

“Old Souls and New”

A Reflection by
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Where do we come from? How does life begin? What does it mean to be born?

We speak of an infant as brand-new, a little bundle of innocence, even as she can holler at a decibel level rising from who knows where, even as he can produce an aroma that confirms we are truly of the earth. Where do we come from? Where have we been?

You would likely hear responses compatible with “the facts of life” as learned by any of our OWL graduates. I refer to the Our Whole Lives curriculum, geared for various stages across the life span and focused on sexuality grounded in healthy relationships. Where do we come from? OWL is one channel for discovery. As for where we have been,

Stars image 1

“Out of the stars in their flight, out of the dust of eternity here have we come,
Stardust and sunlight, mingling through time and through space.
Out of the stars have we come, up from time,”

writes Robert Weston. Lest we think he defies Darwin, he continues:

“Time out of time before time in the vastness of space,
earth spun to orbit the sun,
Earth with the thunder of mountains newborn, the boiling of seas...

Out of the seas to the land, up from darkness to light,
Rising to walk and to fly, out of the sea trembled life.”

Is human life as an outcome of natural selection any less wondrous than gazing at the night sky, any less astonishing than witnessing stars that are light-years away, in the “time out of time” of our cosmic origins? We are ancient creatures.

Are we also ancient souls? What traces of memory and wisdom do our psyches hold from the vast pilgrimage of our origins?

This morning we welcomed new members into our midst—new souls, we might say. The community of this congregation changes. We stretch, we adapt, we flex, we transform. And I wonder. How is it that anyone chooses a community of faith with more questions than answers?

How is it that we espouse independent thinking and mutuality grounded in covenant as a workable dynamic? How is it that we seek to balance the needs of the individual and the call of community? Yet I am because you are; and you are because I am. We are woven with texture. This faith that we share has moved through a metamorphosis over the thousand or so years that hold our roots.

We are a faith as old as the soul of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar and Ishmael. We are as new as an opinion voiced by one of our children when guessing what could possibly be in that wonder box. Above all, we are connected.

Each of us has distinct glimpses of what matters, and what matters varies across what we surmise from those glimpses. How closely do we notice?

When I dedicate a child, I commonly tap “Original Mystery,” the welcoming tribute my late friend Phoebe Hoss wrote to her newborn granddaughter, Stella, and later gave me permission to use for the child dedications I perform.

You, you dear few
 solid pounds of bone,
 muscle, luscious
 rose-petal flesh; you
 with your thrusting,
 quivering, questing arms
 and legs; you with your
 wordless, watching eyes...

What is it to view the world afresh, with “wordless, watching eyes”? How is it that the eyes of an infant reflect a world that is ancient? How ancient is the fresh wisdom of an infant?

“Your children are not your children;
 they are the sons and daughters of life’s longing for itself,”

spoke the poet-sage Khalil Gibran.

“You may house their bodies, but not their souls;
 for their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow, which you cannot visit,
 not even in your dreams,”

he continues. Gibran’s words perhaps land obliquely; yet they have resonated with so many of us who hold them as prophetic truth, in accord with the title of the work in which they appear, *The Prophet*. So why not continue in the spirit of Gibran and ask, “If our child souls ‘dwell in the house of tomorrow,’ might they also ‘dwell in the house of yesterday’?” I wonder if the essence of a soul is timeless. And I wonder if this timelessness is more recognizable in some beings than others.

While all souls may be ancient and brand new, might some souls hold a trace of wisdom accumulated from who knows where or when? Or a deep current of orneriness, or malevolence even, accumulated from who knows where or when if one can't trace it to immediate family?

“We are our grandmothers’ prayers and we are our grandfathers’ visions,” we sing. “We are the breath of our ancestors.”

We are the harvest of generations. How to understand who we are without recognizing the import of generations past?

I wonder how many of us in this sanctuary this morning were raised in cultures that cultivated such recognition of past generations. [Response...] It's not quite the same as my paternal grandmother hoping against hope that I would join the D.A.R.—Daughters of the American Revolution. It's not quite the same as holding up family from past generations as heroes and heroines no matter the consequences of their life choices. Rather, it's a mindfulness that leans back into our biological and spiritual past, and it's embodied in the veneration of ancestors.

