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Ancestors, Horses, Rabbits, Turtles—All Are Relatives

In academic circles, it is common to hear the “post-Enlightenment” perspective that “everything is relative.” Among the Lakota (Sioux) of South Dakota, another point of view prevails. Religious rituals always conclude with the utterance “*mitak oyasin*” (“all are relatives”). Some have suggested that these words imply that any activity one does is connected in some way to everything else. It is a curious analogue of cross-cultural appreciation for Darwin’s assertion that all life forms are ultimately related. Said prayer-like in a ceremonial context, the phrase also echoes the Christian tenet that all people are God’s children, and so are kin to one another.

The essay that follows is a reflection on “all are relatives.” It is based on experiences of the past year that one can appreciate since they relate to life activities that are not extraordinary. However, they become extraordinary when one understands that events are never “nothing but,” but rather always “something more.” In seeking “the more,” one might find unexpected answers, unplanned opportunities and unscripted encounters with the Eternal—discoveries never dreamed, but were always present in otherwise mundane behavior. One might come to realize that thoughts, feelings, actions, persons and events play out on a stage of connectedness. Careful reflection, or sensitive “noticing,” can lead one to affirm with the Lakota that everything is related, and that “all are relatives.”

Ancestors

I knew my mom’s mother but never met her dad. The only person my mother met on her father’s side was his mother. Coming from somewhere “in the east,” this woman visited Detroit one day to seek custody of my mother (who was about 8 years old at the time). All that my mom could ever recall of the visit was that a stately lady entered the room, seated herself across from her grand-daughter, pointed to her cheek and said “kiss granny.” Dutifully, my mom did so, and then learned all she would ever know about her father’s side of the family. Her “granny” left that day without custody of my mom. No one from that side of the family ever again had contact with Detroit.

Years later, I was a child asking my mom about her father’s family. Wanting no contact with her father, all mom knew was what she said her grandmother recounted during the short visit described above. Her grandmother simply said that “My father, who is your great-grandfather, captured the first prisoner at the battle of Gettysburg. My maiden name was Pauline MacNair, and I married your grandfather, Edgar Annan.”

The only other piece of information that my mother learned was that her father’s family was wealthy. I distrusted her recall of this point since I attributed the “false

memory” to mom’s childhood taking place during the Depression and her being born and raised in poverty. She probably “imagined” having a wealthy family somewhere who would magically appear one day to redeem her from a destitute home.

My mom and grandmother are no longer alive. Until writing the account here, I alone knew of the stately and reserved grandmother who visited the 8 year-old who would one day be my mom. Several years ago, I visited Gettysburg for the first time, and asked the Information Desk about my alleged relative. The attendant asked: “What side was he on?” Neither my mom nor I knew. “What State was he from?” I did not know that, either. Ever since hearing of my lineage’s connection with the Civil War, I concluded that such family folklore was based on faulty details that mythologized the ancestors.

In my first sabbatical summer of 2004, I received a brochure advertising a day’s seminar that addressed translations of the Old Testament. It would be *gratis* for anyone who attended. Since the price was right and since it was, after all, my sabbatical, I phoned in my reservation. The agenda for the seminar was not particularly appealing, but the topic was within my teaching field. By the end of June, perhaps my interest would grow. All was in place. I would attend the conference at Mt. St. Mary’s University in Emmitsburg, Maryland.

Why the thought of my mom’s family ever entered my mind in mid-June, I can only speculate. Nothing prompted the thought unless it was a passing memory of my mom, and feelings associated with her loss. Perhaps its origin was from some other constellation of experience. After making my reservation for the conference, I one day mused for the first time “why not enter the ‘Annan’ name on the Internet, and see if anything related to me is forthcoming?”

I found many sites that referred to the UN General Secretary, Kofi Annan, but one site led me to someone’s compilation of names from a cemetery. Reading through the list of persons long buried, I came upon “Pauline MacNair Annan.” Confirmation that I had found the right person followed immediately when I saw that Edgar Annan also was buried there. I was excited to visit the town where this cemetery was located. They had gone to their eternal rest in Emmitsburg, Maryland. This new revelation now made the Mt. St. Mary’s conference a destination I found quite appealing.

The main street of Emmitsburg has not changed much since my grandfather left his family 85 years ago. As I stood near the blinking light at the town’s chief intersection, I looked at what was formerly the Annan Bank on one corner, Dr. Annan’s office on another, and the Annan Department store on yet another. Perhaps further research would have revealed that the fourth corner was once the site of some other enterprise operated by the family. I had already visited the Presbyterian church they had built.

