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Kennebunk, Maine
10/31/04

"Legacy"

Well finally...after 86 long years...the Red Sox have won the World Series! I was a little disappointed that my home town team didn't give them a better run for their money but these Red Sox were tenacious, clawing their way back against the Yankees. They had quite a head of steam going into the World Series and they rolled right over my Cardinals - but thank goodness that "curse" has finally been broken!

As the Red Sox swarmed the field to celebrate their victory Wednesday night, Joe Buck; the announcer, talked about how much things have changed since 1918. Women had yet to win the right to vote. Automobiles and movies were brand new inventions. Baseball games weren't even broadcast on the radio until 1923. Most of us don't remember a time when you had to read play by play accounts in the newspapers the day after the game. 86 years was beginning to sound like a very long time. It's hard to imagine that it's a lifetime for some. It's more than a lifetime for many.

Something that's put those 86 years into a very human context for me this week are the stories of Red Sox fans who spent their whole lives perched on the edge of their seats - waiting year after year, every year, ever hopeful, that this would be the year the Red Sox would "go all the way". People who lived and died devoted Red Sox fans without ever seeing their team win a World Series. People like our very own Tom Vail.

Tom was born during spring training in 1919. The 1918 World Series must have been the stuff of legend when he was a boy. Babe Ruth pitched a shut-out in the first game and had a big hit that won game 4 for the Red Sox. The Red Sox won the series in six games. Tom spent his whole life watching, waiting, hoping and praying that next year would be the year the Red Sox would win again.

There's something bitter-sweet about the fact that Tom died in August; just two months shy of seeing his Red Sox finally win a World Series. But in a very real sense, he is here, celebrating with us and through us as we remember him. I heard more than one Red Sox player testify that it was the legacy of lifelong fans like Tom Vail that helped spur them on to victory this year.

There was a picture in Friday's Portland Press-Herald of grateful fans gathering outside Fenway Park to welcome the Red Sox home. But the camera's really focused on the sign they're holding which reads, "Our (late) Parents and Grandparents THANK YOU!" Maybe Tom had some extra pull this year. Maybe it was the lunar eclipse. Who knows? But what I do know is that we, the living, are here to carry the banner for those who came before us. Our delight in this historic occasion is sweeter because we remember people like Tom; their passion becomes our passion - their joy becomes our joy - their love becomes the love we pass on to others.

We are the living legacy of those who came before us - the repository of their hopes and dreams. For some, baseball is more than a game - it's a tradition and celebrating a World Series victory isn't just about winning; it's about reaching across time, joining hands with those we love who have died. It is through us that in the words of Rev. Peter Morales, "The dead don't die, they live on."

He goes on to say, "I'm not speaking metaphysically or theologically. I'm talking about the very real stuff of memory, history, and molecular biology. Look in the mirror. The DNA of your ancestors is alive in you. Look at your children and grandchildren and see yourself and your ancestors. Think of the decisions made by your parents and grandparents. Their choices shaped your life. And the choices we make every day shape the lives of those to come. The interconnections stretch across time."*

We are the living legacy of those who came before us - we carry their memories, their history - we carry their successes, disappointments and their failures into the future in the very fibers of our being. We are the seeds - what they planted lives on in us.

Like Tom Vail's Red Sox, sometimes the seeds we plant don't bear fruit until after we're gone. But the analogy is much bigger than baseball. A Grandfather teaches his grandson about prayer. "Each living thing gives its life to the beauty of all life, and that gift is its prayer" says Grandad. But the boy's not sure he understands until one day, after his Grandad's death the boy goes for a walk. Sitting on a big rock under some tall trees he hears something whispering in the leaves, something in the sounds of birds and water flowing and he knows that what he's hearing are the prayers of the earth.

He joins in..., "Thank you for tall trees and sweet flowers, for still rocks and singing birds and especially for my Grandad." And as he prays something in him changes and for the first time since his death his Grandad seems somehow near." Sometimes the seeds planted in us by our parents and grandparents don't bear fruit until after they're gone. Remembering them can help us to understand our place in the larger family of things.

My colleague, the Rev. Barbara Hamilton-Holway recently published a book of reflections on her mother's death. She says at one point that; "Reflecting on Mother's death helps me understand the ways the people closest to Jesus talked about him."** No one was more human than Jesus. But after his death, she says, that Jesus' life became a metaphor. After his death the seeds Jesus had sown in life took on larger than life proportions. Barbara Hamilton Holway writes, "Metaphors are fingers pointing to the moon". They help us make connections with that which is larger than we are. Every death teaches us something about the human condition, something about belonging to the larger family of things. Barbara finds herself using metaphoric language very similar to the language used to describe Jesus after his death to describe her mother - looming much more largely in death than she had in life.

She writes, "I experience my mother's love as a reflection of a larger love that does not and cannot die.... Her death has meaning for us, her family, and in a certain way her death was "good" for us. Her death brought the family together and brought out people's strengths. Her death encouraged us to see that life is short and to see the importance of tending to what really matters. And so, in a certain way, Mother died so we might live. Her death was a life-bringing event.

There is nothing more finite and more human than death. But Barbara Hamilton-Holway has learned that seeds of new life can be sown even in death - the seeds of understanding that each of us is part of something larger than we are.

Barbara continues, "In a certain way she died for us. I believe that my death - that each of our deaths - will also bring meaning to others. We will die for others.

Mother's death leads me to believe there is something more than death. Love continues.

In the celebration of the bread and wine, Jesus' followers remember him. Similarly, when our family sits down to a meal, we remember Mother and all the feasts she laid before us."

When we remember those who came before us, we clasp hands across time and space - we transcend death as we take up their banner and carry it into the future.

"Dia, De Los Muertos is a festival dedicated to remembering. By inviting the spirits of the ancestors into their homes and seeking them out in the cemeteries, Mexicans remember their roots. They remember where they came from. They remember who they are. They remember that they belong to a human family. And remembering helps them understand their place in the larger family of things; the ongoing cycles and seasons of life.

In the end, we are all finite beings, but our reach extends beyond our years. As Peter Morales reminds us, "When we allow ourselves to feel our place along the continuum of life and death, it moves us deeply. Facing death sharpens our sense of being alive and our connection to one another. And the dead help remind us of what is most meaningful and joyous in the world. Ultimately, then, the Dia de los Muertos celebrates life."

May it be so.

Blessed Be and Amen.

*"Bringing the Dead to Life, *UU World Magazine*, M/A 2000

** *Who Will Remember Me? A Daughter's Memoir of Grief and Recovery*,
Skinner House Books, 2004.