

Listen More Often to Things Than to Beings
Rev. Diane Rollert
The Unitarian Church of Montreal, 1 November 2009

*Listen more often to things than to beings,
'tis the ancestor's breath when the fire's voice is heard,
'tis the ancestor's breath in the voice of the waters...*

*Words adapted from a poem by Birago Diop
from the song "Breaths" by Ysaye Barnwell*

I often think of my friend, a Tibetan Buddhist monk, who lived most of his life in India. When his Rinpoche sent him to North America to teach, he gathered up his one small box of belongings and he moved.

It is hard for me to fathom having only one box of possessions. My family and I have filled more attics, basements, storage lockers, dumpsters and moving trucks than I care to remember. This summer, when I helped my father clear out the house that he and my mother had shared for more than 25 years, there were so many things that neither he nor I could let go of. And I, I am the worst culprit.

Besides the sentimental knick-knacks, *les bibelots et les bricoles*, and the favourite casserole pots, there were the writings of my mother and my father. My mother had kept lists of every place they had ever visited and every book she had read since 1960. The year before she died, she kept a diary. Nothing too personal or emotional, just a day-by-day accounting of her health as it deteriorated.

My father, on the other hand, had reams of music he had composed floating about the house. In between the sheets of music, there were pieces of paper that revealed fragments of his life story. His childhood and wartime memories had been scrawled on a legal pad here and a scrap of paper there. I gathered these living documents of who my mother was and who my father still is, and brought boxes of them home to Montreal, so that they too could be squeezed into our overstuffed storage locker. How could I ever let go of such treasures? They are a connection to my parents that will continue to reveal slices of who they were, hopefully there for my children and their children to read someday.

*Listen more often to things than to beings...
The dead are not under the earth,
They are in the rustling trees,
They are in the groaning woods,
They are in the crying grass
They are in the moaning rocks...
They are with us in our homes...*

Birago Diop's poem reveals something that I find so beautiful in many of the spiritual traditions of Africa. Things have power because they have been touched and experienced by the ancestors. A friend from Ghana once explained to me that the veneration of the

ancestors is central to all traditional African religions. Ancestors are the immediate link to the spirit world.

My Ghanaian friend's roots are Akan. (His people number about six million and live mostly in southern Ghana and the eastern Ivory Coast. They are divided into kingdoms, the most famous of which is the Ashanti.) In my friend's Akan religious tradition, the spirit world is as real as the physical world. In the spirit world, there are several levels of gods. *Nyame* is the Supreme Being whose power permeates all, yet is remote from the people. Next are the lesser gods who live in the trees, mountains, rivers and streams and mediate between the people and *Nyame*. Then, beneath the lesser gods, there are the ancestors. The ancestors are the most direct and immediate link between the living and the spirit world.

In Akan belief, the living and the spirit world are in a constant dance with each other. What happens in one world affects the other. To neglect to venerate the ancestors through daily ritual is to risk the unravelling of the fabric of the cosmos.

Even when the Akan people are converted to Christianity or Islam, they still hold onto a sacred reverence for the ancestors. My friend told me that, "Even when we come North and are assimilated into your culture, we still hold onto this core belief that the ancestors are very present to us."

Last summer, as David and I were passing through Quebec City, we stopped at the Museum of Civilization. That day, we wandered into a surprising exhibit on loan from Le Musée du quai Branly in Paris. Perhaps it was the exhibit's title that drew us in: *Objets blessés, la réparation en Afrique* (Wounded Artifacts: Repair Work in Africa). Display case after display case was filled with objects from daily and ritual life from several African countries. I cannot remember the exact sources of the artifacts on display, yet the power of the experience still remains with me as if it were yesterday.

Many of the objects on display seemed surprisingly ordinary, but when you looked closely, you could see that each object had been repaired in some way. What I remember striking me the most were the large and small vessels made out of gourds and calabashes (*gourdes et calabesses*). When these vessels were first created, the gourds were cut open, their insides scooped out, to be made into bowls or pitcher-like containers. They were left to dry and then painted with decorative markings.

Some of these vessels were used in religious ceremonies to offer ritual libations to the gods. Others were used as serving bowls and utensils in daily life. Yet look closely and you could see where the skins of the gourds had broken and cracked and then had been carefully and lovingly sewn back together with thread or wire. The beauty of the objects was not in their original designs but in the way that they had been repaired again and again over the years. Nothing was thrown away.

A film in the exhibit hall explained that the ritual act of restoration was the point of the exhibition. These were sacred objects to be revered, preserved and repaired, because they held the spirits of those who had created them and once used them. They were a link between the living and the dead. To repair these objects was a sacred act, a sacred art form, in and of itself. Fascinated by the exhibit, I latched onto the tail end of a guided tour.

A museum guide, a woman about my age, was leading a small group through the exhibit hall. "It is so hard to explain to Westerners the significance of these objects," she told the group. Then she shared a story. The previous week, at the end of the guide's last tour of the day, a woman had come to offer her thanks.

"You know," the woman told the guide, "I understand exactly what you were trying to tell us about these objects. When my mother died, my siblings and I had a very short time to choose from the few possessions my mother had left behind."

The woman continued, "Of all the possibilities, I chose a small, plain mixing bowl. I picked up that bowl, and I held it in my hands. It was the same bowl my mother had used every day to make my father's eggs. I could see my mother's hand holding the fork and beating the eggs. Holding that bowl, I was connected to my mother. I could feel her there in the room with me. Now each day, I do what my mother did. I prepare an egg and my hands are her hands. That bowl was the only thing I needed to hold onto my mother's spirit."

As the guide stood there and told us the woman's story, tears began to spill down her cheeks. Tears filled my eyes. I could see that bowl. I could see the hands of the woman's mother. I could see the objects that belonged to my mother, that I use each day, that keep her present in my life. I understood what it meant for a simple object to have sacred power and why it would have to be repaired no matter how worn or damaged it might become.

Most of the objects in the exhibit represented communities that didn't know wealth or abundance. Repair was a necessity. Yet to repair also was a religious act, a duty to be performed in honour of those who had died. Restoration, they called it – a way to hold onto the spirits of the ancestors, a way to never lose connection to those whose physical bodies were no longer present.

We, who live with so much stuff, can forget the true value of things that have been touched or created by those we love. The sacred is lost in the abundance and volume of what we have, whether we have lost reverence for our ancestors or the lesser gods of the trees, the mountains and the rivers. Surely, there is much that needs to be restored in our lives.

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November 2nd is the date that the calendars mark as All Souls Day. As you rise to greet the day tomorrow, I wish you a deep connection to the ancestors and to the spirit of all those whom you have loved and are now departed.