Later on, I meditatively stood at the graves of Pauline and Edgar, my great-grandparents. I learned their dates of death, and read inscriptions on the monuments located over the graves of their parents. Just standing there was a lesson in genealogy denied my mom. She never knew that her grandfather’s mother’s name was Julia, and that her grandmother’s mother’s name was Antoinette. Mom only knew that her name was Julia Antoinette Annan. Nor did mom know the fuller story of her grandfather, Major Samuel MacNair of the Maryland Cavalry. The night before the guns of Gettysburg commenced firing, it was he who saw through the disguise of a Confederate spy. The spy was seeking information related to the lay of the land in the region. Major

MacNair arrested this “first prisoner at the battle of Gettysburg.”

Another unexpected gift of this experience was befriending Michael and Audrey Hillman. I contacted Michael because the Internet cited him as being the director of the Emmitsburg Historical Society. His wife, Audrey, shared my interest in matters related to the world of flora and fauna. Michael generously gave of his time during my visit, and led me to other family plots. From etchings on these ancestral monuments, I learned the Annans regularly interacted with the country’s founding fathers, that they conspired with them to revolt against the British, and that one Annan was a student of American medicine’s first notable practitioner.

I also learned that Michael’s sister was indebted to Jesuit education and that she was one of its most vocal advocates. In her undergraduate days, she valued the counsel of Fr. Terry Toland. While he is now superior of the Jesuit community at Wheeling, he was then president of St. Joseph’s University. If my understanding is correct, she was the first woman to serve on St. Joseph’s board of directors. In light of this discovery and the hospitality extended to me by the Hillmans, it seemed an appropriate expression of gratitude to pass on to Michael’s sister a rare bottle of “Novitiate” wine, the brand name of a Jesuit vineyard no longer in existence. Had Michael not graduated from the Augustinian-founded Villanova, I would have had to open the bottle and ask him to share it equally with his sister. I gave Michael a special copy of a book I had written.

Horses

Historians are familiar with a chapter in American history known as the “Battle of the Washita.” Others may know of this incident from the 1970 film (and novel), “Little Big Man.” It featured Dustin Hoffman as a young man raised by Cheyenne Indians whose village was attacked on the Washita River in western Oklahoma. Loss of innocent human life was depicted along with General Custer’s strategy to deprive the Cheyenne of their livelihood, horses. He ordered his men to round up the herd of 800 that was left behind when the Indians fled.

The battlefield site today is little visited because it is in a remote location and has no amenities nearby. Printed “self tours” are available in a box located where the tour-path begins, and about twenty numbered-posts indicate which paragraph to read for information related to each site at the conflict.

Tucking the pamphlet in my pocket, I walked the vast field that extended a couple of miles in all directions. Reflectively, I contemplated the persons who made this parcel of land famous. Soldiers in combat, parents, grandparents and children running in all directions, guns blasting and bullets singing past, or directly at, those who fled—all this I imagined until stopping abruptly. The pungent scent of horses startled me, and I looked around to see if several were somewhere in the thicket that now grew dense in spots throughout the area. It was strange, I thought, that horses be present at a national battlefield site whose perimeter was fenced.

In front of me was a self-tour post that was marked with a painted number “5,” so I pulled the pamphlet from my pocket and read about my location. I was standing precisely where the 800 horses had been slaughtered, and where they were left until 1912. In that year, a soap company collected the field of bones that never had been removed. Without consciously thinking of this aspect of the conflict, I detected the silent presence of its horse-participants in August of 2004.

Several miles from the Washita site, there is a town which has a ranger station

where visitors can make inquiries related to the battlefield. I stopped and spoke with Alden Miller, the officer on duty. Eager to learn all I could of the battle, I eventually asked about the scent of horses that was so strong. I was surprised to learn that Mr. Miller knew of no one who had ever registered such an observation. I suddenly felt very self-conscious, and imagined he was beginning to wonder if I had been adversely affected by my growing up in the hippie era of drug experimentation. I politely thanked him for conversing, and strove to convey a sense that I was in possession of my faculties.

Rabbits

I had to return, run the mile to marker number “5” and confirm the scent that earlier suffused the scene. As before, I was alone at the quiet battlefield on a day the temperature was close to 100. Unlike my earlier experience, there was no scent except that of wildflowers and sweet grass. I wondered why the reality of this place had changed, and why so potent an experience from the previous visit did not register. Had the heat so altered my perception that “reality” was actually an olfactory product of my imagination?

Lost in thought, I was suddenly startled by a sound in the bushes to my left. I backed away thinking a rabid coyote might resent my intrusion on this hot day. Instead of a predator, I saw a rabbit stumble out of the brush and tentatively choose his steps about ten feet in front of me. Although he seemed not to mind my presence, I did not want to frighten him, so I tried to behave in an unthreatening manner. I looked in the other direction, voiced some greetings in a tone I thought a rabbit might find acceptable, and made no sudden movements. I even asked if he was descended from rabbits that the Cheyenne once probably hunted on this very spot.

