

Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church—UU
“Looking for Ghosts”
The Rev. Morris W. Hudgins
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Introduction

After last week’s very serious and important sermon topic, today I have chosen a much lighter topic, “Looking for Ghosts.” As you will see in a moment there is a serious side to this topic as well. At least it was fun for me. The internet is full of material on the subject of ghosts, paranormal to the scientific, from the deeply religious to the atheistic.

On the scientific side, Einstein thought that the distant particles of the universe actually speak to each other. He worried about this so much that he called it “spooky action of a distance.” They now call this “quantum ghosts” and is helpful in understanding quantum physics. I will not be dealing with this today. I will leave this to the physicists among us.

Many physicists are talking about the expanding universe, the fact that galaxies are moving away from our galaxy, which limits how long we will be able to study them. Robert Roy Britt, a science writer, says:

As if in a dream where we swam but could not reach the shore, the universe likewise recedes as we study it, destined to disappear at the whim of time, space and the laws of physics. All that will be left are fading ghosts of distant galaxies, each an afterimage preserving a final moment as a swarm of stars slips into a netherworld of cosmic invisibility. (“All Galaxies to Become Ghosts, Frozen in time and Space.”)

If you are worried about this, it may help to know Abraham Loeb, an astrophysicist at the Harvard-Smithsonian Center, predicts this will happen in 100 billion years. We have time to adjust to the ghosts of former galaxies, frozen in time. Loeb, using Einstein’s Theory of Relativity, says the “galaxies will recede at the speed of light, making it impossible for their light—or any other radiation or information—to traverse the cosmos to our home in the Milky Way Galaxy.” I guess some astronomers are worried that we will not be able to communicate with galaxies 6 or 7 billion light-years away. They say we might be lonely in about 50-100 billion years. Forgive me if I don’t spend any sleepless nights worried about this. I believe we have other ghosts to think about.

Should we worry about ghosts? Did you know that almost half of the American population believes in ghosts? And the younger the audience the more we believe in them. About 56% of women and more than half of those between 18 and 58 years old believe in ghosts.

I will admit up front that I believe in ghosts, but as you will see in a moment, ghosts for me are not what you might think. Do I believe that buildings, institutions and families are haunted? Yes, I do. But are the haunts literally true or created in the minds of those who look back in time?

“Ghosts” by Henrik IbsenI

If the scientists looking at other galaxies don’t help, where can we look? I turn to a play titled, “Ghosts” by Henrik Ibsen. In this play Ibsen takes on the powerful themes of duty, sacrifice, and work so much a part of Western society. These themes are advocated by the character, Manders, a divinity student. Manders counsels Mrs. Alving, who has found that her husband is a drunkard and a philanderer, to do her duty and stay in her marriage. Mrs. Alving follows his advice as law and decides to stay in her marriage for twenty-five years and as one writer concludes “suffers all the misery and torture of the damned.” (Richard Badger, pp. 25-26, *The Social Significance of the Modern Drama*, Emma Goldman).

Mrs. Alving survives those twenty-five years by devoting herself to her son, Oswald. She commits to saving him at all cost. To this end she removes him from the poisonous home when he is seven. She sacrifices her own wants and needs for his well being. She becomes the martyr in the story.

After the twenty-five years, Mrs. Alving returns to the Rev. Manders after the death of her husband. Manders, of course, defends his actions as he expresses the view that happiness is not our goal in life. Duty and sacrifice are. He says:

It is only the spirit of rebellion that craves for happiness in this life. What right have we human beings to happiness? No, we have to do our duty! And your duty was to hold firmly to the man you had once chosen and to whom you were bound by a holy lie. . . .It was your duty to bear with humility the cross which a Higher Power had, for your own good, laid upon you. But instead of that you rebelliously cast away the cross. . . .I was but a poor instrument in a Higher Hand. And what a blessing has it not been to you all the days of your life, that I got you to resume the yoke of duty and obedience!

There is another view. Mrs. Alving speaks:

You have now spoken out, Pastor Manders; and tomorrow you are to speak publicly in memory of my husband. I shall not speak tomorrow. But now I will speak out a little to you, as you have spoken to me. . . .I want you to know that after nineteen years of marriage my husband remained as dissolute in his desires as he was when you married us. After Oswald's birth, I thought Alving seemed to be a little better. But it did not last long. And then I had to struggle twice as hard, fighting for life or death, so that nobody should know what sort of many child's father was. I had my little son to bear it for. But when the last insult was added; when my own servant maid--then I swore to myself: this shall come to an end. And so I took the upper hand in the house--the whole control over him and over everything else. . . .That was why I placed him out. And now you can see, too, why he was never allowed to set foot inside his home so long as his father lived. No one knows what it has cost me. . . .From the day after tomorrow it shall be for me as though he who is dead had never lived in this house. No one shall be here but my boy and his mother.

So what is the ghost in the story? The ghost is the impact of the poisonous home on the life of her son, Oswald. Now, looking back, she admits her mistake. She says:

I ought never to have concealed the facts of Alving's life. But. . .in my superstitious awe for Duty and Decency I lied to my boy, year after year. Oh! What a coward, what a coward I have been! . . .Ghosts! (If finally see the) Ghosts before me. But I almost think we are all of us Ghosts, Pastor Manders. It is not only what we have inherited from our father and mother that "walks" in us.

Our ghosts are the parts of our past that continue to impact us today. Ibsen goes one step further in this play. He also challenges the values of his culture that he sees as ghosts, "lifeless old ideas" that continue to ruin our lives. Ibsen concludes:

They have no vitality, but they cling to us all the same, and we can't get rid of them. .
 .There must be Ghosts all the country over, as thick as the sand of the sea.

