

"A Different Kind of Magic": A Service of Remembrance
November 2, 2019

"Ancestral Magic, Discovery, and Acceptance"

D. Andrews

"Do you have a magic spell to return someone to life?" the girl asked.

"No," the witch said, "I'm sorry."

"Oh."

"Why don't you tell me about them?"

"Will that bring them back?"

"For us. For a little while. Stories are a different kind of magic."

I guess I'm a magician!

A genealogist, I tell the stories of those no longer here. The ancestors, not always my own, and their stories are my life's work, my calling you might say. The memories of those who aren't present in physical form tug at my heart and my consciousness, trying to get my attention.

"Hey, look here, I've got something to say." I suspect your forebears may tug at the edge of your awareness as well. Society trains us to ignore them. Be defiant and take heed, especially at this time of year when we remember those who have passed and honor them as our ancient ancestors did. Let's listen!

I honor the ancestors in an ancient ceremony, a simple meal, probably of Celtic origin but practiced across many traditions. Family meetings always happened at the dinner table in my house and it makes sense to meet my forebears, known and unknown, there. I invite you to my dumb supper.

Now, if the idea of a dumb supper seems disrespectful, I thought the same thing until I learned that originally the meal was intended to be quiet, or dumb. Some rituals are more celebratory than introspective though when I think about it, if I were dining with elders, no matter what age I am (aren't you always twelve at your grandma's house?), I am a bit reserved, reverent, and mindful of the relationships being nurtured.

At my table, I set stage with a fine white tablecloth preparing the best seats for my ancestors. I use one place at the head of the table to welcome them all! The table settings can be reversed, spoon on the left and fork the right, to symbolize the reversal of death and the calling in of the Spirits. Irish traditions were less formal and simpler than the traditions that have evolved in the New World. I stick to the simplicity of the Irish and talk out loud to my guests because dinner in the Andrews house was and is an event!

After all my preparations, I invite you and those in Spirit with a prayer:

“Ancestors and guests of my blood and Spirit, you are welcome here. Please join me for a meal in your honor at this table where we will feed each other in memory, learning, and joy. We gather for the highest and best of all.”

In communion, I learn amazing life lessons from my elders as their legacy guides me and teaches me about myself, interconnectedness, and compassion. Some of the most amazing “dumb” meals have been with unknown predecessors and you may be surprised. They want to be remembered.

The ancestors speak to us through their legacies and the lives they dared to create. Untold stories yearn to be revealed if someone, anyone, is listening. At this time when, tradition says, the veil between the worlds is thin, I invite you to listen more intently for stories that want to be told through you? Are there unknown destinies waiting to be revealed? What will we learn, who will we acknowledge, and what about ourselves will we discover?

With the space of time, a fresh perspective, and opening to a wider awareness, we may learn that stories passed down are distorted and based on the collective recollection and the interpretation. Like the game telephone: a story told in 1850 filtered through the perceptions and judgements of others becomes a tale of 2019 that cannot resemble the 1850 reality.

Recently I completed the house history of a mansion built in the mid-1800s. Midway, it became clear the house’s creator had a story to tell and the house was the way to get my attention! During hours among the deeds and the plans in Cambridge, the project shifted to become the story of the amazing woman, Roxana Richardson Reed, the family she descended from, the one she raised, and the home she built, rather than the men who subsequently purchased or rented the home of her vision and to whom it was attributed. Now, 170 years later, I credit Roxanna and tell HER story.

By listening and looking, you may discover family you never knew existed. Was there a child who died young in your family’s history who never mentioned? Was there an ancestor known as a deadbeat who deserted their children?

In my family, my paternal great grandfather, Otis Josephus Andrews, deserted his young sons according to family history. His wife died in childbirth in 1907 and, at 28, he placed his boys; Joseph, 4, and my 1-year old grandfather, Leon, with different families to be fostered, and, the story goes, he disappeared, never to be seen again.

The abandonment felt by his sons, who may have met each other once or twice in their adult lives, was immense. The lack of roots and ancestral legacy was as poignant as any orphan though their father yet lived on another coast for most of their lives. Their children carry the shadow of that abandonment and pain, and, as happens in families, it is passed on through generations where judgement abounds by those left to tell the story.

Otis' tale needed to be uncovered, at least for me, and his story told. Admittedly, I didn't want to believe he had just disappeared as I followed his movements throughout California in public records. I knew he had moved up and down the coast supporting himself while remaining a widow. His 1956 death record in Solano County didn't help and no obituary could be found to provide further details.

Otis' 1918 draft registration named my grandfather's foster mother, Mrs. Tilden, as beneficiary of his death benefits demonstrating in two handwritten lines that he hadn't forgotten his children.¹ Those two lines from 1918 made me cry and rewrote history for me and, for those who are open to forgiveness in my family.

On November 3, 2015, Otis and I shared a table of sorts when I travelled to California to find his grave marked generously by a stone "erected by his friends." I visited and, as people did in other times, picnicked with my great grandfather in the cemetery. On social media, I introduced my cousins to Otis inviting them to reframe the image of our great grandfather and felt blessed.
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In the "Spirit" of acceptance, acknowledging that pain of abandonment and loss, will you join me in honoring the magical humanity of all our ancestors. In this season of remembrance and, dare I say, discovery, might we meet our ancestors as human beings who struggled and were challenged by complicated lives and, many times, from things they did not discuss.

