

The people of Ghana have a word, san-ko-fa, which translates to “go back and get it.” It is often used in a proverb which says that “It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten.” In keeping with the Soul Matters theme this month of Resilience, that’s what today’s sermon is about: the ways in which things that matter can be left behind or taken away, and the ways in which we can, collectively, go back and get them—to rise again together in resilient community.

It is not a new concept that our bodies carry stories. Stories of things to come--the title of today’s sermon comes from the scene in “the Scottish play,” which goes “by the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes.” Stories of the past--big stories and little stories. The ankle we broke as a child, that aches when a storm is coming. The field of epigenetics was originally just about learning how genes turn on and off. In more recent epigenetics research, scientists have been studying the impact of what things like violence, poverty, and oppression have on our bodies at a deep genetic level.

Patrick Reyes, author of Nobody Cries When We Die, said: “Those who call us to new life have also survived. We who are called to transmit the traditions of survival are also typically the ones who tell the stories of life; we are

called to call others to life. However, our world does not allow enough room for our ancestors to walk freely among us. Those with their own stories of survival and caring for the next generation often are lost, forgotten, or buried—lost because colonial histories have acted violently on our histories, erasing our bodies from history, or lost because their stories were not viewed in such a way as to reflect their beauty, their courage, and their own strength to survive their times. So often, the stories of our ancestors are treated as mere side characters or plots to the dominant narratives.”

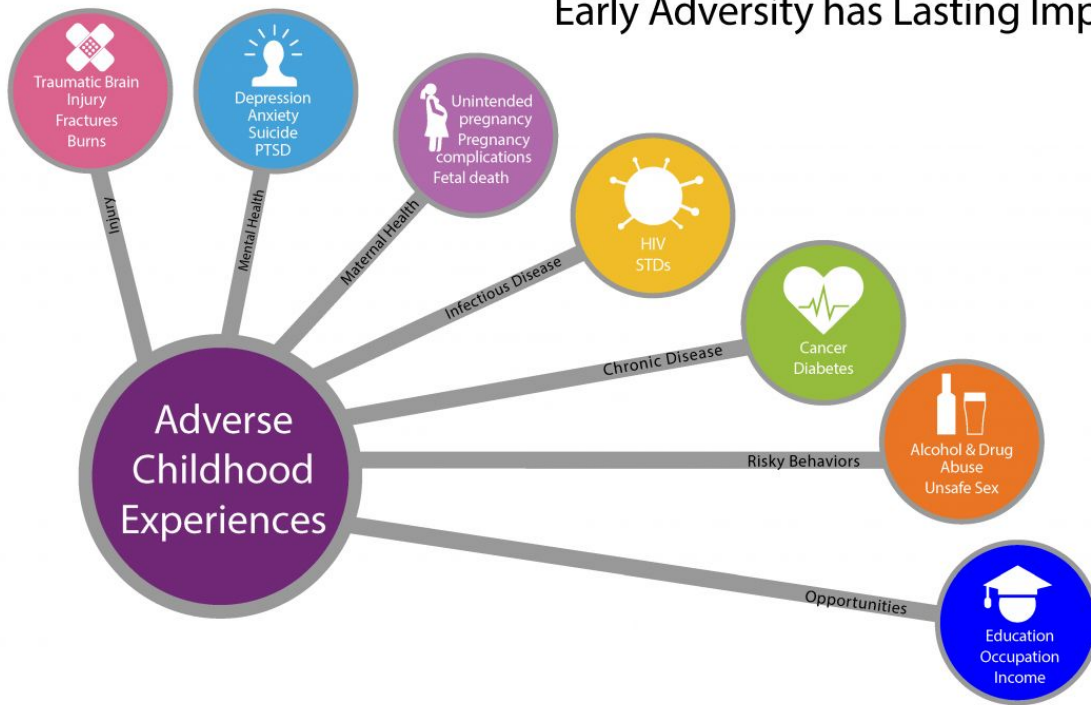
Science has now confirmed the wisdom that has been held in various cultures and religious communities for a long time--the experiences we have change us, even down to the cellular level, and those changes can be passed on to our descendents.

