

“Rooting around in our ashes”

Delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Muncie, May 19, 2019

Dr. Joel Tishken

On the screen now is our quote for the week. The author of the quote, in addition to being an NPR journalist in New York, was also a Wiccan priestess and Unitarian Universalist. In 1979 she published the book, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today*. The book’s publication proved to be a watershed moment as it brought witches, druids, and pagans out of the broom closet and into broader public awareness. I was captured by the last line of Adler’s remark, “All of us are rooting around in the ashes searching for something we have lost.”

I invite all of us to consider today, what might be among our ashes? And what is the condition of them? Fires do destroy, sometimes catastrophically. But fires do not obliterate everything to total ruin and nothingness. There could very well be some things among your ashes that while perhaps impacted, or transformed, or even devastated by the fire, are still in some state of preservation, awaiting our discovery. Like a forest that regrows from portions of trees that survived a forest fire, there may be pieces of our ancestral pasts within our own ashes that could become our own new growth. [slide 2]

Every person in this room is standing in ashes from fires that occurred in their ancestral pasts. The differences among us will depend on the size of those fires and how recently or how far back in time those fires occurred. Please allow me to make one thing clear—I am not suggesting any degree of equivalency. Yes, we all have ashes. But we all have different volumes of ashes. Some people are standing in a mountain of ash with embers that are still warm. Peoples in First Nations suffer from transgenerational trauma and historical trauma from what happened in their ancestral pasts, and that continues to play out for them daily, in ways that I cannot even begin to imagine what that feels like.

However, the embers at your feet do not have to be warm from a fire that recently burned to have an impact on us. And here’s why. We would expect that transgenerational and historical traumas would be passed on psychologically and socially based on our environment and how we are raised. But genetic science is currently suggesting that ancestral traumas are also not just a matter of our nurture, but also of our nature. Traumas can be epigenetically transferred. Life

experiences can alter the composition of the DNA that is transferred to subsequent generations. Trauma, therefore, can enter into our lineages through both our nature and our nurture.

So while there is no equivalency in the fires our ancestors endured, or the kind of ash we each have around us, Adler's quote is nonetheless accurate. Having some ashes around our family trees is something that is universal. It is true even of those who come from privileged lineages. Paul Kivel in his book *Uprooting Racism* contends that racism harms everyone by leading to a loss of culture and a romanticizing of other cultures.

skipping [slide 3]

When I lived in the deep South, I told folks there that one of the things I missed was living in a place where white people weren't all the same. No matter the race of the person hearing me say that, if they were born and raised Southerners they looked at me like I had gone insane. What in the world do I mean, white people aren't all the same? In response, sometimes I told them a joke I recall hearing growing up in Wisconsin. The joke would work equally well in other parts of the upper Midwest and upper Plains states. The joke is: "What is multi-cultural education in LaCrosse?" The punchline is: "Finns are people too." The joke reveals a prejudice grounded in ethnicity and culture. That among the many people of the region who descend from Norwegians, Swedes, and Danes is a chauvinism that their kind of Scandinavian is of a higher degree of pedigree than being Finnish. Yet it also reveals the fact that these identities still have meaning for people in that part of the Midwest.

To the people I was speaking to in the South, long-standing racism had divided their world into white and black, and more recently brown. Differences among whites disappeared in the creation and maintenance of white supremacy. Racism can therefore lead to a loss of culture and identity for the oppressed and the oppressor. To compensate for that loss, people often romanticize other cultures and attach them to their family trees. For southerners, in recent decades, romanticizing has led to everyone having a Cherokee princess in their family tree. Rarely it may be true, but more often it's about a family assigning themselves high class pedigree and a desire to be something that now sounds cool. However, adding a Cherokee princess to your family tree, or getting drunk on St. Patrick's day, doesn't make up for the loss of your ancestral culture. And assigning your family a Cherokee princess doesn't honor the Cherokee—it continues cultural violence by co-opting an identity we have no right to and perpetuates romanticized imagery that is inaccurate.

Let's redirect ourselves back to Adler's quote. She is speaking to the loss of culture and identity in a specific way—regarding spirituality, meaning-making, and worldview. Adler is correct that all human cultures at some points in time were like those we now call pagan—they saw the universe polytheistically, that had an orientation toward nature, and were bounded and reinforced by their culture—religion and identity were one. In many parts of the world, those ancestral religions were overtaken, sometimes peacefully, sometimes violently, by the spread of Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. That change was more than just a change in religious practice and identity—it transformed how people saw the world. In our society, many of our embedded assumptions come from Christianity even if we're not Christian. Linear time, our view of the environment as a resource for our usage, our ideas about gender and sexuality including patriarchy and homophobia—all have their roots in Christianity. Previous pre-Christian ways of relating to land, or thinking about gender or sexuality, lie in our ashes.

As UUs, we regularly challenge dominant narratives—whether Christian, Western, or capitalist—and encourage the writing of new ones. It may be that our ancestral identities, cultures, and religions can be a source of meaning for us, a source of lost wisdom, a different way of seeing the universe. This proved to be true for me. I would like to share about a few things I have found as I've sifted around in my ashes over the course of my adulthood.

One thing I found was a sense of ethnic identity and pride. I had no ancestors in this country before the 1910s—so just four generations ago. And yet by the time I was growing up, almost anything that gave my family an ethnic identity was gone. We were just generic white Lutherans who ate tatter-tot casserole and jello with fruit in it like everyone else in Wisconsin. My ancestors are almost entirely from Eastern Europe and strived to look like they weren't. They purposefully did not pass their culture to their children—my grandparents—in the desire that they would pass as “normal” white Americans. Pressures on my ancestors to Americanize had robbed me of an ethnic identity and created ashes.

