

Standing on the Shoulders of Those Who've Gone Before Us

Rev. Cheryl Mayes

(Heritage)

Have you noticed a renewed fascination with ancestry that has arisen because of Ancestry.com? Jackson and I have our kits still in the wrapper, waiting for us to send them off to find out where we're really from. What is it about knowing some of our history that is so compelling for us? It's part of knowing who we are – our identity.

I love the passage in Deuteronomy 26:5 where Moses is giving last instructions to the people before Joshua will lead them into the Promised Land. He reminds them to remember their own story as a people. As they bring their gifts to the altar, they are to say before God and everybody: **"A wandering Aramean was my ancestor..."** Moses is thinking back to Jacob, who lived the semi-nomadic life of a successful sheep herder. You may remember that Jacob's beloved son Joseph was carted off to Egypt as a slave but in time became a powerful leader and assistant to the Pharaoh himself. When famine came to Jacob's land, Joseph invited his father to come to Egypt where there would be food enough for the whole family. Over generations, however, the Egyptians got worried that the descendants of Jacob were getting too numerous and strong. That's when life became unbearably harsh for the Hebrew people. And now, Moses stands before his people, having led them out of Egypt and through forty years of wandering in the wilderness. The Promised Land is in sight. He wants them to remember where they came from.

What is the story of this spiritual community? Who are the guiding lights who first began this work of bringing the Unity message [the Gospel] to this area? Do you know how it all began? What were some of the ups and downs they experienced along the way?

Did you know that communities carry these experiences – the challenges and the joys – in their DNA? When we did an "Honoring Our Past, Creating Our Future" workshop at my former congregation, we discovered that in the 80-some years of our history, there was a period of at least 40 of those years when ministers never stayed longer than two years. Unity in Yakima seemed to have revolving doors as far as ministers were concerned. And what came out during our workshop was that there was a powerful fear of abandonment flowing beneath the surface of our life together. Having been there almost eleven years at that time, mine was the second longest pastorate they'd had. So the workshop leader talked with them about this, reminding them that I would in fact one day leave them. That would be natural and OK. It would not be me abandoning them. It could be all of us deciding to grow in new ways.

Who are some of the "saints" that have shone their light of faith and love in this community over the years? I would love to hear a few of their names now...

[Note: You might want to have two or three people primed to share or do a little research yourself beforehand – especially mentioning some of those who were there before anyone in the congregation would have known them personally.]

A number of years ago, a man of great faith by the name of Billy Graham was invited to a luncheon in his honor in Charlottesville NC. He hesitated because by that time his Parkinson's disease was fairly advanced. But the leaders assured him that they didn't want him to give a major address. They just wanted to honor him. So he said Yes.

After many wonderful things were said about him, Rev. Graham got up to speak. Here's what he said:

"I'm reminded today of Albert Einstein, the great physicist who this month has been honored by Time magazine as the Man of the Century. Einstein was once traveling from Princeton on a train when the conductor came down the aisle, punching the tickets of every passenger. When he came to Einstein,

Einstein reached in his vest pocket. He couldn't find his ticket, so he reached in his trouser pockets.

It wasn't there, so he looked in his briefcase but couldn't find it.

Then he looked in the seat beside him. He still couldn't find it.

The conductor said, 'Dr. Einstein, I know who you are. We all know who you are. I'm sure you bought a ticket. Don't worry about it.'

Einstein nodded appreciatively. The conductor continued down the aisle punching tickets. As he was ready to move to the next car, he turned around and saw the great physicist down on his hands and knees looking under his seat for his ticket.

The conductor rushed back and said, 'Dr. Einstein, Dr. Einstein, don't worry, I know who you are No problem. You don't need a ticket. I'm sure you bought one.'

Einstein looked at him and said, 'Young man, I too, know who I am. What I don't know is where I'm going.'

Then Billy Graham told the group gathered there that he had bought a new suit for this occasion. But he didn't want his audience to remember that suit when they next saw it at his memorial service. He said:

"I want you to remember this:

I not only know who I am ... I also know where I'm going."

As individuals in Unity, we don't worry about where we are going after we die. We know that heaven is a consciousness we can choose right now and that our life in God is eternal.

“Nothing can separate us from the love of God”, Paul reminds us in Romans 8. This is fabulous news!

As spiritual communities, however, we’re not always as clear as we could be about who we are together (our identity) or where we are going (our mission). There are amazing possibilities ahead for you, but there are a lot of unknowns right now as well.

This reminds me of Hebrews, Chapter 11 in the New Testament. I quoted the first verse of this chapter the last time we were together: ***“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”*** The whole chapter is often called “The Roll Call of the Faithful.” It reminds us of story after story of individuals who continued to trust God, even when the way ahead was not clear. After listing these many inspiring people who accomplished great things by faith, the passage concludes in Hebrews 12:1: ***“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witness, let us also lay aside every weight...and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us...”***

Metaphysically speaking, this is a message for us – for each of us here today. Life is full of transitions, is it not? We thought there would be clearer maps to show us where to go next. It turns out, however, that it will be by faith that we take each next step forward. So “lay aside every weight” and get on your long-distance running shoes. A fabulous, fascinating journey is about to continue. When you start to think you are all alone on the path, remember your heritage – those who paved the way before you to bring you to this very moment. We’ve got a whole cloud of witnesses, past and present, cheering us on!

Part 1 - Introducing Five Focus Points for Moving Through Transition in a Congregation

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Rev. Cheryl Mayes is an experienced Minister with a demonstrated history of working in the religious institutions industry. Skilled in Theology, Discipleship, Pastoral Counseling, Spiritual Direction, and Pastoral Care. Strong community and social services professional with a Spiritual Education and Enrichment (SEE) focused in Unity Principles from Unity Institute, Unity Village, Lee's Summit, MO.

Note: More of Cheryl Mayes's article on the five Focus Points will appear in the IMN Friday newsletter in the near future.