In Viet Nam, the venue of my sabbatical pilgrimage this past November, ancestor veneration is embodied in ancestor altars that are central in almost every home, no matter the religion. My first encounter with an ancestor altar was in the home of Madame Ky.

Image 2 – Madame Ky and children

It's a modest structure on a dirt road just south of Ho Chi Minh City. Two years ago, participants in the Soldier's Heart pilgrimage to Viet Nam—mostly military veterans—were en route to a destination further south when their bus came to a sudden halt on this dirt road. A flat tire and the time needed to change it called for everyone to step out of the bus for a stretch. Immediately this diminutive elderly woman approached them, motioning them to come into her home for tea and rest. She was old enough to have been alive during the American War, as the War in Viet Nam is known. Who knows what her situation was at that time? But on this occasion, she greeted everyone warmly.

Image 3 – Madame Ky at kitchen entrance

Noticing the spare conditions in which she lived—with her husband and children and grandchildren—these veterans went home and raised enough funds to build Madame Ky and her family a modern kitchen, then a bedroom. She has become a good friend of Soldier's heart and her home has become a stopping point for succeeding pilgrimages, including ours.

She greeted us as long-lost friends. We greeted Madame Ky and her large family before enjoying tea and fruit in the front room of her home.

Image 4 – Ancestor altar – Madame Ky

With great pride, she pointed overhead to their ancestor altar. You can see images of ancestors from unknown generations in the past, but no more than five. It is believed that after five generations—roughly 100 years—their souls are sufficiently at peace to no longer need the veneration received throughout the previous century. A single bouquet of flowers and an incense holder adorned the altar when we visited; but on the anniversaries of the deaths of these ancestors, the family fills the altar with fruit, flowers, incense and other gifts to honor them.

Image 5 – Tranh Dinh Song and Lan Song

Tran Dinh Song, our Vietnamese guide, and his wife, Lan, welcomed us just a few days later into their home in Da Nang.

Image 6 – Song and their ancestor altar

With great pride, Song ushered us upstairs to their family altar. Like Madame Ky and her husband, Song visits it every day to honor his ancestors from five generations back.

Image 7 – Huu Ngoc

Huu Ngoc, scholar, resistance fighter, poet, and prolific writer, greeted us a few days later in his and his wife's home in Hanoi. He is 100 years old—but not quite ready for veneration on his family's ancestor altar.

Image 8: Huu Ngoc signing book

He is still writing, and he insisted on giving each of us a personally signed copy of his most recent work, *Viet Nam: Tradition and Change*. In this 2016 release, when Huu Ngoc was 97, he describes, among myriad other facets of Vietnamese culture, the practice of what he explicitly terms ancestor worship:

“Yesterday was the death anniversary of my mother, who died several decades ago. I placed on our ancestral altar a tray of flowers, a cup of plain water, and a few dishes of food. Then with my hands clasped in prayer, I bowed three times to her photograph. All the while, my four-year-old grandson looked on, intrigued. ‘Is your mother home with us today, Grandpa?’ he asked. ‘Yes,’ I answered.

He explains:

“Many Vietnamese believe that the departed are not separated from the living, that their souls hover about the ancestral altar, and that their spirits will return to stay with the living on festive occasions, especially at Tet (the Lunar New Year) and on death anniversaries. Traditionally, Vietnamese honor only death anniversaries, not birthdays, the latter being a recent Western importation and a luxury for the rich. The deceased are believed to share the joys and pains of the living.”

We are connected across time, well beyond the five generations formally recognized at Vietnamese ancestor altars. We make new friends, greet new members of the family, and welcome new members of this congregation, but we are all ancient souls. We may look into eyes that seem to hold such depth of wisdom and behold such prodigious talents that it seems impossible for anyone to have developed them in the mere five, fifty, or hundred years of life as we know it. They are perhaps old souls. Might we learn from the wisdom of those children of life who dwell in the house of tomorrow and in the houses of yesterday beyond our imagining. Might we welcome into being those of us who walk as apparent beginners on fresh paths.

“For each child that’s born, a morning star rises
and sings to the universe who we are.”

Let’s now sing it...(1051 in *Singing the Journey*)

Sources

Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1923.

Phoebe Hoss, “Original Mystery”, used by permission of the poet.

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Robert T. Weston, “Out of the Stars,” in *Singing the Living Tradition*, The Unitarian Universalist Association, Beacon Press, Boston, 1993, 530.