

Once I was big enough to get around by myself, I liked to wander... down alleyways, into the thickets and ditches, following streambeds through culverts, back out into the woods. Almost anywhere a child could fit, which was a lot of places. As a general rule, things like fences were ignored, unless they were accompanied by large dogs or threatening signage.

These are also places where the casually discarded ends up. Mostly bottles and cans, cast off pieces of clothing and the like. Sometimes the rusted out hulks of abandoned cars, or old appliances, their boxy shapes a ghostly white presence in the shadows. Sometimes people, although not so much then.

Small town dumps were particularly interesting places to wander, cornucopias of things no longer wanted, some still useful or pregnant with stories. Why would anyone throw away a perfectly good chair? Or the little red fire truck, worn from the hands of a child playing?

All these places are usually overgrown with what we call weeds.

Weeds are plants that some people view as undesirable in a particular place. A plant that is a weed in one context is not a weed when growing in a situation where it is in fact wanted.

One person's weed is another's medicine, another's evening meal. Their names are unfamiliar these days, but they were once common knowledge.

Amaranth, Broadleaf plantain, Burdock, Common lambs quarters, Creeping Charlie, Dandelion, Goldenrod, Milk thistle, Sorrel, St John's Wort, Sumac, Wood Sorrel, Yellow Nutsedge, to call in just a few.

Many weeds do well in disturbed environments where soil or natural vegetative cover has been damaged or frequently gets damaged, disturbances that give the weeds advantages over desirable crops, pastures, or ornamental plants.

The term weed also is applied to any plant that grows or reproduces aggressively, or is invasive outside its native habitat. More broadly "weed" is occasionally applied derogatorily to species

outside the plant kingdom, species that can survive in diverse environments and reproduce quickly.

Such species often do well in human-dominated environments as other species are not able to adapt, like the common pigeon, brown rat and the raccoon. Other weedy species have been able to expand their range without actually living in human environments, as human activity has damaged the ecosystems of other species. The coyote, the white-tailed deer and the brown headed cowbird.

Like other weedy species, humans reproduce quickly, disperse widely, live in a variety of habitats, establish a population in strange places, succeed in disturbed ecosystems and resist eradication once established.

It's illuminating to think of ourselves as weeds, rather than the most desirable crop of some Creators cultivation. That shift in perspective still allows us some small measure of pride. As a species, we are the most successful of weeds, or so it would seem from our admittedly biased perspective.

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You can tell a lot about a culture by who it considers to be weeds, people undesirable in a particular place – which could be a physical place, or a social location. Welcome in the fields, but not the parlor. Welcome in the kitchen, but not the boardroom.

As Unitarian Universalists, we strive to be aware of this, and many sermons have been preached on the subject, but today I'm rambling elsewhere.

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The small town dumps I spoke of earlier are largely gone now, replaced with vast landfills swarming with giant machines, attended only by birds and a few humans. No child could ever wander there, sifting through the detritus of other lives. I count that as a loss.

You can tell a lot about a culture by what it throws away, what it tries to bury in the landfills of reality and of memory.

For us, it's the past. We strive to bury the past in myriad ways.

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Consider a landfill. A broad deep hole is excavated, lined with clay and some kind of thick plastic. It is filled with alternating layers of garbage and dirt, then ultimately capped with a final layer of dirt, planted with grass and perhaps trees, and usually left alone. Although sometimes they become parks.

But much of its content doesn't decay, or if it does, it's encapsulated, isolated from the cycle of life, of death and rebirth, unable to fertilize what comes next. Admittedly, much of it is toxic and dangerous, and needs to be isolated.

But that begs other questions, like: Why is that in our lives in the first place? Isn't there a better way than burying it and forgetting about it, hoping for the best?

Consider a modern cemetery. A body is encapsulated in fiberglass or metal, isolated from the cycle of death and rebirth, unable to fertilize what comes next. It is buried with others in a place covered with green grass and trees. A solemn place to be sure, but one rarely visited. A place where the dead go to die.

Consider the dead. Not just our dead, but the dead of all species, all the plants and animals, the weeds, the dead of all the life that has gone before, the extinct species, the dead that feed the present with the atoms of their bodies that came from stars, the dead that feed the present with the memories of their acts.

These are all our ancestors. Those who came before, without whom we would not be here, their flesh and bones transformed in our bones and our flesh.

All of our ancestors, no matter our lineage, venerated the dead. We have encapsulated them, isolated them from the cycle of birth and death, unable to fertilize what comes next.

The Pueblo peoples of the Southwest, here where we live, know that when the dead are venerated, they change into the clouds and rain that nourish the Earth. When the dead are forgotten, the rains cease.

To take that literally is to do both us and them a disservice. Not all rains are visible, not all droughts are physical.

