

What's Your Story?
A Sermon Offered to the Peterborough Unitarian Universalist Church
March 8, 2015
Rev. Shayna Appel

READING: by Denise (Denny) Davidoff, former Moderator of the UUA. From the *Preface* of *A Chosen Faith*, by John Buehrens and Forest Church.

“My husband, Jerry, and I discovered the Unitarian Universalist church in Westport, Connecticut, in the winter of 1960. We liked the people. We liked the Sunday morning worship in the Saugatuck School auditorium. We liked the potluck suppers. We *loved* the minister, Arnold Westwood. Even three-year-old Douglass liked the place. It seemed like a perfect fit.

Sounds easy, you say. But it wasn't. Signing the membership book in a Unitarian church was scary beyond belief for me even to contemplate. How would I tell my parents I was rejecting the faith of my forefathers? (Yes, *forefathers!* Remember, this was 1960.) I don't just mean my Jewish grandfathers Louis Taft and Harry Zuckerman, who had emigrated from the Ukraine in the late nineteenth century. I mean those *other* forefathers: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. How would I tell my aunts and uncles and cousins? How would I tell my in-laws? How would I tell our friends, particularly those in the Temple Israel community in our town?

And *what* would I tell them? Who had a vocabulary in the early sixties to express the stifling bonds of patriarchy I felt in the synagogue? How could I express feelings of exclusion and put-down I later came to know as feminist? How to explain how good that simple English language liturgy and those guilt-free, uplifting sermons felt in the ears and, increasingly, in the heart? Emerson and Channing and Parker were names mentioned in courses I'd taken in American cultural history at Vassar. But join a *church*?... Leave the family? Deal with Dad's wrath, Mom's tears, and my brother's bewilderment? Was I crazy?

Yes, it was scary. And it took me six and a half years to sign that book. By that time, I was teaching in the Sunday School, serving on committees, canvassing for the pledge drive, and reveling in the beautiful contemporary building we had built on Lyons Plain Road. But even then, all those years later, I still couldn't articulate this newfound faith of mine. The journey to articulation would take much longer than I could ever have imagined. To be truthful, it continues to this day.

Most of us who are active Unitarian Universalists don't know anything close to “enough” about our faith. We don't often understand where the Unitarian Universalist Association came from and, as a result, we cannot have a vision of where we might go. We struggle to speak our Unitarian Universalism to each other and, particularly, to the interfaith world beyond the walls of our societies. We get frustrated trying to explain the theological underpinnings of our social witness to ourselves or to the people with whom we share that witness. We are hampered by

our ignorance. We are fettered by our lack of theological education. How could people who value learning so much find themselves knowing so little?"¹

The topic for today's sermon arose from a discussion at a staff meeting a few weeks ago. Maria, Char, Vanessa and I were sitting around the conference table at our weekly gathering and I asked them for their thoughts on this question. "Is Unitarian Universalism a faith, or is it the umbrella under which people of many faiths worship together?" (May it bring you perverse pleasure to know that the staff here can't agree on anything any better than the rest of you can!)

The question arose for me in part from my own spiritual journey and my return to Unitarian Universalism. As some of you may know, I was born Jewish, got introduced to Unitarian Universalism as a youngish adult, and attended seminary to with the intention of becoming a UU minister. I chose a Christian seminary to attend in the hopes that I would be able to overcome my "Christophobia" – my fear of all things Christian – and ultimately overshoot the mark a bit by actually becoming one. For the last fifteen years I have served progressive Christian churches in the United Church of Christ, and you all have given me my first chance to serve a Unitarian Universalist Congregation; and about that I'd just like to say, "Thank you. It's good to be home! It's good to be ensconced again in a community where the full depth and breadth of my faith can be both nurtured and challenged! It is good to be home!"

It was also good to get away! It was good to get away and dive fully into the progressive Protestantism that is our Unitarian Universalist heritage. Yes, we "are the inheritors of a dual heretical tradition born from... radical branches of Protestant Christianity."² And, while, "We have taken our foundational doctrines in all sorts of innovative directions over the centuries,...our theological heritage remains the same."³ We are Unitarians, meaning we believe in one God, not three. And we are Universalists, meaning we carry within us, "the unyielding belief that each and every person is endowed with an original blessing that calls them and claims them regardless of circumstances or even worthiness."

We are Unitarian Universalists and our heritage lays claim to One Loving, Forgiving, and Redeeming God. But then, we are also inheritors of the Transcendentalist movement, which encouraged us to reach beyond the sources of scripture for knowledge, wisdom and spiritual growth. Thoreau was reading the Bhaavad- Gita on Walden Pond back in 1854. So is it any wonder that in 2015 Unitarian Universalism has grown to include atheists, agnostics, Wiccans, Humanists, Jews,

¹ Davidoff, Denise Taft. Preface to **A Chosen Faith**. Buehrens, John H. & Forrest Church. (Beacon Press: Boston) © 1989. Pgs xv – xvii.

² McDonald Ladd, Nancy. *Universalism in Practice*. UU World. Spring 2015. Pg. 22.

³ Ibid.

Christians, Taoists, or, as I've been known to say, "Everything from Buddhism to Nudism"?

And this, you see, begs the question. Is Unitarian Universalism in 2015 a faith tradition, or the umbrella under which people of different faiths worship? Our answer to this question matters greatly, not because one answer is right and the other wrong, but because it has everything to do with how we practice and articulate this great tradition we are the inheritors of. Let me explain...

Every world religion that I know of has a sacred text, or texts. And within these texts are the collective wisdom of generations of people who have attempted to answer some of life's greatest questions; Who are we? Why are we here? How shall we live together? What is worthy of our pursuit? Is there something more than just this? Can suffering be redemptive? What happens to us when we die? Is there a God or Supreme Being? If so, what is the nature of this Being and what is the nature of this Being's relationship with us?