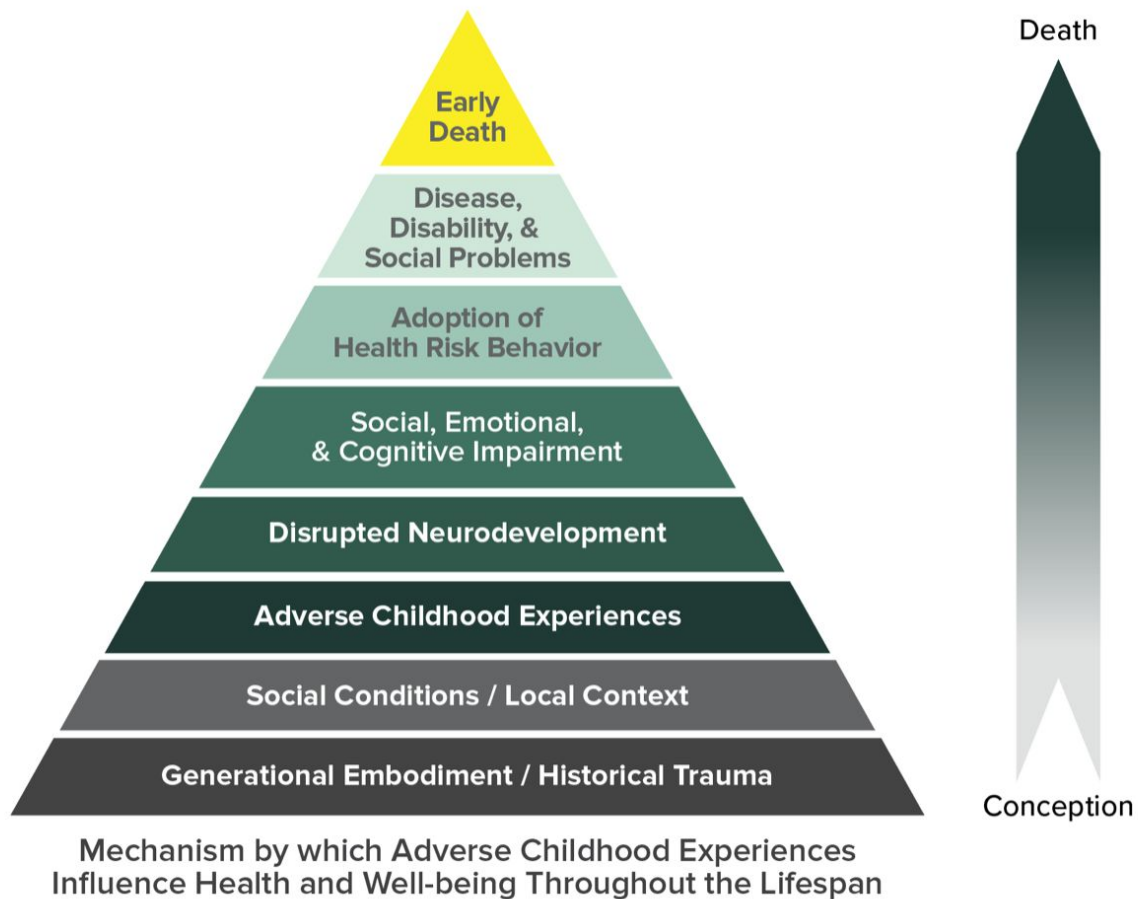
The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has a whole section of their website dedicated to adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs, which are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0-17 years). The original ACE Study was conducted from 1995 to 1997. Since then, other ACE surveys have expanded the types of ACEs from the original focus on poverty, drug exposure, and abuse to include racism, witnessing a sibling being

abused, witnessing violence outside the home, witnessing a parent being abused, being bullied by a peer or adult, involvement with the foster care system, living in a war zone, living in an unsafe neighborhood, losing a family member to deportation, etc.

Hearing just the list of what ACEs can entail is enough to break your heart, but then you begin to really get into the details. Some of the impacts may seem obvious--negative impacts on education, occupation, and income; higher risk of drug and alcohol abuse. But children with a number of ACEs—known as a high ACE score—become adults who are at higher risk for traumatic brain injuries, fractures, burns, depression, anxiety, suicide, PTSD, cancer, diabetes.