He looked at me for a few moments, and then began to dig with his front paws. I asked if he had buried something there, or if he was digging a tasty root for some type of rabbit-lunch. As if to answer, he stopped his digging, turned around, and proceeded to stretch out in what appeared to be a very comfortable position on the cool pit from which he removed a layer of dirt. He was now quite relaxed and staring at me!

Within Native North America, there is a mythological figure known to anthropologists as “the Trickster.” Each Indian group has a different name for this figure that most often appears as a rabbit. Trickster often does as his name suggests. Among other things, he plays tricks on people, and reverses the conventional norms of behavior. Trickster makes one see reality in a different way.

Recalling this information that I often taught in anthropology and theology classes, I thanked Trickster for visiting with me. I told this friendly rabbit that he provided me with an experience I shall never forget, that his reputation had preceded him and that it was a pleasure finally meeting him. As if to acknowledge what I had said, he finished reclining and looked at me one last time. Trickster had taught his lesson for the day and walked back into the thicket. For me, this was a first. For him, I was but another child of the universe he was long ago commissioned to instruct.

Turtles

As many at Wheeling Jesuit University know, I tend the Jesuit garden located behind Whelan Hall. Not a particularly successful venture, the garden is also home to nine box turtles I have attempted to breed (and then release since they are on the endangered species list). Tending these colorful turtles is a mission that stirs my heart. Wondrous creatures, they are probably older than anyone on campus, and their young, if

they ever appear, may well outlive the youngest student now enrolled.

Before leaving for Washington, D.C. in October, I made certain that my nine little friends were fed and that their enclosure was securely locked. Thoughts of them (and my lack of success in breeding them) accompanied me on the journey. Outside Washington, D.C., I realized I had several hours to spare before my scheduled appointment, so I was pleased to spot a sign that read "National Wildlife Center—next exit." Always one to stop at zoos and nature exhibits of all kinds, I turned at the exit, found and entered the Center.

To my left were many displays of animal life native to the region. To my right was a large crowd of people entering an auditorium—apparently set to begin a meeting of some sort. Curious about the purpose of the gathering, I acted as if I belonged with the group and entered the assembly. It was easy to remain in their company, for I had chanced upon the keynote speaker beginning her presentation that initiated the "National Box Turtle Conference." My long stay with these people was an experience of serendipity that required arriving late for the scheduled appointment elsewhere. I mingled with specialists in a field that claimed me as an amateur.

The next day (returning on Interstate 70), I was not surprised to see a weary traveler seemingly lost in the maze of speeding cars. I quickly pulled to the side of the Interstate, ran a hundred yards back, and picked up what the Good Zoo later identified as a nine-pound, sixty year-old turtle. Always on the lookout for creatures in conflict with culture, I tried to find a release-site nearby. However, I could not locate a place to take this large lady who lost her mandible and right eye long ago. Wheeling Jesuit graduate and Good Zoo director, Penny Miller, would surely find a suitable pond for this displaced member of the turtle nation.

All Are Relatives

Turtles bracketed my trip to Washington, and this experience reinforced my concern for the continued existence of these ancient beings within our common home. This concern is ultimately more important (and felt more poignantly) than the business that prompted my travel. My trip to Washington was like attending the theology conference in Emmitsburg and visiting the battlefield in Oklahoma. Something more was at play that transcended a simple undertaking. I had been led to discoveries that were never anticipated.

While I hope my sabbatical year produces the publications for which it was intended, perhaps its real purpose was to touch my heart with the transforming, personalized awareness of the profoundly succinct Lakota utterance "all are relatives." I never planned to have a mythological rabbit transport me to a battlefield from ages past. I never dreamed that a business trip, miles from home, would teach me how to care for those I left behind. In conventional fashion, I attended an academic conference that instead introduced me to ancestors and new acquaintances.

Seeking one thing, I repeatedly found others that were more worthwhile. It seemed that my discrete plans of action were only finite glimpses of an infinite design—like a butterfly's gentle movement of wings in Japan creating wind that eventually becomes a hurricane in Florida. Difficult to comprehend when heard only as a theory, such a reality became incarnate this year when confronting ancestors, horses, a rabbit and turtles.

Seen from a religious perspective, the experiences described in this essay are

examples of what Christian tradition says is “God writing straight in crooked lines.” In like manner, Lakota say that sacred relatedness exists even when it is not apparent. Upon completing any ritual, they proclaim the same insight bequeathed them by tradition (which I was fortunate to receive through the experiences reported above). Lakota assert, and vocally remind themselves, that everything is connected and that *mitak oyasin* “all are relatives.”