the sun. Another Celtic tradition assigns shadow-casting to a serpent rather than a groundhog. When all is said and done this is the time to squint at the sky, to see if the thaw is a midseason break or the beginning of the season's end, to take a breath before the next storms arrive. It is the time when the growing begins deep in the earth, and in the ewe's belly; it is the time of quiet, pregnant silence, holding our breath, waiting for the riot of spring.

It's all part of an ancient wisdom, that cycle of the year adopted now by neopagans and wiccans of various stripes around the western world. Most groups follow at least some part of an agricultural year, divided by quarter and cross-quarter days into eight parts: four seasons' midpoints and four seasons' beginnings.

The full set is as follows:
Samhain, a cross-quarter day, is the turning of the year, at the end of October. It may also be the beginning of winter. About six weeks later comes the winter Solstice, sometimes understood as midwinter, followed in six weeks by Imbolc, the beginning of spring. The equinox (just over six weeks later because of differences between the old and new calendars) is the middle of spring, and Beltane follows at the beginning of May, on our Mayday, to mark the beginning of summer; in a few traditions *this* is where the year begins. Midsummer, the Solstice, comes on June 21 as the sun turns around to head south again; Lammas marks the beginning of harvest in early August; fall's midpoint is at the equinox in September, and then we come full circle back to Samhain. While we have little evidence for a comprehensive ancient calendar with all eight sabbats in one place or culture, there is tremendous wisdom in ancient traditions, and much of modern paganism tries to honor history some and consolidate some. The elegance and balance of the eight point circle is hard to deny. There's another twist, as Solstice and equinox are solar markers, while the cross-quarters are typically lunar. Laying one calendar over another gives us a kind of three-dimentional view of the cosmos and the passage of time, pushed and pulled as we are by two bodies in time and space.

Over time one wisdom gives way to another as cultures cycle past and so Celtic pagans faded as Christianity, riding several thousand years of Jewish tradition, spread its message of a loving god and his great sacrifice for his people.
…but the wisdom of the ages didn't stop with the coming of the Christ child. Somewhere in the stories about the star in the east and the wise men who followed it to the birthplace of a miracle baby were the seeds of a faith that would generate new generations of deep and innovative thinkers, that would make space for the rise of atheism, and ironically, the eventual return of prechristian religions to mainline status. Like eggs in a woman's body, the potential was there from the very beginning—and from that potential, we have risen.

We didn't get here without help, though. We had lots and lots of help. As Edward Moore tells us, even second-century theologian Origen of Alexandria--one of our earliest universalists--was not writing in a vacuum. He was informed by the Greeks who came before him and their perspectives on good, evil, and the eventual balance of the universe.
(http://www.quodlibet.net/moore-origen.shtml Quodlibet Journal: Volume 5 Number 1, January

2003 http://www.Quodlibet.net Origen of Alexandria and *apokatastasis*: Some Notes on the Development of a Noble Notion © Edward Moore accessed Feb 2 2008)

Our fantasies and terrors of standing alone are by and large unfounded. From Origen, universalist thought traces its way through much of the periphery of the early Christian church, picking up support from mystics of several faith traditions. It speaks well for the strength of Universalism as a theology that in its persistent marginality it was never entirely extinguished despite the best efforts of a battery of powerful opponents. Likewise Unitarianism, which would not have been legislated against at the Council of Nicea in 325 if there had not been a strong case developing in favor of it.

Our very origins are rooted in rebellion and a kind of self-assured stubbornness that permits us to follow our own hearts and minds though all else declare our confidence unfounded. And standing here in the early light of the 21st century, we are unspeakably lucky to have had so many strong hearts and voices in our past.

At their peaks, the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America were forces to be reckoned with, each having membership and monies to support major building projects and substantial outreach. They were also respectable enough that membership would not have been considered an obstacle to holding public office—indeed, several of our presidents have been members or had strong Unitarian or Universalist leanings. In the 19th century we made a particularly strong showing; among our ancestors from that century are Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Olympia Brown, Dorothea Dix, Clara Barton, and Theodore Parker.

Thoreau is the one who "went to the woods because he wished to live deliberately" and built a tiny cabin which he make his primary residence for two years. Emerson was the preacher son of a preacher who resigned his pulpit only a few years after beginning settled ministry, unconvinced of his call. Olympia Brown was the first woman regularly ordained by a national denomination; Dorothea Dix fought for the rights of the mentally ill, Clara Barton nursed soldiers from both sides of the Civil War on the battlefield and Theodore Parker is one of the great figures of UU history.

He advocated such fundamentals as abolition, equal rights for women, religious tolerance, and transcendentalism. He also taught that thought and theology were the impermanent trappings of religion, while the permanent consisted of some greater and unknowable truth. Today most of his ideas seem obvious, almost axiomatic. But in his lifetime he was shunned, an outcast even among his colleagues. His ideas were radical for the time, so radical that they kept him on the edge of polite society. Even as he struggled to be accepted, he was uncompromising with his integrity. Like John Proctor in Arthur Miller's 1956 play *The Crucible,* he wavers but ultimately chooses his own honor over the pressures of peers and society.

Stories like the one of John Proctor are the stuff of which our legends are made. Proctor is a character who chooses to hang rather than to give a false confession to the peculiar witchcraft around which the Salem Trials revolved. That he withstood such grief and took on such anguish rather than besmirch his name and the names of those he loved makes him honorable and

fascinating and we kind of want to be like him, but we're scared. Leaders change us in part by showing us that what we thought was out of reach is actually possible. It's a challenge, then, when they remove the obstacle of impossibility and leave us staring at our toes. Given the choice between facing our own failings or labeling the leaders as idealistic, unrealistic, dreamers—or just plain wrong—we tend to opt for rejection.

The giants on whose shoulders we stand have a tendency to get marginalized or even martyred for their beliefs. This is true to tradition. Giants have always occupied a strange place in our cultural narrative, most often relegated to the representation of evil and needing to be vanquished by seven-league-boot-wielding country boys or young slingshot experts or enterprising and talented gardeners. They represent threat to security, to safety, to the status quo. They rumble and thump and destroy things, apparently with no concern for the impact of their choices.

Theodore Parker could have been accused of many of the same things, and yet he has become one of the brilliant lights of our past. The fact is, we often don't recognize greatness in our midst. The people who make us most uncomfortable may well be the ones speaking and living the truths that will lead us to our future. They may, in fact, be our modern prophets, to be ignored at our peril.

If we are not to ignore them, then we Unitarian Universalists have an important role to play, assuming we are equal to the task we've chosen. We are that liminal faith that aspires to open-mindedness; open-mindedness sufficient to make us a den not of iniquity but of possibility; of experimentation; of new thought and new action. In our finest form we are a safe harbor for the rising generations that I hope, that *we* hope will be choked with Thoreaus and Lincolns and Parkers; that will be choked with the saviors in earthly form in whom we must believe if we set aside the divinity of Jesus and the omnipotence of God—or, indeed, the very presence of God--and still want to carry hope.

We can be the proving ground. We can be the seed tray, the cold frame, the place that makes the beginnings possible. If we have the strength and the courage; if we live up to our ideals, we can foster innovation that will move us into a world we cannot even imagine. With the quickening time upon us let us understand the examples we follow, let us honor the elders and the ancestors, and then let us step forward into the new season; step into the new light.