

Clouds of Witnesses
Sermon by Matt Meyer
January 12, 2014

Earlier, I told you a story called Miriam and the Tambourine. Let me share another one called, “Matt and the Maraca.” Just about ten years ago I took a semester off from college to go study music in Cuba. In particular, I was there to study the religious music of Santeria, the dominant religion in Cuba, which comes out of the west African polytheistic traditions.

The services are fairly different than our own new England puritan tradition. They’re centered around three drummers who play rhythms and sing songs for the various orishas, the Gods and Goddesses of Santeria. Services last for hours and hours with participants singing and dancing, sharing dinner and dessert and sometimes even passing a around a bottle of rum to share. As I said, they’re somewhat different from how we do things here in the White protestant tradition.

One service in particular that I attended has stuck with me. I had met up with a group of musicians that brought me along to a service, but they were a few people short. So a little way into the service, the lead drummer pointed at me, and pointed at a maraca on the floor and pointed back at me. In utter terror, I picked up the maraca. Now the rhythms of these drums are enormously complicated. The maraca part was actually the only part of anything that they were doing at the moment that I understood. So I began to play.

And maybe this has happened to you— where you know you’ve stepped into something WAY over your head. But a few minutes in, you take some deep breathes and your heart stops racing and you start to think, “Oh. I *got* this.” In fact, maybe you even get to thinking, “yeah,. I’m actually the *perfect* person for this job!”

And in my experience, that’s just the moment that everything falls apart.

For me, it was just at that fleeting moment of confidence, that the person near me in the service began to go into convulsions, as they were becoming possessed by one of the Orishas of the tradition. They shook and trembled and I tried with all of my might to focus on this little maraca rhythm without losing the beat. Even in my anxiety and confusion, I was awed by the ability of this gathered community to call this element of the divine to be in the room with us. We had literally invited this spirit to join us for the celebration. To reach out and take hands and dance with us.

It’s important to know that the ancient and current conflicts between monotheism and polytheism have very little to do with the number of gods. Instead, they have everything to do with the nature of divinity. The Orishas of Santeria are not all knowing, all powerful, or all loving. They are the spirits of the ancestors. People

like you and me who walked the earth with strengths and weaknesses, but they are remembered because they are people who lived with such conviction that we can still feel them here in the room with us.

This understanding of ancestors is not so far from our own Unitarian Universalist theology. We believe in the gathered religious community as a place where we are held in love and made more whole. We believe that it's the gathered community of seekers that calls us to seek the truth in love and then live our truth more fully. And we believe that we have inherited a tradition of faith, hope and love from our ancestors who lived with such conviction that they shaped the world we know today. When we work in the name of fierce love, or for real family values through marriage equality, or an end to unjust and unnecessary deportations, or reproductive justice, let us remember those who went before, because the spirit of the work they did is here in the room with us.

The community of travelers that surrounds us in a place like this gives us the strength to do what we already know needs to be done. And that community of fellow travelers includes not only those who stand beside us when we gather in the sanctuary for justice or in the streets for worship. Our fellow travelers include those who have gone before. Those that planted the trees that give us shade and dug the wells that give us water. It also includes those who will come after us and carry on the work that we may have left unfinished. The saints of our tradition arrive in these moments to remind us that **there is work to do** and **we are not alone** in doing it.

Who are the people in your past and present and future who act as a compass for you? What is your practice for connecting to something larger than yourself, when you can't do it alone? Are there people in your life, physically or spiritual, who sit with you when you're weary and can't find a way forward? Who are the family members, of birth or of choice, that hold your hand and walk with you? Who are the people among your inheritance of religious liberals, of justice makers, of daily task-doers, that lived with such conviction that you can still feel them here in the room?

Because of those who came before, we are;
In spite of their failings, we believe;
Because of, and in spite of the horizons of their vision,
We, too, dream.
—Rev. Barbara Pescan

I grew up Unitarian Universalist, attending Sunday school every week. Every week I would come to a place like this and I would learn about tolerance and reason. I would learn about justice and equity and compassion. When I came of age though and began to understand more of the wider world around me, I was surprised to learn that not everyone shares these values. In addition to individual greed and prejudice, there are systems of injustice that mock the values I had internalized in my religious community.

Coming of age, I began to see that the lessons I had learned about what it means to be a man in our culture have damaged my ability to be in real relationship with the women and trans people in my life. The racial segregation in our cities and suburbs has often left me culturally isolated and blinded to inequalities, even when I was surrounded by them and even still when I unknowingly added to them. Even the effort of imagining a different world of justice and equity, can leave me feeling weary and exhausted. It can feel like I'm using all my energy to hold onto my own simple part, when everything around me is falling apart. The saints of our tradition arrive in these moments to remind us that **there is work to do** and **we are not alone** in doing it.

Some of us read the stories of our foremothers in books. Some of us sit with the elders among us to hear their journeys. Sometimes we listen to the children, because they know truths we have long forgotten. And as we

look around at these fellow travelers, we locate ourselves. Like an X on a map, we begin to see this web of interdependence that holds us, and carries us. And it is beautiful and it is whole and it is holy.

African perspective on music and the human perspective on relationship.

A note doesn't mean anything until you hear it relation to another.

Desmond Tutu often shares an African wisdom that says "a person is a person through other person."

When we are worn out from too much work and not enough connection, how can we gather together to invite the spirit of **peace** and a deeper joy to be in the room with us? When we are angry with the headlines and decision makers and power brokers, how do we invite the spirit of **justice** and **equity** to be in the room with us, and show us a way forward? When American apartheid continues in our schools and prisons and immigrant detention centers, how do we invite the spirit of **love** to be with us and give us **courage** for the struggle?

All that we have ever loved and all that we have ever been
Stands with us on the brink of all that we aspire to create:

A deeper **peace**,

A larger **love**,

A more embracing **hope**,

A greater generosity of spirit,

A deeper joy in this life we share

-Leslie Takahshi Morris