And so, over the course of my adulthood I set out to learn as much as I could about my ancestors. I was particularly intrigued by my maternal ancestry of Lithuanian. It's a rather obscure part of the world. I knew almost nothing about it, and as a result knew less about myself.

I found meaning in even some very small discoveries. I discovered that is why I have, what I now call, Lithuanian eye shadow. The skin under the eyes of people from that part of the world tends to be thinner, and therefore more veins show, making our eyes darker. So now when

I get the occasional super-rude remark that I ought to get more sleep, or did I get a black eye—I now respond, “no, I did not get two black eyes at the same time that are perfectly symmetrical and have the same shading everywhere—I’m Baltic, you jerk.” It’s such a small thing. But it transformed something I was self-conscious about into an ethnic thing I no longer am.

I also discovered a fascinating place with a deep and rich history that you might not expect for what is now such a tiny and obscure place. My mother and I visited the country in 2010. I’d like to share about a few things that had great meaning for me.

[**slide 4**] This is Kernave, which is a UNESCO World Heritage site. It was the capital of Lithuania until it was destroyed and not rebuilt during a civil war in 1390. These hills were constructed, and on top of each of them once stood wooden structures for different members of the royal court. One hill was where the head pagan priest who served the king lived. I’m getting goosebumps even now remembering how it felt to climb to the top of the hill and stand where the head pagan priest once lived, in a valley that was beautiful all by itself. It made me feel connected to the land, and to a deep and pagan history in a way I never had before, or since.

[**slide 5**] These images are of the castle at Trakai, completed by Vytautas the Great in the early 1400s. We toured the castle and had lunch at a restaurant on the shore of the lake. The location, the castle, the history...all of it was magical. I was absolutely transfixed. I could have stayed there all day. And I very well might have if the tour group hadn’t moved on after lunch.

[**slide 6**] It was under the rule of Grand Duke Vytautas that the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth reached its greatest territorial extent. As you can see, it once stretched from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea. At its peak it was the largest empire in Europe. Obviously Vytautas was a conqueror; large empires don’t simply appear. I don’t want to glorify his violence the way this 19th century image does. [**slide 7**] However, he deserves huge credit for something else he did that was totally unusual for the day--he allowed for freedom of religion, even though he was Catholic like the rest of the aristocrats by this era. But among the peasantry, freedom of religion enabled the practice of paganism to continue into the 1700s. Lithuania was the last country of Europe to convert to Christianity.

Because the old pagan religion was practiced for so long and was still being practiced so recently, the old gods and goddesses are just part of the place everywhere you go. [**slide 8**] For instance, sometimes we would pass by a tree and the guide would tell a story. One of the stories I remember is when we passed a linden tree our guide explained that the goddess Laima decides

the fate of each of us while under a linden tree. On my first night in town, I strolled up to a wood carver at a booth and asked for a statue of Perkunas, the Lord of Thunder. He didn't speak English, but he pointed to a statue, this one here that I brought with me today. I could go on, but I trust you get the idea, the old religion is very much at a surface level in the country and is just part of the culture. Every Lithuanian knows the mythology and folklore of their ancestral pagan religion.

The remains of Lithuanian paganism are among my ashes, changed but not destroyed by the spread of Christianity. And it proved to be a valuable gift when I discovered it two decades ago or so. It immediately gave me a connection to something ancestral that had some spiritual meaning for me. That discovery brought me to where I am spiritually today as a nontheist pagan. I and my ancestors have different views on supernaturalism and theism, but we share a mutual adoration of Nature and trees. It has given me a place to stand spiritually, a place of meaning making and beauty and wonder, that simultaneously has ancestral resonance, connects me to a place, and gives me an ethnic identity.

Before we move away from Lithuania content, I would like to point out that Lithuania is part of the heritage of everyone here today. The freedom of religion allowed by Vytautas was something that entered into the political culture of Lithuania and Poland and lasted for centuries. When some Unitarians were fleeing intolerant places in Europe, Poland was one of the places they went to. Known as the Polish Brethren, the group was so large they had their own seminary and printing press. They were in Poland about 80 years, until they were expelled in 1658 when all Protestants were accused of being collaborators with the Lutheran Swedish invaders. The Polish Brethren, then, are part of our UU ancestral ashes. Not only do they show that you never know what you may find in your ashes, they also illustrate that there is more than one way to define our ancestry.

Your ancestral story obviously differs from mine. You may not have grown up feeling ethnically vanilla as I did. Or even if you did, that doesn't mean it ever bothered you. The religion you were raised with may not have felt as alien as mine did. You may discover the seed of paganism and nature-religion among your ashes but not be interested in replanting it as I did. Whether or not my things could be your things is not where I see the value of my message today.

Somewhere in your ancestral line are events that cut you off from your ancestral past. Whether it was forced or elective immigration, Americanization, being targeted by hatred or

intolerance, cultural loss, generational poverty, forced or elective religious conversion, famine, war, genocide...and on the list could go—all of us have some times when our ancestors and who they were was burned. What have you and your ancestors lost? Has your family created a romanticized and invented identity that is not actually who you are? What things could be regrown and provide new meaning to who we are?

In this month devoted to the theme of curiosity, let us end today where we started—what might be among your ashes? It is my wish for us all that we may find new meaning for ourselves and who we are among our ashes.

Matas. So may it be.