These are very old questions. Questions humanity has been asking for thousands of years. And so it is not surprising that, within these sacred texts, we find stories that have been guiding humanity, for better AND for worse, for thousands of years.

Those of you who identify as atheist, agnostic, and/or Humanist may be thinking that you have no such stories. I would challenge that. All of life is a story. There are family stories, historical stories, and national stories, stories our friends and families have about us that shape and form us, sometimes in ways we don't even notice. There are stories that were read to us as children, or bodies of literature we may have read as adults, philosophers who kindled our imaginations and got us thinking way outside the boxes we had constructed for ourselves.

Stories matter. Foundational or faith narratives matter deeply. Applied to our own lives these stories can hold us together in a storm, they can literally re-member us to our highest selves or aspirations, they can guide us along right paths or lead us into right relationship. Conversely, tragically, these stories can also inspire some of the worst behavior known to humanity – but that's a topic for another day.

Today's topic is "stories" - mine, yours, ours. As Unitarian Universalists, who do we say that we are? How do we live that out? How are we making manifest in our own lives or in our world the stories that constitute our internal narratives?

While you ponder that, let me offer you an example of how the faith stories from one of the traditions I hold dear carried me across a very wide abyss that opened before me three and a half years ago.

At about 4 O'clock in the afternoon on September 20th in 2011, my world changed forever, and not for the better. I learned in a telephone call from my sister-in-law Brenda that my beautiful, awesomely cool, smart, funny, bright, compassionate

brother Michael had intentionally shot himself in the chest earlier that day and that he had died en route to the trauma center at University of Maryland Hospital. Upon hearing, and then registering, this news, it was as if some here-to-fore unseen veil between lives as I knew and loved it, and some other realm of darkness and pain, was violently torn open, and I was dropkicked into a place of hell reserved for the living. Michael's suicide came suddenly, seemingly without warning, and with precious little by way of explanation. As all suicide survivors know, we were left with more questions than answers – and as anyone who has lost a loved one suddenly knows, we were stunned into breathlessness.

In September of 2011, when I lost my brother Michael, I had been a practicing Christian for nine years. For nine years I had lived the liturgical calendar with all of its narratives– preparing in Advent to receive something unexpected, allowing Jesus to be born in me anew each Christmas, wondering what it was all about during Epiphany, searching deep within during the season of Lent, then walking the excruciating journey to the cross and death during Holy Week, and the joy that awaited at an empty tomb on Easter morning. For nine years I had lived this cycle of stories. For nine years these stories were taking root in me.

Now, just to be clear, the first year I walked that journey of Holy Week to the cross and beyond, my worst fears of Christianity were realized. Maundy Thursday, with its recounting of Jesus' last meal with his disciples, and then Good Friday in which we remember the final hours of his life. I remember thinking to myself, "These people are gluttons for punishment! My God! What could possibly be gained by putting ourselves through this every year?"

The years past, and every year the same liturgical cycle rolled on...Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Hell Week and then Easter, followed by Pentecost in which we remember the birth of the church and then on to Ordinary Time during which we try to make sense of the first half of the cycle...then it would start all over again.

I don't remember changing amidst the wash of those cycles. It must have happened very slowly – the building of spiritual muscle. But, when my brother died, suddenly nine years of practice – nine years of preparing to receive the unexpected, of wondering what it all meant, of wilderness wanderings, pain, death and resurrection all came together like some great exo-skeleton, holding me together and helping me go forward when I had no strength to even stand on my own. All those stories contained in the liturgical years I had served helped carry me across the abyss of my brothers' death.

It's not that I didn't hurt. I hurt. But if all that time in the tomb with Jesus had taught me anything it was that tombs are for a season, not a lifetime. Yes, they're dark, and as anyone who has ever been in one can tell you, after awhile they really stink – but eventually the stone is rolled away. It happened every year. So it's not

that I didn't hurt, it's that I could, as the Apostle Paul wrote, grieve my loss fully because I wasn't grieving as someone without hope.

Is Unitarian Universalism in the twenty-first century a faith tradition, or is it the umbrella under which people of many different faiths come together? Are you moved beyond your comfort zones in good times, or held together in the bad, by our Unitarian Universalist response to Bloody Sunday and the larger Movement for Civil Rights? Or, is it the wisdom of the Tao Ti Ching, the Buddha, or the Koran that inspires you to reach for your highest, best self? Is it our Unitarian Universalist principles that guide your life, or the gospel imperative to love one another? Does the essence of our UU faith, with its flexibility to continually evolve as a global civilization of people, inspire you to reach forward when everyone around you is stuck in the past, or are you more inclined to be moved by the mysticism of Kabala?

Is Unitarian Universalism in the twenty-first century a faith tradition, or is it the umbrella under which people of many different faiths come together? I think the answer is, "Yes." It is both. So, far more important than your answer to this question, is how you answer when someone asks, "So, what's your story?"

Won't you pray with me?

Holy Mystery-

We unite in our differences in background and belief;

We unite – with gratitude and hope:

Hope for a world of differences;

Hope for a world that honors difference;

We unite in community

With gratitude for difference.⁴

In the days and weeks and years to come

May we discover together, amidst our differences,

Words with which we may speak our Unitarian Universalist faith-

To one another, and to the world beyond our doors.

And may all that we discover along the way bring us closer to one another, and empower us to be builders of a world that works for everyone.

And when our time on this sweet earth is over Precious Spirit of Life,

May our lives be worthy to find their way into the stories of the next generation.

Ashay. Blessed be. And, Amen.

⁴ Breeden, David. We Unite in Our Differences. From Association Sunday, 2009. Posted on-line at Illuminations, a Unitarian Universalist App.