Early Adversity has Lasting Impacts





And as if that wasn't enough, it doesn't even stop there! The field of epigenetics tells us that the impacts of historical trauma start as early as conception. For most of my life, I really struggled to understand emotional responses like rage. I mean, "people just need to make their points calmly and rationally, right? It's completely counterproductive to get angry over everything." But the truth is that even as a person of color, I'm still subject to the same forces of white supremacy as anyone else who grows up in this country that has been steeped in structural oppression from the very beginning. As a faith

community, we need to understand, to our very core, a few things. The first is that rage can sometimes feel scary to witness, but it is, and I cannot stress this enough, a completely reasonable reaction to the evil of oppression. Full stop.

But it is also a learned behavior, a learned coping mechanism after an entire lifetime of being dismissed, of offering your story and not being heard, not being believed. Of, as Patrick Reyes's book title says, of nobody crying when you die.

It took me a long time to begin to overcome my own reactions to anger; in fact, it wasn't until seminary that I began to recognize that there was more to this than my own experiences. Patrick Reyes tells the story—and some of you have heard me mention this before—of being in a seminary class, and having a professor ask the class what they had done, what they brought with them into their seminary career. Classmate after classmate talked about their work with this renowned theologian on that prestigious project, and when it got around to Patrick, he said simply, “surviving.” His class laughed. Reyes tells of how in that moment when he had been so vulnerable, only to be met with mockery, how he pulled around him like a shell an attitude of sullen uncaring. He wrapped anger

around him like a shield to hide his broken heart. And at that moment, the blinders that had covered my eyes about rage began to shatter. Psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross says, “The most beautiful we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths.”

So we’ve talked about all these awful statistics, all these terrible experiences...what can we possibly do in the face of that? Well, there is good news in the rest of the story. Because that CDC website I told you about? There’s another section, and that section says that kids who have high ACEs scores do have all these risk factors, but it’s not a foregone conclusion—there is something that will make a difference. That long list of risk factors I named? Well, those risks go down, way down, when children are connected to adults who love them, whether they’re part of their family or not, and to communities who support and embrace them.

The science tells us that there are other things as well that help in community. You may have heard about the school in Baltimore that was seeing major behavioral issues in the kids, and they decided to take a novel approach to the number of detentions and suspensions they were having. They decided to take away their detention room and

replace it with a meditation room, and bring in people to teach yoga and meditative practices. Do you know what happened? When kids were presented with a calm environment and tools to help deal with their feelings, the behavioral issues went way down. It works for adults too...Mindfulness meditation—like we have here every Sunday and Thursday—has been shown to help people have fewer PTSD symptoms.

As I mentioned earlier, our partners in ACT have asked us to spend some time focusing on the ways faith communities can help combat the stigma of mental illness and support people on the path to mental wellness. There is nothing shameful about going to the medical doctor if you need help with healing your body, just like there is nothing shameful about going to, as we call it in our house, the “emotion doctor” for help with healing your heart and mind.

In the Christian scriptures, there is a story of a woman who lost money, a significant amount of money. She searches her entire house, and when she finally finds it, she calls in all of her neighbors to celebrate. There was something about that story that always bothered me, and it's taken me a long time to figure out what. It's this: the woman did the searching on her own, and did the

celebrating with her neighbors. What would it look like if we did more searching together? What would it look like if we let our family, the other parts of our interdependent web, in on the messy parts, along with the pretty parts once the crisis has passed? Dr. Eraina Schauss talks about how to help children who have high ACEs scores, and she said something that really resonated with me regarding how we help each other heal. People who carry trauma--children and adults alike--need what she calls a "circle of security."

We say, now, that we've "got someone's back," but do you know where that comes from? It refers to the danger a soldier was in if they were fighting and someone snuck up behind them. If they fought back to back, though, they could protect each other. We all have blind spots, and with every person we add to the circle of security we shape together, we open our awareness and our understanding of the world and those who live their stories alongside us. And Dr. Schauss says that security builds resilience. Builds the ability to return to who we need to be. So how do we build that circle of security for each other?

We must make the interconnected web visible; we must honor each other's stories as sacred. Hold together the truth of the inherent worth and dignity not just as an idea,

but in real and tangible terms. Experiences of trauma are not an inescapable destiny of doom. We must go back for what we have forgotten, for those we have forgotten. We don't talk a lot about salvation in the UU, but I believe that truly, we save each other every day. Together, everything really is possible. Together we can heal, and heal our world .