

***Family, Faith and Making Connections***  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver  
June 30, 2024

**Reflection on the Theme by Lacey Stokes**

Anybody who knows me, knows my children are my life. I have spent over two decades mothering six children, much of it as a single mother. I didn't enter motherhood lightly. I read every book I could get my hands on. I researched everything. I was terrified to fail these precious human beings I was bringing into the world and I knew the examples of parenthood I had been given by my own biological parents were impressively harmful. I didn't want to carry on a legacy of shame and fear and pain. I wanted my children to always know that they were loved, wholly and completely, that their authenticity was celebrated and they were valuable and worthy for exactly who they are.

My goal with my own motherhood has been healing, because as I choose to raise these people with love, compassion and acceptance, I am not only building them up, I am reaching back through my own ancestral line and healing the traumas that have come before. I don't really come from a line of ancestors that I can look to with respect and pride. I will forever be grateful to my grandparents for being a beacon of hope, but there is also the reality that I am descended from people who have caused great harm. There is so much evil in my family history that I have always been tempted to divorce myself from it and yet, it is my history and my origin despite my feelings on it.

Recently, on one of my many wanderings through the woods, I ran across a tree that spoke to me. It was crowded amongst other trees and its growth was straggly and stunted. Skinny, dying limbs spaced sparsely and lacking in needles. It was a sad sight indeed. Until. Until it broke through the canopy of the other trees and burst into beautiful, healthy life. Its origins of pain and struggle were still a part of it, but so too was the gorgeous growth in the sun.

I think healing ancestral wounds is like that. The trauma of a painful beginning can be the support for something beautiful, if we keep growing. Perhaps this tree, with her layers of struggle and beauty of green growth can symbolize my own journey. It was hard to get started with an angry drunk for a father and critical, punishing mother. There was a lot I've had to unlearn, a lot I've had to overcome and some things I'm still working to overcome.

I certainly haven't been a perfect mother myself. I spend a fair amount of time worrying over the moments my temper has been short or I don't feel like I've spent enough time or I just wasn't as understanding as I think I probably should have been. But I do know, I've started the work that one day my children will carry on. I have confronted the origin story so that the beautiful growth above it can start.

Yes, my children are my life. I am grateful every single day for their presence in my life. For the conversations and the laughter, the sharing of meals and the adventures, the sheer joy of watching them grow into the people they are becoming. I hope as they reach adulthood and go out into the world, they will feel a sense of family roots that I didn't have and that their own growth surpasses mine.

Each generation is another chance to begin again, an origin story waiting to be written. May we write our children's well.

### **Sermon By Ronnie Mars**

When Alex Haley's book and TV miniseries "Roots" came out in the seventies, it led to a cultural phenomenon in the United States. It tells the saga of an American family beginning with Kunta Kinte, captured as an adolescent, sold into slavery in Africa, and transported to North America. It explores his life and those of his descendants in the United States, down to the author.

This morning, I'd like to talk about family, faith, our origins, and making connections. Any one of these could make an excellent sermon on its own but think of my sermon as the tent and the four themes of family, faith, our origins and making connections as the tent poles.

This story about my family begins with my father. On my last birthday, I turned the same age my dad was when he died. I thought about that a lot as I approached that milestone; wondering how many more grains of sand I had left to fall through my hourglass. This symbol of time serves as a reminder that life is finite. Most people who have lost a parent will say that reaching the age of your deceased mother or father is a day of mixed emotions.

Several years before he died, my dad told me he was born with a different last name. I was not surprised. My dad had not disclosed personal business about himself before. It was his way of telling me the man my paternal grandmother was married to was not his biological father. There was no further information forthcoming from him, and I regret I didn't press him for more details, but I think he revealed only what he knew. I know more about my mother's family, although that knowledge extends only to my maternal great-grandparents.

I can only speak from my Baptist experiences in talking about faith. The sermon preached to me in the church I was raised in, contrasted with what I learned in school. In the beginning in Genesis Chapter 1: verse 1: "God created the heavens and earth." Christians believed that Earth, and all living things, were created by God in six days, as described in the Bible. And Hebrews Chapter 11: verse 1: "Now faith is the

assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” From this particular passage, we see that the central feature of faith is confidence or trust. The object of faith is God and his promises. I was not feeling it! That makes me pragmatic, I guess.

