

Defiant Love: Interrogating Our Heritage

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The theme for this year's summer series is "Defiant In Love." I have no idea what that means, which is nice because each speaker will have a different take on it through the summer. Here's mine. I took the liberty of ignoring the word "in".

I started working on this sermon around Fathers Day, so I was thinking about ancestors & descendants, grandparents and grandchildren. At some point during the last year or so it became clear to Ann and me that grandchildren are probably not in our future. For me this brought real sadness. I'm not any kind of pronatalist; I have been VERY careful never to pressure or even encourage our kids to have children. That is not my decision, and want *them* to make it, either way, for themselves. More people is not what the world needs right now. But *I see* you grandparents. I know what I'll be missing. And I'm sad.

I also know, intellectually, that what truly matters in this world is not MY grandchildren, but THE grandchildren. Humanity is in a precarious place, one where it is no longer possible to protect MY grandchildren unless we repair the world for THE grandchildren.

This is my mom with her two *great*-grandchildren. Only one of them is a *genetic* descendant of hers, can you tell which? No, you cannot, and if for even a fraction of a second you thought you could, well, think about that. Our brains have habits, and those habits come from somewhere. That's what I want to talk about this morning.

This is my mom's father, my grandfather. He was a good man, and, a product of his time. He believed, deep in his bones, that German people are the best, and he kept a detailed hierarchy of ethnicities and racial groups somewhere in his head. I don't know how long his ancestors were in North America, but I'm pretty certain they came from northern Europe. That's part of my heritage.

On the other side, my father's father was a genealogist, so I know that his ancestors were here a long time. For example, I am related to the Admiral Dewey who is known as "the hero of Manila Bay" for defeating the Spanish Armada during the Spanish-American war. He was unhappy that I changed my name when we got married. My American heritage from his side goes pretty far back on this continent.

My American heritage. Tomorrow is July 4th, when most Americans celebrate the victory of plucky pioneer forefathers over the well-regimented armies of an oppressive monarch, a victory which we celebrate by... blowing things up. I happen to really love fireworks, even knowing that they are a re-enactment of exactly what's

happening in Ukraine right now. Fireworks are a beautiful and inspiring way we glorify what is inherently evil. I can't reconcile these, and I still love fireworks.

A few years ago Karen Mallah and I facilitated a group studying the UUA's Examining Whiteness curriculum, and ever since then I've been looking more critically at my own heritage, especially its origins. Where did white culture come from? How did we get here?

After reading *this book*, I have an answer, or at least a strong clue. I think the origins of my American heritage are rooted in **trauma**. We know that families that have endured trauma are more prone to addiction, abuse, neglect, and other family dysfunctions.

Such families often have an unspoken code of conduct: Don't talk, don't trust, don't feel, don't remember. Don't talk about the dysfunctions; don't trust anyone because traumatized people are unpredictable and violent; don't feel your feelings because they don't matter and you'll be punished if you express them; and don't remember anything that would undermine the happy-family facade, because everyone else will deny it anyway. Disney got it right with Encanto. This is a family rooted in trauma. We don't talk about Bruno. We work, and we fight and we sulk, and we take, but we don't talk, trust, feel, or remember.

When *nations* are rooted in trauma, the same code applies. We get racial hierarchies, violence as the only imaginable means of security, damaging patriarchies, and the kind of shallow nationalism that requires us to forget our history. This manifests as a social culture that idealizes selfishness, consumerism, neglect of community, and a strange obsession with bootstraps.

So what's this trauma I keep talking about? Imagine what it was like to live in Europe during the Middle ages. Brutal, ongoing oppression, with routine torture, wars, famines, plagues, cruel punishments that would be trauma-inducing for us to even imagine. Think about the toll the pandemic has taken on our mental health, then multiply that by constant war, famine, and torture, and make it last for a thousand years. Fifty generations. By the time the Renaissance came around, my ancestors were severely damaged, and they didn't even know it. They called it civilization.

Two weeks ago, Christian Hayden spoke from this pulpit about healing the body, and he mentioned epigenetics. This is key, so I want to say a little more about it. Epigenetics is a brand new, pioneering branch of molecular genetics, and it's only really been around since the 1990s. In school you probably learned about how genes are encoded by DNA, and how those gene blueprints determine all your physical features, and some mental and emotional ones, too.

