

Exploration: Ancestry by Mike Ludwick 11/15/15

The nation is in the midst of war. A young woman's father has been conscripted to fight in the military, and as much as he wants to join in the fight to protect his people, he is too weak to go. The brave daughter decides to go in her father's place, but before doing so she goes to the family's shrine of their ancestors and lights a burnt offering. Then she cuts off her long hair, steals her father's sword, dons his armor, takes a family horse and rides off in an attempt to bring honor to her family and her country.

While this is an inspiring story, to my knowledge is not actually true. Rather it the premise behind the 1998 Disney film set in China entitled, "Mulan."

I remember seeing the preview for this movie and thinking it was a probably Disney movie just for girls. I was incredibly wrong. Now it's actually my second favorite Disney movie, after Robin Hood, that is.

This month in our community we are talking about being people of Ancestry. If I'm honest, I can't say I think much about my ancestors. I'm focused on people I interact with and the things I am doing on a day-to-day basis. If anything, I might be thinking about what my descendants might say about me when I'm gone: whether I was a good person, father, husband, friend, worker, citizen. And if I were going off to war, I wouldn't necessarily think to light an offering to my ancestors.

But according to the British Museum website, "the ancestor worship cult is still an important part of the belief system of Chinese people. It is based on the belief of reciprocity between the living and the dead. The living have to sustain the spirits of the ancestors and protect their graves. The dead can bring prosperity and good fortune to their living successors. If their descendants neglect their ancestors, the ancestor can become a 'hungry ghost'. A 'hungry ghost' is cut adrift in the spirit world and

can be vengeful and dangerous. ” And the Chinese are not alone, varying types of ancestor worship have been practiced across the globe for centuries.

We humans always seem to be looking for divine intervention to help us out aren't we? But regardless of whether you believe that the intervention of ancestors or divine spirits is possible, is there some benefit to us of looking back to our ancestors? I think so.

About 10 years ago, my mom invited me to take a trip with her to her family's ancestral homeland, Lithuania.



Steadfastly pagan for centuries, it was one of the last areas of Europe to convert to Christianity, and many pagan landmarks remain, as does the traditional ethnic religion itself.

A religion called “Romuva” is a contemporary continuation of the religion of the Baltic peoples, reviving the ancient religious practices of the Lithuanians before their Christianization in the late 14th century.

According to the Romuva website, Lithuanians also had a form of ancestor worship. “In olden times the alkas (or family sanctuaries) was set up in the corner of the house - where the rural folk would hang sacred pictures, symbols. The corner was significant because therein the ancestors' souls and home deities would reside.”

In Lithuania I saw wonderful sights but also learned about the strength of the Lithuanian people. I learned of a woman who secretly and at great risk taught children the Lithuanian language even when it was illegal to do so. This statue depicts her with a child and book hidden behind her spinning wheel.



Particularly disturbing was learning of the Soviet Union's secret police (the KGB's) activities. We visited a building in the capital, Vilnius, where political prisoners were held and often mistreated.



Forced to stand on a platform in the middle of a room surrounded by cold water, prisoners would literally fall asleep from exhaustion and be awakened by the icy liquid. Here we see the destructive power of ancestry, a force that can be used to pit one people against another.

In Paris this week we saw an example of people taking violent aspects of an ancestral religion, and harming innocents. While each person has inherent worth and dignity, I think it is necessary to stand against those who would take away our religious freedom, our humanity and our very lives in an attempt to punish “infidels,” reinstate a theocratic caliphate and bring about the end of the world.



My mother’s family saw America as a place to try to break some of those ancestral bonds. My mom was told not to think of herself as Lithuanian, but

rather as an American, and leave the old world behind. There is a beauty in that, to be able to wipe away old prejudices and assimilate into something new.

Still my mom longed to know about her family's history. And even her family could not put behind prejudice when one of my mom's sisters wanted to marry a Russian of all people! That was scandalous!

The Lithuanian story fortunately ends with freedom. As the Soviet Union crumbled, Lithuania declared its independence in 1990. But Russia had other ideas. As Russian tanks rolled in around the TV tower in the capital, Vilnius, in January 1991, Lithuanians stood around the tower, trying to prevent the Russians from gaining access in order to control the media.

Undeterred, the tanks plowed over the crowd and a cordon of parked cars, seizing the television broadcast center... in a fusillade of cannon and gunfire. At least 11 civilians were killed and 100 or more were wounded.

But later in 1991, when the Soviet Union actually fell, Lithuanian independence was finally achieved again. This statue placed at the TV tower memorializes the freedom the Lithuanians achieved.



So what can we learn from Mulan, Ancestor Worship and the Lithuanian story? I think the answer is Courage and Wisdom. In the face of

hardship and great loss, looking back to the stories of our ancestors can give us courage. Thinking about they handled, or didn't handle, difficult situations can give us wisdom. When we make decisions we often don't know at the time what their impact will be. With our ancestors, we catch a glimpse of the consequences of the choices they made, for good or ill, which can help us.

And I don't necessarily mean just our familial ancestors. I could mean anyone (even fictional characters like Mulan) and real people like George Washington or Sitting Bull or Martin Luther King or Susan B. Anthony or those people who stood around the TV tower in Vilnius.

When we think about what they faced and overcame, or in some cases what they were unable to overcome, maybe we can see more clearly where we need to stand in our lives and that we too can overcome enormous obstacles, or maybe see that our obstacles aren't so big after all.

And while we may question if our ancestors are really able to bring us good fortune, it is without dispute that they may be able to inspire us to have the courage and wisdom to make our own, or if nothing else make our lives worth living.

Blessed be.