In communion, I learn amazing life lessons from my elders, and I am humbled as I learn about myself, interconnectedness, and compassion. Some of the most amazing dumb meals have been with unknown predecessors.

Suddenly all my ancestors are behind me.

"Be still" they say.

Watch and listen. You are the result of the love of thousands.

"To Honor and to Pay Attention"

The Rev. Heather Janules

When my friend and colleague told me about preparing to lead a memorial service, having gone through this many times, I could see it all in my mind. I could see Rachel thumbing through the hymnal, trying to find the right hymn and readings to reflect the meaning of the deceased's life. I could see Rachel leafing through different stoles to see which one best reflected the personality of the one the community was holding in memory.

¹ "U. S. World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917-1918," Santa Cruz County, California; image, *Ancestry.com* (www.ancestry.com ; accessed 18 July 2017); Roll 15544331, Draft Board 0.

² Vacaville-Elmira Cemetery (Solano County, California); photograph by D. Andrews, 2015.

But, as Rachel tells the story, this particular service was somewhat unusual. It inspired her to hum a familiar song by The Beatles: “Eleanor Rigby, died in the church and was buried along with her name. Nobody came.”

As Rachel shared with me, the deceased – let’s call her “Eleanor” – was a long-time member of the congregation. Over the years, she was appreciated for her prophetic work in the community, including creating floats for the local Pride Parade, and for her faithful service within the congregation: chairing committees, volunteering on task forces and running the sound system every Sunday.

But that is not the only way people knew Eleanor. While appreciated for her commitment and her service, Eleanor had a hard time leading with compassion, often getting things done through bullying others into compliance. Sometimes those who received her rage asked her to consider her behavior but she refused to make amends and refused to change. Those who knew Eleanor well knew that Eleanor was also estranged from her family, including her only adult child. Eventually, Eleanor became estranged from the community she loved and that, despite her unkind behavior, still loved her.

In time, Eleanor slipped further way through the challenges of dementia. The pastoral care associates from the church and Rachel were her primary ties to the world beyond her nursing home.

With her death, the congregation was invited to go through the familiar ritual of a memorial service, a time of remembering the deceased, naming what was sacred and worthy of celebration in her life and strengthening the bonds between the living to lighten the sting of grief. But what do we do when the one who has died did not have much to celebrate in life? What do we do when we are left with not only the sting of grief but the sting of painful memories?

These questions are not abstract for me. When my mother died, I was still preparing for the ministry. I knew enough about memorial services to know what a memorial service is supposed to do and, as my mother’s daughter, I knew that my mother’s life was not something to celebrate.

I don’t know how they all connect but my mother grew up in an emotionally abusive household. She entered adulthood with what I imagine a doctor would diagnose as an anxiety disorder. But she never sought help for herself, perhaps because she never believed she was worthy of relief. Instead, she found help through alcohol. Of course, self-medication only works for a short time, becoming a problem in itself. By the time she died in her mid-fifties, alcoholism mutated her personality so she was vicious and cruel. I now understand why we used to call alcohol the “demon drink” as she seemed possessed by something evil that lashed out at those closest and trapped her in addicted suffering. So, when it came time to hold her memorial, I could not call it a “celebration of life,” choosing instead to say it was to “honor” her life and the time our lives entwined together.

And that is what my friend Rachel did in organizing a memorial for Eleanor. For even though Eleanor's life was not easy nor was it always easy to be with her, it had a beginning and it had an end. For a time, Eleanor embodied what we might call "the spirit of life" and that, in itself, warrants our reverence, our care and our attention.

Rachel was afraid that, like Eleanor Rigby, no one would come to the service. But people did come, including some people who left the congregation long ago.

As Rachel officiated, she invited the community to reflect on the tension between holding healthy boundaries while also deeply loving those who try to undermine them. Through speaking the truth about Eleanor and her life, the congregation honored her worth and dignity while honoring their own right to respect and care. As Rachel recalled, "in her death, Eleanor did not simply drift away, lost to the church's memory, we lifted her memory up, both good and bad, honoring the presence she held in the life of the congregation. And we sang, 'All the lonely people, where do they all come from? All the lonely people, where do they all belong?' It turns out that all the lonely people belong in our sanctuaries."

We all belong, even the lonely ones, the angry ones, the misunderstood. We belong in communities like this one and, simply, we belong in the world. We all belong, as Mary Oliver famously said, "in the family of things." You probably understand why I asked that the poem *Wild Geese*, that spoke of this essential, primal, non-negotiable belonging, be included in the service that honored my mother's life.

I am grateful to D. for her reminder that while death ends a physical body, it is not the end of the story of one's life. There is the story that we have created about another through our lived experience. There is also a collective story, created by families and communities about the dead and passed down from generation to generation.

And there is a more complete story, perhaps just waiting for us to find it, waiting for us to pause and truly listen.

Who has a story to tell in your circle? We only need to set the table and invite them in. We only need to find the strength to honor the spirit of life that shines through all things, even the unknown and the unforgiveable. Perhaps through paying simple attention to lives that begin and end, stories come forward and the "different kind of magic" does its work, not only with the memories of the dead but the lives of the living. Perhaps through honoring and paying attention, the beloved and those who leave resentment in their wake, the known and those temporarily lost to history; "you are not forgotten."