

FROM THE HEART
by Fred Gilbertson
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November 2, 2008
(Day of the Dead service)

Most members of the previous generations of my family are not around any more – except in memory, of course. Like my mother’s father, Emil Nagel. He never set foot in a church after his wedding day, but I think of him as quite devout. For decades of Sundays, he drove folks who needed rides to church. Grandpa Nagel was very nondiscriminatory about this – making stops at the Episcopal Church, the Catholic Church, and right on down the line. He was so welcoming I like to call him the first Unitarian in our family.

Grandpa was usually pretty serious, but he did like to make us laugh. He would tell these deadpan stories of running into friends at the train station, and their names would always be outlandish ones -- like “Ignots Schrouchsky Gibmichken Shouflenhofer.” To me, as a child, he was a towering presence – someone who helped to shape my values and my temperament, right down to little things like the way I tell stories. He will always be with me in those ways; and I guess that means he’ll also be with the people who, in turn, are shaped by being around me.

My mother’s sister, Dorothy Nagel Jensch, also had a big effect on me, but in different ways. When I started to think for myself and did things like getting involved in civil rights activism, she reinforced that – unlike the rest of my family – and that was a very important message for me to get. She also was the first person to talk to me about Unitarian Universalism. Most of the rest of my family were pulling me in a more conservative direction religiously, but she made it okay for me to accept different paths to spirituality. I can’t remember if I ever talked w/ her about my calling her father a Unitarian, but to me her welcoming attitude and his were made of the same stuff. I don’t think I would be speaking here this morning if it weren’t for Aunt Dorothy’s influence.

My mother, Catherine Nagel Gilbertson, died about 6 weeks ago. Putting that in perspective is a work in progress. During the last weeks of her life, I was going through her belongings, preparing for the inevitable. The drawers of her night stand were stuffed with religious and inspirational pamphlets, magazine and newspaper articles, as well as handwritten notes about religion and spirituality. One of the articles was entitled “Remember me by helping others.” When I prepared my eulogy of her, it almost felt like she had provided an outline by saving up these pieces of common wisdom. I have tried to spend most of my adult life helping others as a social worker, and I know this came from the encouragement and fine example she gave me. Even when I was a teenage troublemaker, she never stopped saying, “Fred is so good with people”. I do remember her by helping others; and even more importantly, I help others by remembering her, and how well she did that.

I was raised to be my own person, but when I take the time to reflect on how much these ancestors contributed to who I have become, it makes me aware that no one ever really makes himself up from scratch. I am proud to stand here today as a blend of not just self-initiated but also inherited character traits and values. The inherited parts are what I celebrate today.