MEMORIAL SERVICE FOR THE PASSING YEAR

Rev. Steve Wilson

Pacific Unitarian Church

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To be an emotionally healthy person, one has to find some way to grieve the changes and challenges that life inevitably brings. There is also no one way, or right way, to grieve and move on. There is no polite way or perfect sequence of mixing together our need to be sad, to grieve, and the need to move on and re-embrace life. There is no right way.

However, the Irish and the residents of New Orleans—"Nawlins"—have a few interesting traditions regarding the mix of feelings that strike as we attempt to move past something, and we head to the close of the year, and I wanted to tell their stories and maybe lift them up as possible guides for us as we begin to prepare for a new year.

As we likely all know, one of city of New Orleans most identifiable customs is the animated Jazz funerals that parade through their streets. This funeral tradition, famous for its brass bands, parades, and twirling parasols, began to take shape in the late eighteen hundreds.

There were a lot of influences that led this style of funeral to become a tradition in "The Big Easy." The city's various influences that famously brought European, American, and African musical elements together to make Jazz also came together in "Nawlins" to create a new way to grieve, honor, and celebrate the deceased. From the region's Colonial past came the tradition of parading brass bands. From the local African Americans—particularly those with west African tribal roots—came the history of ritual dancing and the call-and-response style of music and chant we think of as connected to the lack church. And, some of the instinct to celebrate after a funeral to protect the dead from evil spirits has roots in the local Native American Mardi Gras Indians.

One interesting odd factor that led to these marching funerals was that after the Civil War, a number of insurance and burial societies sprang up among the recently-freed people of color. When that happened, small regular payment plans allowed all but the poorest to afford a "proper" burial for their loved ones. Built into these small insurance plans were the resources necessary to create a novel little funeral industry that included bands of musicians. These bands were *commissioned to give the beloved dead a good send-off both on the way to and back from a burial in one of the city's* famous above-ground cemeteries.

Ever since they began, these musical funerals ebbed and flowed in their acceptance and popularity among the city's white citizens. Always there have been people who found the ritual undignified, and always there have been those who found it a way to celebrate a life well lived, a liberating way for the living to move on, and for the dead to move to a better world.

For much of the last century white people in New Orleans, particularly Catholics, considered playing "hot" music disrespectful at funerals. In fact, calling it a Jazz funeral was itself thought to be in bad taste. A "funeral with music" became a more dignified way to refer to it. In practice, these Jazz funerals were for most of the last century restricted to the Black Protestant community of the city

Towards the middle of the twentieth century, as the movement caught on more, social clubs and insurance policies arose to help the underprivileged afford these funerals. The *Dirty Dozen Brass Band*, a band I love, is perhaps the most famous of these bands.

After the 1960s, the tradition gradually started being practiced across ethnic and religious boundaries. Over time, the jazz funeral tradition grew to become New Orleans' most honored ceremonies, with horse-drawn hearses and parades set up for famous entertainers and community leaders.

In New Orleans, after the wake was over, usually the next morning, the coffin would be removed from the home or the funeral parlor, and carried slowly and solemnly through the streets of the city to the church. Initially the coffins were pulled on a horse drawn wagon, but more recently the body is transported by a hearse that would slowly pass thru the streets. Following behind walking and playing slowly in unison would be a brass-band. (The people following the band are called the "second line" because the band is the first line.)

The brass band followed behind the coffin in slow lock step, playing mournful dirges, with the family and friends behind them, all moving slowly and sadly, doing what in New Orleans is called "the slow drag" in time with the music.

In New Orleans as the coffin is lowered into the grave—or just as likely placed in one of their above ground burial vaults—the Grand Marshall of the brass band would lifts his baton and gives the signal that the body has been dismissed. They call this "Cutting the Body Loose." As this letting-go happens, what was slow and sad on the way to the cemetery becomes a bit bouncier..

Although this switch is generally an ever so subtle shift in the way in which an old hymn swings, eventually the band on parade switches over from playing somber music to a more upbeat numbers like the classic "When the Saints Go Marching In" or the irreverent "Didn't He Ramble." As time has marched forward up to the present, the traditional hymns, gospel and R&B music we think of as staples began to incorporate even more modern pop, funk and hip-hop music into the upbeat, "second line" closes of these funeral processions.

The mourners and well-wishers, who up to this point have been marching in the slow mournful dirge like funeral beat known as "the slow drag," break out into clapping and dancing and singing along.

Those who follow the band just to enjoy the music are called the second line, and their style of dancing, in which they walk and sometimes twirl a parasol or handkerchief in the air, is called second lining.

The motivations for this very physical style of grieving that intentionally shifts the attendees at a burial from sad to happy style of burial are multiple. To some, the music and dancing of the jazz funeral were thought to help the deceased find their way to heaven. To others, the music and dance celebrated the deceased's freedom from the constraints of this earthly life. The further back in time one goes has closer and closer connections to being freed from slavery.

Particularly for those who still remembered slavery, but really for all of us, this idea of people being freed or cut lose from the suffering and constraints of the world was and is important

Irish wakes likewise mix the somber and the raucous. At a usually three-day wake, one experiences the earnest sadness of people confronting the new truth, a bit of contrived grieving in that there are professional criers at these ceremonies, and the simple good fun of getting drunk, telling stories, and goofing around with pranks. At the height of the raucousness, men would show off trying to lift the corpse. This curious mixture borne of a cultural blend of paganism and Christianity survives today in a relatively toned-down fashion. Irish wakes in times gone by generally began with neighboring women of the deceased washing the body and preparing it to be laid out on a bed, the dining room table, or often a door. Mostly this took place in the largest room of the deceased family's home.