Mrs. Alving challenges the defender of duty and sacrifice when she says:

When you forced me under the yoke you called Duty and Obligation; when you praised as right and proper what my whole soul rebelled against, as something loathsome. It was then that I began to look into the seams of your doctrine. I only wished to pick at a single knot; when I had got that undone, the whole thing unraveled out. And then I understood that it was all machine-sewn. . .It was a crime against us both.

What Mrs. Alving learns is that in the end she also loses her son. He says he cannot return home, even after his father's death. It is not a place of joy, light, sunshine or happiness. Richard Badger concludes:

In truth, a superstition—one that is kept like the sword of Damocles over the child who does not ask to be given life, and is yet tied with a thousand chains to those who bring him into a cheerless, joyless, wretched world.

The voice of Henrik Ibsen in *Ghosts* sounds like the trumpet before the walls of Jericho. Into the remotest nooks and corners reaches his voice, with its thundering indictment of our moral cancers, our social poisons, our hideous crimes against unborn and born victims. Verily a more revolutionary condemnation has never been uttered in dramatic form before or since the great Henrik Ibsen.

I praise Ibsen for raising the issue of ghosts, and his encouragement of the woman who should stand up for herself, against the ghosts of bad ideas and patriarchal control, including the church. I do not, however, completely agree with Ibsen. *Ghosts* is obviously an extreme indictment against the extreme views on the other side. Duty and sacrifice are not all bad qualities. Our challenge is to find the balance.

Contemporary Ghosts

What we were talking about last week, as we struggled with Thomas Jefferson, are the ghosts of the pasts, the social poisons. We cannot place all the blame on Jefferson. But we must move forward, admitting our ghosts, and challenging our former ways. We must also admit that the ghosts of our past walk in us today, as Ibsen describes.

There is a poem from *The New Yorker* that speaks to my message this morning. It is titled, *Ghosts*, and it is by David Harsent (August 10, 2009):

They bring with them a coldness, as tradition demands,
 and a light, dry odor of rot
 much like worm in wood, and bring a chorus of cries

To fill the air as if it were birdsong, and bring in their open hands
 tokens of themselves, a letter, a snapshot,

and bring some trace of their point of departure, a smudge

On the shoe, a stain on the sleeve, and bring the disguise
they lived under, stitched with their names,
hoping you'll give them the nod, hoping you'll recognize

Something, perhaps, of the old times, the fun and games,
when they shuffle up as if they stood on the edge
of night so a nudge would tip them over, and bring

A dew of death that settles on picture frames,
on pelmets, on clothes in the closet, on books,
on your eyelash, to make a prism through which you get

A broken image of what must be a stage set
of the Peaceable Kingdom, a front
for that place you only ever find in dreams,

Its undrinkable rivers, its scrubland of snarls and hooks,
horizon gone askew,
beasts hamstrung and walking on their hocks,

And bring their long-lost hopes, which they lay at our feet
then stand back, stand apart,
hairless, soft-skinned, their eyes bright blue

Like the eyes of the newborn, and bearing a look
of matchless sorrow, as would, for sure,
stop the heart of whoever it is they take you for.

Ghosts:

A broken image of what must be a stage set
of the Peaceable Kingdom, a front
for that place you only ever find in dreams.

I am the first to challenge Ibsen and Harsent. Is there not something from our past that is good and meaningful? Is there not some part of the Peaceable Kingdom that we can find as we look back? Yes, I admit to be an eternal optimist. My hopes are not all "long lost." My heart still beats for what can be.

On a personal level, I have my ghosts. My family in some ways was dysfunctional and I remember the ghosts of my childhood, intra-family disagreements, prejudices passed on to me about others in our society. I also have my personal ghosts of the present, recent events that return to me in my dreams, night and day. You can imagine a foot, a lawnmower, and wet grass are involved. I choose to move beyond all these ghosts, not to forget them, but to affirm a new and better future. My decision to talk about ghosts was made in the spring

when I was recovering from my accident. Most sermons are written for ourselves, answering the ultimate questions, but also encouraging us to do what is right and good in the present.

I hope America can move beyond its ghosts—whether they be related to our racial past, our treatment of the American Indians, our destruction of the planet, the creation of a health care system that is broken, or other ghosts. Ross Douthat, in a recent editorial in *The New York Times*, draws parallels between what is happening in the health care debate and what happened with the Clintons in 1994. He writes:

In both cases, an apparent legislative juggernaut hit a wall of public skepticism. Both presidents saw their poll numbers wilt in the summertime heat. Both White Houses staged a September address to Congress in an effort to regain the political initiative.

We all know what happened in 1994. Clinton's popularity went south. Health care reform withered on the vine. Public anger with Washington grew. Newt Gingrich swept into power in the fall. The Contract with America became the focus instead of Health Care Reform.

Douthat concludes that 2009 is different from 1994. There is not a Newt Gingrich around this time. There are radical talk show hosts instead. Douthat is optimistic that a health care reform bill will be passed this time. He advises the Democrats to work with the Independents and not respond to the extremists.

It is my hope that they will and progress will be made. Yes, I am an eternal optimist. I hope we can move beyond the ghosts of our past, and work toward a new future. Yes, ghosts, broken images of our past, a front for our dreams. Ghosts don't make our dreams bad or good. They just are. We need to move beyond them, walking boldly into the unknown, as Mrs. Alving did, standing up for ourselves and what we want for the future. Let's not wait until it is too late, and what we wanted has been lost. Our task is to help create the peaceable kingdom, not wish that it were here, not bemoaning what happened yesteryear, or what our forebears did. It is up to us, not them, to move us forward. May it be so. Amen and Blessed Be.