There are 4,000 recognized faiths around the world. However, almost 75 percent of the people follow one of the five main faiths, which include Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, and Islam. I’ve stated some Christian fundamental beliefs. These five faiths all believe in and worship a superhuman power or powers, especially a god or gods. Wherever I was living, I always sought out a Baptist church. Deep down I knew I wasn’t a believer. It was the fellowship of being among the people in that community that gave me solace.

As far as our origins, what is more conceivable to me is the Big Bang theory. It says the universe as we know it started with an infinitely hot and dense single point that inflated and stretched first at unimaginable speeds and then at a more measurable rate over the next fourteen billion years to the still expanding cosmos that we know today. I didn't have the understanding to put what I felt into words when I was younger. What is miraculous, I believe, are our lives that formed from such a horrific event.

A year ago, scientists reported evidence that the planet Earth may have formed in just three million years, much faster than the ten to one hundred million years thought earlier. Pangaea, known as the continental drift, existed about 240 million years ago.

**(Video)** [Back in Time: Present Day to 200 Million Years Ago | California Academy of Sciences](#)  
([youtube.com](#))

Over time, Pangaea separated into pieces that moved away from one another. This video shows this supercontinent forming from the present day to two hundred million years ago. These pieces slowly assumed their positions as the continents we recognize today. They fit together like pieces of a puzzle. (

The out-of-Africa model is currently the most widely accepted model for how and where humans evolved. It proposes that Homo sapiens evolved from the earlier species Homo erectus in Africa before migrating across the world.

All humans share a common direct maternal ancestor known as Mitochondrial Eve. Their results show that Mitochondrial Eve, which statistically speaking is not one woman but a group of closely related women, emerged in the Makgadikgadi basin. Based on their genetic data, the first families stayed in this

region for 70,000 years.

I've traced my ancestors to the great continent with roots beginning in Nigeria (21%), Cameroon, Congo, and Western Bantu Peoples (20%), and Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana (19%) making these three regions sixty percent of my ancestry. The remaining regions of my ancestry DNA are made up of ten percent or less in three continents. Unless your ancestors are Indigenous people who inhabited the Americas before the arrival of European settlers, we all came from other parts of the world.

I'd like to focus on Nigeria, the dominant region of my ancestors. It takes its name from the most populous country in Africa, where today more than 168 million people live in an area about twice the size of California. It has six cities with populations over one million (the United States has nine). From its tropical south to the arid north, Nigeria as a country is a concept and product of colonialism, bringing together more than 250 ethnic groups within its borders. The Igbo religion, practiced before Islam colonization, was a mixture of human and spiritual beings. The Human category consisted of the priests, diviners, and ritual elders who conducted religious worship and sacrifices to god and goddesses. The divinities included ancestral spirits, and spirits of national heroes, and other deities.

Muslim traders brought Islam as well as goods with them across the Sahara, and the religion was adopted by some in Nigeria's northern regions by at least the ninth century. Christianity came later, with European traders who interacted with groups in the south. Religious preferences still maintain this north-south divide, with Islam predominating in the north among the Fulani and Hausa, and Christianity in the south. This seems more of a case of coercion. Imagine having your community invaded and then being told what to worship!

Slaves had always been part of West African trade across the Sahara. Once the Europeans began turning to Africa as a source of slaves for the sugar plantations in North America, the transatlantic market grew exponentially. Some estimates put the number of slaves sent to the Americas from Nigeria at 3.5 million. From 1526 to 1867, some 12.5 million captured men, women, and children were put on ships from other regions in Africa, and 10.7 million arrived in the Americas.

Conditions for them were horrendous; they endured months at sea with physical and mental abuse. Men were chained in cramped spaces with leg irons, women and children had limited freedom to move, and on average, 304 people embarked on each voyage with 265 disembarking. They were treated as commodities and shipped from port to port, and the names of most of the estimated 12.5 million

enslaved Africans were never recorded. That's why African Americans refer to their names as their slave names; the personal name given to them by others, or a name inherited from enslaved ancestors.