In Ireland when people died, it is customary for the mirrors in the homes of the deceased to be turned around or covered, and family clocks were stopped. We never did either of those things. I am not so sure if that tradition is still practiced. As my Father has told me in the context of a few scary nights as a boy, once the body of the deceased is prepared, it is never left alone until after it is buried. Someone, usually it was woman but, in the case of my family, often my father as a boy, would take turns sitting in the same room until she or he were taken to the funeral. Part of this tradition of keeping the dead company was rooted in honoring the dead, part of it no doubt in natural grieving, but partially because many people thought to be dead were not quite there yet. The wake custom of the Irish harken back to more ancient Jewish customs of leaving the burial chamber unsealed for three days, with relatives returning during that time to check for any signs of life.

My father tells the story told to him by his father, my Grandfather, who when a boy in the mid 1910s was at a wake, after he had left, had the guy laid out in his coffin on the dining room table stir to life. And as he slowly began to stir the men in the room had to gently pulled apart the hand-built coffin around him so that he didn't have to realize he was waking up at his own wake. After all, back then in rural Ireland, there were no doctors that gave a final and definitive declaration.

According to Irish custom, crying couldn't begin until after the body was prepared lest it attract evil spirits that would take the soul of the departed. However, once the body was properly prepared, the crying, or "keening" as it was called, would commence. According to custom, Irish wakes had a lead keener, who would help facilitate a new round of grieving at the arrival of each new guest.

Irish wakes typically last for two or three days and nights. Food, tobacco, and liquor, mostly whisky and/or Poteen, essentially Irish Moonshine, are plentiful. Laughter and singing as well as crying would mix to fill the air as mourners shared humorous stories involving the deceased. The Irish are aware you can't cry forever, and amidst the earnest periods of grieving, games were played, and poetry was read. It was a non-stop social event. Mischievous behavior like sneaking underneath the table to shake the coffin from below were all part of paying tribute and passing the time. Storytelling, mischief-making, and games were all part of the send-off in an attempt to ease the suffering of the deceased's family. As the joke goes, what is the difference between an Irish wedding and an Irish funeral, "one less drunk person."

To the Irish, wakes are truly social gatherings, hardly the hour we spend visiting the family at a funeral today. It is thought that the merrymaking aspects of these wake customs were influenced by the Irish's deep pagan heritage, as well as the very practical need to stay awake for such a long period of time.

Often in the Irish tradition, just before the trip to the graveyard, the coffin would be brought outside, and the open coffin laid across some chairs, or the such, until it was time to carry the coffin to the graveyard. Mourners would kiss the deceased prior to the lid being placed on the coffin.

Before cars were common, traditionally four of the closest relatives physically carried the coffin, relieved along the way by others. The spade and shovel were laid on top of the new grave in the form of a cross. Prayers were said, bringing the wake and funeral to a close.

"Back home," as my Father would phrase it, death was a very-hands on affair. On one encounter with a person who had died and had not been discovered for a couple days, my teenage dad had to jump up and down on a stiff body laid out on car running boards to flatten it out enough to get it into the coffin.

As the twentieth century wore on, many of these traditions ended as increasingly such vigils came to be held in professional funeral parlors or in churches.

Thankfully, not with the coffin of someone we love in front of us, but a calendar representative of the soon-to-be passing year, we will try to employ some of the physicality and social nature of the grieving New Orleans and Irish residents and do the same today, giving lots of folks a chance to in a way lift up and move past some of the hardest parts the past year.

During the wake, friends and family would sit up all night with the coffin, not only singing, but remembering and sharing stories together. Sharing stories is healing and helps us deal with grief, which is why it is so often a part of our Unitarian Universalist memorial services. In recalling and sharing stories, the burden of grief and memory is laid down, becoming not solely an individual problem but something dealt with in community. Keeping pain inside is isolating; sharing pain is both liberating and healing.

Keeping pain inside is isolating; sharing pain is both liberating and healing. As you sit, think about what burden from the past that you wish to lay down, and also what you might want to share about that. Anyone who wishes to share.

So, in that same spirit. Let's let go of all the sadness we spoke of and wrote about in last year, and cut loose that for the hope that rests in 2019.

Much as we might like to, we cannot literally burn all our burdens and losses from the past year. Instead, we can honor these challenges, and in a way cut them loose, bury, to dismiss and leave behind us. Let us imagine ourselves to be the mourners of the past year.

So we begin this morning with an assessment of the past. What events of the past year do you regret? What words or deeds, your own personally or collectively as a citizen or as a member of particular group, do you wish to banish? What feelings do you wish to bury? What happened to you individually or to us communally that you wish to deal with and lay to rest?

Our lives are brief, we have only a little while to stay here; we should not carry emotional pain forever. What burdens are you willing to lay down?

We will take some minutes of silence to review the year, and to list our burdens on the small pieces of paper found in your Orders of Service. Then, as the band plays the traditional "Just a Closer Walk With Thee," you are invited to come forward, and place your burden to be burned in our fire.

Ideally it has been an experience of laying down our burdens of grief, and maybe even shame and guilt. As we grieve our loss, we realize also that there is much to be thankful for, this community of faith not least among them. We have each other, we have this church complex, so full of potential, we have the bounty of our Unitarian Universalist faith tradition which always calls us forward.