What does to be a people of memory?

The theme of memory is a familiar concept around this time of year. With only two months left, we are starting the process of looking back over the past year and looking back at all that has happened; all that we have lived through in this year. It is also the time of year that we are looking ahead to holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas, in which many of us will gather with friends, family, and families of choice. In the midst of all of these gatherings, there will be laughter and sharing of stories from the celebrations of previous years and an attempt to fill up our photo albums and social media feeds with the creation of new memories from the time that we have spent together. It is also a time of year when many world cultures remember loved ones and people who are important to us that have passed away. Whether it is Día de los Muertos, or All Souls’ Day, or Samhain, there is a belief that the veil between the world of the living and the world of spirits that have passed on is at its thinnest, and for a brief moment we are able to be close to those who still occupy a large place in our hearts.

I have to be honest: “memory” is not a word that is always readily accessible in my own personal theological vocabulary. I am much more comfortable with words like “vision” and “purpose.” Those words are concepts in the future that have not yet materialised. We have complete control and agency over shaping the meaning of those words for ourselves from scratch. But “memory” conveys something that has already taken place; something that has already occurred. To be a people of memory means that we have to spend time going back and looking at the people, places, things, and events that have made us into the people we have become and the people that we are today. This means delving back into the stories of our past. It means confronting things that, for some of us, we have spent too much time and energy trying to move past and move beyond so that we do not have to revisit them. But in order to be a people of memory, we have to go back and revisit them; a process which can often be messy and uncomfortable, to say the least.

In 2008—close to around this time of year—my American grandfather, Robert Kaelin, passed away at the age of 88. He was the first close family member that I had experienced passing away. He had been suffering for a number of years from the effects of Alzheimer’s, and it was difficult and painful to witness what the disease had done to him in his final years. This was a man who was a veteran of the US Army. He had served in the Pacific Theatre in World War II. He was an avid deer hunter, a man who fixed and did work on cars, a man who for years almost single-handedly maintained several acres of farmland and wetlands in the Hudson Valley of New York, and a highly decorated Masters Amateur tennis champion well into his late 70s and early 80s. And all of sudden—almost overnight from one family visit to the next—he had been turned into a man who did not recognise who you were or where he was.

Some people say that Alzheimer’s disease robs people of their identity and of who they are. I would disagree with this. Alzheimer’s does not rob you of who you are. Who you are is still there and the disease can never completely take that away from you, no matter how ravaging it is. What Alzheimer’s does take from you are the connections that one person makes to their memories. Those connections are the ways in which we access who we are and how we communicate those aspects of ourselves with others. It is the way that we remember and relate to those that we have formed special relationships and connections with. It is how we express our emotions towards them. In essence, Alzheimer’s breaks every connection we have to our memories one by one over time until we are reduced to being our own prisons of solitary confinement; we are still ourselves, but we are trapped in our own minds

The lessons that I learned from my grandfather’s last few years is that, with regards to what it means to be a people of memory, we are a people of privilege. We cannot assume that our ability to remember—or to choose to not remember—will be something that we can take for granted. We cannot always rely that it will be something that is there for us. We need to cherish and treasure our ability to share the memories that we have while we have the ability to share them, because it is one of the unique things that makes us not only people of memory, but individuals as well. Sharing memories not only gives us an opportunity to reflect on who we are. It allows us to reflect on the journey that we completed thus far and the many things that we have learned along the way. It is one of the reasons that I love the fact that we as UUs do not celebrate funerals—we have memorial services and celebrations of life where we create the space where stories about the person and the impact that they had can be told and shared with others.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are a faith tradition that is built upon a heritage of memory and legacy. Our memories have made us the community that we are: we have the opportunity to look to the future having been enriched and learning from our memories, both cherishing the ones that have made us who we are and also looking at our mistakes as we boldly try and dynamically move forward, creating the sense of wholeness and beloved community that we have always strived to achieve.

As we come together today to light our candles of remembrance for those that we have lost this year—and for those whom we have lost whose absence still weighs heavy upon our hearts—may all of their stories come alive to fill this sacred space that we have created here. May the memories embolden us to live into the people we want to become and in this moment, may we feel their presence here with us. As we now move into our candle lighting ritual, let us pray.

“Divine Force that is ever present with us and with our memories that you have always been privy to from afar, give us the peace and the courage to live into our unique role as people of memory. Let the memories that we have cultivated be a catalyst that moves us forward into the people that we look to be and those who have the power to create and realise the potential we have. May we turn it into the future that we desire to bring about for our world.”

May it ever continue to be so. Blessed be. Amen. Shalom. Assalamu Aleikum. Namaste. Please come forward and allow the memories of your loved ones into this space so that they may be with us this day.