It was the costliest in human life of all long-distance global migrations. Without DNA, the connection to my past would have been lost. Why should I be so invested in my ancestors' story? The answer is easy. When my father does not know his father or his own name, the history we can extract is all we've got.

Some of your ancestors were among the 104 English men and boys arriving in North America to start a settlement in 1607. On May 13, they picked Jamestown, Virginia, for their settlement, which was named after their King, James I. Or some of your ancestors may have come on the Mayflower, an English sailing ship that transported a group of English families, known today as the Pilgrims, from England to the New World in 1620.

Other ancestors of yours arrived at Ellis Island. From 1892 to 1954, 12 million immigrants arriving at the Port of New York and New Jersey were processed there under federal law. Immigrants did not need a passport, visa, or any other document to enter the country. These people immigrated for a variety of reasons, including escaping political and economic oppression, as well as persecution, destitution, and violence.

Learning about American history, I realized I learned about YOUR history before I learned about my own. In other words, I was taught European history before I learned anything about the great continent of Africa. What little I knew about Africa came from news stories or what I read from a National Geographic magazine.

Jim Wallis' book, *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America*, published in 2016, calls for Americans to overcome racism in the United States, issuing an appeal rooted in fundamental Christian values. American diversity began with acts of violent racial oppression that were called "America's original" "sin," including the theft of land from Indigenous people and the enslavement of millions of Africans, who became America's greatest economic resource in building a new nation. It argues in favor of telling the truth about the American past, suggesting that this is essential to national redemption. By 1860, four million enslaved people had produced well over 60 percent of the nation's wealth. The book also discusses the concept of white privilege, arguing that it constitutes a sin.

Through my DNA matches, my extended family members include my second through third cousins who share my skin complexion, but when we look at my fourth through sixth cousins, you see that some look more like you. How much of that is the legacy of slavery?

Children of the Plantation is a euphemism used to refer to people with ancestry tracing back to the time of slavery in the United States, in which the offspring were born to African female slaves and slaves' owners from rape, which was a common occurrence.

In her poem 'Human Family', Maya Angelou reminds us that despite our differences, we are all more similar to one another than we are different. This powerful poem beautifully shows that all people can relate to one another.

One of our most basic human rights is freedom of religious expression, which is a self-evident truth. Daniel H. Mueggenborg, bishop, Roman Catholic Diocese of Reno, Nevada, says "Religion is the way in which we interpret and give meaning to the experiences and events of life. Those who share a particular religious perspective experience a certain unity, while those who have an unfamiliar perspective can feel divided. The experience of religious division is not necessarily a terrible thing unless it involves the forced imposition of one perspective on another."

I couldn't agree more. You have the right to believe what you believe. We do exercise religious freedom in this country. It's all a mystery to me; how we came to be. I love learning what scientists think! It's clear what we're capable of doing to each other. Look at our history. A friend reminded me that we should treat others as we would want to be treated. Regardless of your race or religion, things will not get better until we do that. That shouldn't be too hard. That is the hope! We're supposed to be teaching our children that. That's where it all begins.

Lacey's reflection moved me. She writes with great passion the love she has for her children. What impressed me the most is that she raised six kids, much of it as a single mother. Lacey made every effort to give her children what she had not received thus breaking the cycle of her own traumatic childhood.

I was given the gift of fatherhood to two great sons but failed to be a father to them. Proverbs 22:6 states, "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it." This verse highlights the significance of parental guidance in shaping a child's character and faith. The act of abandoning a child is not only morally wrong but also carries severe consequences.

My sons were raised by a good mother like Lacey, and they are today well-adjusted and productive citizens. I'm proud to be their father and have a better relationship with them. Staying connected is the goal.

Four days from today, this country will be celebrating its independence day. Freedom I don't take for granted. I know all too well how it can be taken. My declaration today is I no longer think of myself as an African American. I am an American. The ground we stand; the soil we grow our crops have the blood, sweat and tears of my ancestors. Here is where I took root.