That's not the whole story. Our genes come with packaging. For decades we thought that packaging was inert, and that it had no role in our development. Turns out, it plays a fairly active role in regulating gene *expression*. Genes get turned on or off, or are more or less active, based on the packaging, and the packaging can be inherited. That's called epigenetic inheritance, because your genes, the DNA itself, is not changed, but its activity is changed in a way that's passed on.

What this got to do with trauma? The seminal experiment on this was just done in 2013. The experimenters exposed mice to aceto-phenone, which smells like cherry blossoms, for a few seconds, during which they gave them harmless but painful shocks to their feet. They did this five times. The next day, five more times, and again the third day. That's it. Then they let the mice live out their lives, including mating and having babies.

When the baby mice were grown, they exposed them to that same smell, and they immediately became anxious. Their heart rate and blood pressure rose, and their behavior was that of panic. A whole generation later, the grandchild mice reacted the same way to the smell of cherry blossoms.

They ran the experiment again, but this time they isolated the babies from the parents at birth. Same thing. They used IVF and surrogate mothers. Same thing. And these were just harmless shocks over three days. This is so surprising, and so potentially relevant to who we are, that the field has exploded.

Now there are thousands of studies, just from the last few years, on epigenetically-inherited effects of trauma. It's not simple or clear-cut; there are lots of factors, and not all traumas and not all stimuli show up so dramatically as this, but the concept is solidifying in the scientific community. It's real. I predict you will see this phrase again. It is entering the popular vocabulary as we speak.

The connection Resmaa Menakem makes in his book is that our modern global culture, and specifically Euro-American culture, is rooted in the trauma of medieval Europe. That trauma informed and shaped my Euro-American heritage, and allowed my ancestors to brutalize and exploit indigenous people everywhere they went, initiating a self-repeating cycle of intergenerational trauma and dysfunction that continues today.

That trauma and dysfunction is transmitted directly through abuse and exploitation, and also epigenetically and culturally, so it is deeply embedded in our bodies, our minds, our emotional responses, our language, and our religious traditions. Explains a lot, doesn't it?

What do we do now? Knowing that all of us are affected by this, how do we honor the grandchildren?

I think we have to carefully examine and yes, defy our own cultural heritage. Raise your hand if the extreme consumerism around Christmas bothers you. Keep your hand up if you're still participating in it. Yeah, that's what I thought. We've got to pay attention to those nagging feelings, and follow them to a new way of being American, a new way of celebrating winter holidays. That's an act of defiance! It's also an act of love.

We have to *break the rules* we inherited from our dysfunctional families & cultures: We have to **talk** about uncomfortable subjects; we have to **trust** our neighbors & people we reflexively regard as "the other"; we have to **feel** our feelings, and honor them, find out what they're trying to tell us; we have to **remember** the foolish & evil stuff in our heritage, along with the glorious triumphs. There ARE glorious triumphs, and their celebration will be so much more meaningful if we remember, honestly and authentically, the mis-steps and errors and awfulnesses that taught us to reach for them. Remembering it *all* requires a defiance rooted in love for the grandchildren.

We have to love *ourselves* when our culture keeps telling us our value is measured by our work and our possessions. Talk about an act of defiance!

There is a local artist here in Harrisburg named Julia Mallory who's the founder of Black Mermaids. She's amazing, and I recommend you look into and support her work. For Juneteenth this year she handed out a sheet of affirmations she wrote that address this directly. She writes:

I honor my ancestors and myself by resisting relentless productivity. Talk about defiant! Any other workaholics in here? If my only value is in what I accomplish, then accomplishment is all that matters. But *family* matters. Relationships matter. Inspiration, vulnerability, play, and rest:

I honor my ancestors and myself by listening to my body when it tells me it needs rest. Rest is defiant in a culture where rest equals "lazy." It's not true.

I honor my ancestors and myself by making space for joy in my life. Do we even know what joy is? Not happiness, *joy*. When's the last time you felt joy? Actually making space for it goes against the grain; it's love, and it's defiant.