For them, and for the ancient Chinese poets, and so many other cultures, consciousness and memory reside in the landscape, in the sky, in the sun and moon and stars.

The ancestors reside in the landscape. The landscape is ripe with memory, conscious of the past, beckoning us into the future.

The Senegalese poet Birago Diop, wrote:

Hearing things more than beings,
listening to the voice of fire,
the voice of water.
Hearing in wind, the weeping bushes,
sighs of our forefathers.

The dead are never gone:
they are in the shadows.
The dead are not in earth:
they're in the rustling tree,
the groaning wood,
water that runs,
water that sleeps,
they're in the hut, in the crowd,
the dead are not dead.

The dead are never gone,
they're in the breast of a woman,
they're in the crying child,
in the flaming firebrand.

The dead are not in earth:
they're in the dying fire,
the weeping grasses,
whimpering rocks,
they're in the forest,
they're in the house,
the dead are not dead.

No matter where we walk, the ground beneath us is layered with bones and pottery and bricks and old metal. Layered with the atoms of all those beings who came before, with roots that reach deep into the past.

We are part of that landscape.

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There is little that we have thought or experienced that our ancestors did not conceive of, that they did not go through, and in many cases, think far more deeply about than we do.

They were survivors. They endured ice ages. They survived fire and flood, long years of wars, economic depressions, the rise and fall of empires, comets, plagues, famines. They built cities and civilizations.

I'd like to quote something for you:

“ . . . Let [the reader] follow in his mind how, as discipline broke down bit by bit, morality at first foundered; how it next subsided in ever greater collapse and then began to topple headlong in ruin—until the advent of our own age in which we can endure neither our vices nor the remedies needed to cure them. . . . Recently wealth has brought greed in its train, manifold

amusements have led to people's obsession with ruining themselves and with consuming all else through excess and self-indulgence."

One might think these words were written yesterday, but they were written just over 2000 years ago by the Roman historian Titus Livius, known to us as Livy. He wrote them shortly after Augustus, to the acclaim of the Senate and People of Rome, effectively ended the Roman Republic by becoming dictator in all but name.

Livy believed that Augustus would restore Rome to the moral virtues of its humble beginnings. We know that never happened. We also know whatever truth there may be to the idea of a glorious past for any nation, the very idea is also suspect. Rome continued its decline, as all empires have done.

It is tempting to think that empires decline and fall because of moral decay. Livy thought so, Gibbon did as well. It's particularly tempting for people of faith because morality is our stock in trade.

For me the point is that Livy sounds like a contemporary. One could easily imagine him spouting his opinions on a cable TV talk show.

Our ancestors wrestled with the same issues we do. They too sought justice, and equality, and a say in how they were governed.

Here is Livy again:

"So difficult is it to observe moderation in the defense of liberty, while each man under the presence of equality raises himself only by keeping others down, and by their very precautions against fear men make themselves feared, and in repelling injury from ourselves we inflict it on others as though there were no alternative between doing wrong and suffering it."

And this from Aristotle:

“In all sciences and arts the end is a good, and the greatest good and in the highest degree a good in the most authoritative of all—this is the political science of which the good is justice, in other words, the common interest.”

I don't seek to analyze their words, or debate what I consider their eternal truth. I am not here to point how far or little we have come in two thousand years. Instead, I ask that you think of them as something remembered. A old memory. A link in an ancestral chain of thought and being that goes back millennia.

One of our challenges in the present is our relationship with the dead, and with death.

Our news is filled with research whose end is immortality, either in the physical world, perhaps transplanted into a robot or clone, or uploaded into some cloud of data. Our medical establishment seeks to delay death at all costs. The aged and dying are segregated so we no longer have to face our own mortality.

We think death is an end, and so we fear death. We no longer seek an honorable death and a place with the ancestors, becoming part of a continuity that stretches back into deep time.

Those who came before us knew better. As Livy and Aristotle show us, our ancestors were quite sophisticated, no matter what lineage we come from.

The underlying conceit of our time is that the people of the past were primitive, unsophisticated, driven by foolish beliefs and ignorance. We are encouraged to believe this because it cuts us off from our ancestors, denies their wisdom and strength, and renders us powerless in the face of great change, living in a time of increasing challenge and uncertainty.

We are weeds, strong and adaptable. Generations and generations live inside us. We contain multitudes, and in their memories are memories of meeting – or failing to meet – the challenges of the past. Part of our task is to discover how all these ancestors – human and other than human - continue to inform our lives.

Like those who came before, let us remember our sacred ancestors, delve deep into their memories, and seek to become ancestors in our turn, so that the great river of life continues, and we live on in the clouds and the rain, nourishing those yet to come.

References / Reading List

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The Presence of the Past: Morphic Resonance and the Habits of Nature, Rupert Sheldrake

The History of Rome, Book 1, Titus Livius (Livy),

The Politics, Aristotle