

All Our Ancestors and All Future Generations Are Present In Us



Reflection by Tom Stites

October 30, 2022

YouTube video of full service: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7AxcFv7doY4>

Reading from Thich Nhat Hanh, followed by Reflection by Tom Stites, begin at 30:15

Reading

Our reading this morning comes from the wisdom of Thich Nhat Hanh, the late Vietnamese Buddhist monk, peace activist, author, poet and teacher, who was a major influence on the way Buddhism is practiced in the West. The title of the reading is,

Happiness Is Not an Individual Matter

He wrote,

All our ancestors and all future generations are present in us. Liberation is not an individual matter. As long as the ancestors in us are still suffering, we cannot be happy, and we will transmit their suffering to our children and their children.

Now is the time to liberate our ancestors and future generations. It means to free ourselves. If we can take one step freely and happily, touching the Earth mindfully, we can take one hundred. We do it for ourselves and for all previous and future generations. We all arrive at the same time and find peace and happiness together!

Reflection

Tom Stites

The words of Thich Nhat Hanh. They inspire my reflection this morning, and his first sentence of what I just read you provides its title:

All Our Ancestors and All Future Generations Are Present in Us.

I discovered this reading 20 years ago and it's been on my computer since, so I can return to it. Last spring something inspired me to return again. This time it changed my life. The words inspired me to actually take that first step, freely and happily, and I did.

What changed? I read the words of that first sentence just as accurately as I always had, but for some reason I changed the emphasis on its last two words.

Let me read you that sentence again, as I read it

for so many years:

All our ancestors and all future generations are present in us.

Every time I'd read the sentence, my imagination would light up with a family tree – and that would sort of fade into acorns and saplings.

This time, though, I happened to read the same words a little differently:

*All our ancestors and all future generations are present **IN US**.*

IN US. [Tap myself in the center of my chest]

Just by changing the emphasis on those two tiny words, Nhat Hanh's thought suddenly stopped being an abstraction in my head and leapt straight into my heart.

IN ME. [Tap myself in the center of my chest]

Suddenly I felt a deep responsibility, to my ancestors, and to my children and to all who may follow. They need liberation. And so do I. Don't we all? Isn't the search for liberation one of the main reasons we come to church?

Let's read that first sentence again. This time let's all join our voices and read it together in unison. The sentence is in your order of service – as the title of this reflection – and should appear on the screens of people attending virtually.

*All our ancestors and all future generations are present **IN US**.*

Try it once more, substituting my for our and me for us to make it personal.

*All my ancestors and all future generations are present **IN ME**.*

So: What does it take to relieve the suffering of our ancestors in us, to clear a path where future generations in us can step freely and happily, to achieve the liberation that Nhat Hanh offers us?

I think there are as many answers to this question as there are people.

My own first step was to take an inventory of family suffering that I know about. In respect for our time this morning – that could go on for a while – I'm going to focus only on my father's side:

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After my great-great grandmother Stites was widowed, she was unable to feed her whole family, so she indentured one of her sons who was old enough to work as an apprentice. The master she apprenticed him to spirited him off to Illinois, where they almost starved, and this boy, who would grow up to be my great grandfather, was so angry about having been cast out that he would never utter the names of his parents.

My great grandfather had 10 children. Now imagine this: Only three grew to adulthood, and two of them died very young, without families. The only one who lived a full life was my grandfather, who prospered and, with my grandmother, raised my father and his sister.

But when my Dad was in college, he and his father became alienated. My grandfather died less than a year later. He and Dad had not reconciled, and this tormented my father for the rest of his life. I won't trouble you with the details, but this torment was an element in his divorce from my mother – which transmitted some not-so-insignificant pain to me. And my pain certainly has transmitted to my kids.

I was 5 when my parents divorced. My daughter, Hannah, a devoted UU who has worshipped with us several times here at the FRS, was the same age, 5, when my first marriage split up. My son Bill wasn't even a year old. Happily, Alex Mezey joined us four decades ago. Some of the pain that rivers through my family has certainly splashed onto Alex.

I believe that Thich Nhat Hanh would say I have a lot to work with.

My Dad died when I was only 24. With my sparse family, I don't remember ever attending a funeral before then. I doubt that I even knew what a eulogy was.

So, this spring, having read Thich Nhat Hahn in a new way, I was inspired to write a eulogy. It became the centerpiece of a service by the grave in Kansas City where Dad has rested for 56 years. I invited eight friends as a congregation. Dad and I had sung together in the choir of an Episcopal church till I went off to college, and one of the congregation at the grave was a musician who led us all in singing a hymn you'll never hear in these walls:

From the Episcopalian hymnal: [Tom sings]
"Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God almighty . . . God in three persons, blessed Trinity."

[Laughter]

Triumphant Trinitarianism is not usually heard here.

But we chose that hymn because Dad and I had sung it together. It was a step toward rejoining with him, and to getting square with him.

Getting square has also meant doing research to figure out lots of stuff, and remembering lots of stuff, and forgiving lots of stuff, and figuring out what to appreciate. And there is so much. In this process I realized how lucky I am. I know a lot of people who got seriously unlucky with their parents. My heart goes out to them.

My heart also goes out to my father. Dad, I hope the appreciation it took me so many decades to clarify helps you overcome the sense of disapproval that burdened you after your father pushed you away. May your suffering be less and may inner peace grow. May the fact that your grandchildren, both born after you died, have now read your eulogy, and learned to appreciate you, may this further lessen your suffering. That your grandchildren know your story should give their lives a much stronger foundation and greater peace. Let us join in gratitude.

This was my first step. More lie ahead – with my ancestors and future generations as my walking companions.

Amen.