I honor my ancestors and myself by making space for pleasure in my life. We do this, but it's often a shallow kind of pleasure, and we often feel guilty afterwards.

I honor my ancestors and myself by realizing that others' limited imagination should have no impact on my life. Raise your hand if you have told a young artist that they should probably have a back-up plan. Why do I think my cynicism should have any bearing at all on their art career, huh? It's their life, they'll figure it out.

I honor my ancestors and myself by recognizing care as a personal, community, and political act. So important to our humanity, but, you know, the pay kinda sucks.

I honor my ancestors and myself by going where the love is. By being where the love is. Well, we're here this morning, so we're doing OK on those two. I know we could do a better job of expressing that love, though.

I honor my ancestors and myself by acknowledging that I am already enough. Radical. By tending to the earth and respecting its natural cycles. Long way to go. By caring for the youngest and the oldest amongst us. Our relentless productivity makes it easier to pay someone else, poorly, to do this caring.

I honor my ancestors and myself by acknowledging that grief work is also freedom work. We don't talk about death. Birth, we go on and on about birthweight and labor and the anesthesia and the breathing and the three stages and the gender reveal and the tiny little fingers... We gotta talk about death, and grieve in community, vulnerably, for as long as it takes.

I honor my ancestors and myself by understanding what my work is and doing it. I don't think Julia is talking about the work we trade for money. She's talking about this inner work of cultural growth & healing, and the outer work of bending the arc toward justice. What is my work? Am I doing it?

*I honor my ancestors and myself by remembering the past, **taking up space in the present**, and building the future.* Julia Mallory is Black, and these affirmations were not written for people like me, meaning, old cis-gender white men. Old cis white guys *always* take up space; I'm doing it right now! And everyone else is acculturated to *expect* us to! I grayed out that middle part on this last affirmation because if you're an old cis white guy, you should cross that part out; you're probably good on that one. If you're *not* old, cis-gender, white, or male, you deserve to take and occupy your share of cultural space. For the grandchildren. Defiantly. The old cis white guys in *this* church will support and encourage you—old men can I get an Amen?

Julia's affirmations are all about defiant self-care and community awareness, which is precisely what's needed to soothe and resolve decontextualized trauma. I am a rank beginner in this. Christian Haydens led us through a couple of exercises two weeks ago, some mirroring and some eye contact. Resmaa's book has a lot more exercises that are designed to free our bodies from unresolved trauma; I hope this

church will pursue this work as a community. Other things that may help include yoga, meditation, 12-step programs, Sufi dancing, massage and other kinds of deep body work.

I only have glimmers of what my ancestors went through, but I am aware that almost every immigrant to this continent came as a refugee from some trauma: from religious persecution, famine, extreme poverty, war, genocide, or enslavement. Native Americans are refugees from all of those traumas, but inflicted on them in their *own* country. It's in all of us. The most recent science we have says that our ancestors' trauma lives on in our bodies, our minds, our culture, and our spirits. This is part of our heritage.

For those of you who've been holding your breath this entire sermon trying to figure out what's going on in this picture, I'll tell you. One of these kids is a *genetic* descendent of my mom, and the other is the child of the same-sex marriage of my mom's grandchild. No, there is no way to tell from the photo which is which, and the point is that to my mom, it makes no difference whatsoever. They are her great-grandchildren, full-stop. And I gotta point out that in spite of the adorable bow-ties, you don't know these kids' genders, either. No one does. We won't know until they tell us.

As it turns out, there is some small hint of a possibility that there might be grandchildren for Ann and me, but *I'm* not gonna hold my breath. There are millions of grandchildren out there for me to love. But to do that in good conscience, I have to strive not to pass on the unresolved trauma that comes with my American heritage. To do that, I have to *defy* that heritage. *With love, for love.*

I have work to do. We have work to do. Let's do it together.

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Parting Words/Benediction:

Do I know who you are? Do I know who I am? We live inside bodies that carry it all: ancestors, history, culture. As we work to turn the world around, let us carefully examine our contents, and pass on only what's worth keeping. Go in peace, return in love, and make sure you get a copy of Julia's affirmations.