

Hallman Ministerial Intern: Kathryn Jay



Brazil's Museu Nacional burned in mid-September. The fire destroyed more than 90 percent of the collections housed in the museum. It's as if the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History had been destroyed.

I once spent several lovely months in Rio de Janeiro, but I never made it to the Museu Nacional. Yet the images and headlines about the fire made me so sad that it took days for me to read the details of what had been lost. I was mourning what I had never seen.

When I finally read the stories, I learned that, in addition to over five million butterfly specimens, a 3,500-year-old Chilean mummy, and dozens of the best-preserved pterosaurs in the world, all the museum's anthropological collections had been destroyed. This loss included the only existing audio recordings of many indigenous languages, some of which are no longer spoken. When a museum worker called it "a moment of intense pain" and talked about trying "to recover our history from the ashes," I cried. So much history. So much culture. And it was all gone.

There's a word in Portuguese that helps to express how I felt — *saudade*. It's a beautiful word, pronounced *sow-DAH-djee* in Brazil. *Saudade* doesn't have a precise cognate in English, but it often gets translated as melancholic longing or yearning. That sounds like nostalgia, but the feeling is a little different because you can feel *saudade* for something that might never have happened, or for something you've never seen or experienced. As someone trained as a historian, I know the feeling well.

I felt such a sad longing for the treasures that had been contained in the museum, even though my own personal memories of Brazil center on drinking *choppe* (cheap draft beer) and watching people play *futevolei* (imagine playing volleyball using only your head and feet) on the Copacabana beach. The history contained in the Museu Nacional wasn't mine, but I long for it anyway, because when history gets lost, we are all the lesser for it. When I ponder the many stories that have been lost, the voices that have fallen silent, the treasures that have gone missing, I feel *saudade*.

Fire is only one brutal way to destroy the past. Before I went to seminary, one of the high school history classes I taught explored the development of the Atlantic World. In the class, my students and I looked at the complex interplay between African, European, and American communities, especially the devastating impact of slavery and colonialism. One year, a short piece by Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot became our go-to article. Trouillot focused on how society's most powerful create the past. He explored the silences of history, detailing why so many stories never make it into the museum at all.

My students and I wondered together - what are the stories we tell ourselves, what becomes the dominant story, what is too often lost or missing from our stories? We found it very powerful to think about how history is created and shaped, how so many voices and stories get lost, get disregarded, get discredited. We felt *saudade* for the forgotten. So all year long, those fifteen-year-olds made it their mission to ask about the gaps, highlight the tantalizing fragments that remain, and uplift the experiences of people left out of the narrative.

As people of faith, what would happen if we did the same? What silences do we long to fill? How does what we remember about the past shape our longings for the future and our ability to create and protect a more inclusive community in the present?

Please feel free to contact me at kathryn@unityunitarian.org or 651-228-1456 x109.

Open Page Writing Sessions

Led by Consulting Literary Minister Karen Hering, Open Page writing sessions are invitations to correspond with the "still, small voice within." Using stories, poetry, images and objects as well as wisdom from religious teachings, science and history, and provided prompts, participants reflect on the month's theme in their own words and on their own pages. No writing experience is necessary. Bring something to write with and on; the rest will be provided! Sessions are free and held at Unity Church; RSVP requested to karen@unityunitarian.org.

- *Belonging to Our Longing*:
Wednesday, October 17, 7:00-8:30 p.m.
- *Covenant: the Promises We Make, Break and Renew*:
Wednesday, November 14, 7:00-8:30 p.m.
- *Wonder: Living with an Open Heart*: Sunday, December 2, 1:00-3:00 p.m.

2019 Thresholds Group

Save the dates!

Are you living on a personal threshold — in the midst of changes in relationship, work, home, health, identity or more? The 2019 Thresholds group begins meeting January. More information will be published in the next *commUNITY* and available online at <http://karenhering.com/event/crossing-and-blessing-our-thresholds-a-4-part-series/>.

Meanwhile, save the following Saturdays for this transformative and supportive group: January 19 (9:00 a.m.-3:00 p.m.), February 2 and 23, and March 9 (9:00 a.m.-noon). Pre-registration REQUIRED. Email Rev. Karen Hering at karen@unityunitarian.org.