

The Sanctuary of Our Stories

October 7, 2018

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

OPENING WORDS

Come, friends, into this sanctuary,
this room of history and hope.
Come, friends, into the sanctuary
of this community of love and laughter.
Come, friends, into the sanctuary
of your own soul, this sabbath of your own making.
Let us worship together.
(ABSB)

STORY FOR ALL AGES Scaredy Squirrel (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=klwSfmCEiC8>)

Poem #1

THAT SPRING

I watched you crouching in mud
to bury peas, hard nubbins
dyed fluorescent pink.
You covered them gently,
patting each like an infant.

Afterward, you stood
in the drizzle like a tree,
admiring your work
as you always did.
Certainty rose like steam
from your body.

(Holly Zeeb, *Eye of the Beholder*)

Poem #2

VOYAGE AT NIGHT

In the ballast
of the house
something groans.
The furnace clicks on –
a soft thud,
then a whirring

as if there were
life below. Your body,
its massive trunk –
its breath, its warmth –
is *Absence*,
a cold hollow
beside me, vaster
than ocean.
How will I travel
without you?
(Holly Zeeb, *Eye of the Beholder*)

READING A public reckoning, from the book *White Trash – A 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*, by Nancy Isenberg (p. 2-3)

The idea of settlement had to be sold to wary investors; the planting of New World American colonies had to serve Old World purposes. In grand fashion, promoters imagined America not as an Eden of opportunity but as a giant rubbish heap that could be transformed into productive terrain. Expendable people – waste people – would be unloaded from England; their labor would germinate a distant wasteland. Harsh as it sounds, the idle poor, dregs of society, were to be sent thither simply to throw down manure and die in a vacuous muck. Before it became that fabled “City upon a Hill,” America was in the eyes of sixteenth-century adventurers a foul, weedy wilderness – a “sinke hole” suited to ill-bred commoners. Dark images of the New World accompanied more seductive ones. When early English promoters portrayed North America as a rich and fertile landscape, they grossly and perhaps knowingly exaggerated. Most were describing a land they never had seen, of course. Wary investors and state officials had to be convinced to take the plunge into a risky overseas venture. But most important, it was a place into which they could export their own marginalized people.

SERMON

The Sanctuary of Our Stories

The Rev. Anne Bancroft

How are you today, my friends? Are you weary, as I am?
And, how is it with your spirit? Are you struggling a bit?

There’s an old Irish saying that declares, “There are three things that are real: God, human folly, and laughter. The first two are beyond our comprehension, so we must do what we can with the third.”

I must go to Ireland soon.

On the whole, I believe it – surely some essence of God, of spirit, of experience of wholeness beyond our comprehension exists, a greater love, however we name it; sometimes when we're lucky, we even feel it. And in times of despair, we no doubt long for it.

And human folly – so very much on display this week in all its varieties ... by folly I don't think they mean fun, or trivial but complicated and messy and unresolved – our human capacity to run in circles around ourselves.

So we do what we can with the third, which is laughter, and you know I like its sounds, even in church. I think it's good for the soul, and that's what we're in the business of addressing here ... but this week, it feels that where there has been laughter, too often it has been at the expense of dignity, and that is not a good tradeoff. It has not been laughter born of joy but of mean-spiritedness and fear.

I've been yearning for the joy of discovering that really we – like the squirrel – can fly, that in truth we could rise high above and beyond the fears that are keeping us captive in our own small spaces, each in our own tree. I want those wings, because this week I am fearful and inclined to burrow into the safe space of my imagination as opposed to embracing the stark yet grace-filled light of day.

We – among others – ask ourselves, how did we get here? To a place of such contention and disrepair in our collective lives? And who can we blame, because that ALWAYS feels better, doesn't it? Being able to point our fingers at THEM, the ones responsible for what we feel is not right ... whichever side one lands on, we invariably point at THEM ... (remember? Our folly?)

Our theme for this month is "Sanctuary." I opened with some suggestions about what sanctuary can be or mean to us – a physical space, like this one; a community space, with the kind of welcome that makes room for others; the sanctuary that is our own hearts. There is another kind of sanctuary that is a story, that is our stories. I want to think about that with you this morning – the sanctuary of our stories, how they provide us respite from the storms that challenge us.

We humans are inherently storytellers. It is how we understand our lives as collections of events that we string together. It is how we locate ourselves in time: stories of where we were born, and to whom; stories of our childhoods, our best friends, the memories of major milestones; the choices we have made about how we spend our time, or what communities we have chosen to be a part of. These are all our stories. We share them as they are relevant – one day, this piece; another day, this piece.

We like to think they originate with us when in truth we inherit much of what we believe about ourselves and how we perceive the world around us, for good or ill. We define ourselves in response to

the stories we have arrived into. The place we were born existed long before we did, and yet we enter into that environment, our narrative affected, even to a large extent determined, by time and place.

Each segment and chapter of who we are are the magical elements of how we get to know each other, and of how we find common ground.

Our stories provide us identities. And, they become by and large our sanctuary, familiar and comfortable. We wear them like favorite clothes that we never want to give away, even though they may be worn and tattered.

I have always done things this way, we may believe; I am that kind of person. Any of you who have done Myers Briggs testing or know your Enneagram numbers have fine-tuned senses of self, no doubt.

Sometimes, of course, our stories are closer to being reflections of what those around us have suggested than they are of our true selves. We may have stories with which we judge ourselves: I am not so smart, I am not so beautiful, I am not so strong – because no one told us otherwise. Regardless, even those stories become our sanctuaries, as they are known and familiar. The sanctuary part is the familiarity, not the truth of it.

And then sometimes, there is a disruption and we are forced to reimagine, reframe, redefine, which is, even in the best of circumstances, inherently uncomfortable as it requires us to give some of those old clothes away – our favorite sweaters of safety, shoes that are worn smooth from walking the same path over and over. How can we live without THEM? Who would we be, after all?

We heard two beautiful poems this morning – the first an image of the partner full of presence that rises like steam from his body. The second an acknowledgement of the change that was a profound absence. “How will I travel without you?” What is my story now that I am alone?

We could feel the loss, the grief of this new chapter.

I knew this woman, this poet; she was overwhelmed by having to change the story she had hoped to tell her entire life: of his being beside her, planting peas, tending their lives, their shared garden.

This was not a change she wanted, nor one she ever wanted to reconcile with. There was no sanctuary in her new story, at least not right away. Most stories take time to become familiar. Not all stories arrive with sorrow, of course. Sometimes new stories arrive with joy – a new job, a discovery, a new child; perhaps a new sense of self that has more affirmation than the old one. Either way, there is a loss we experience when the old story leaves us.

It's why we resist it so much, I think – why it can be so hard to move, even into the light, because we are letting go of the sweatshirt, or the twice-darned socks, or the hat of familiarity.

The devil you know ... as they say.

This weekend is the observation formerly known as Columbus Day – now often referenced as Indigenous People's Day. There is a story, speaking of stories, that we have told each other about this country and its beginnings for many, many years. We heard remnants of that story this past week, actually, about what it takes – or what is allowed – in the effort to gain entry into positions of power for the young white men who are still the primary inheritors of this tale. We Americans, the story goes, are smart and industrious; we have built the strongest country in the world by working hard, serving our faith-based values on behalf of equal access and justice for all. We are heirs to great courage and discovery, our ancestors having arrived in this land with joy in their hearts and opportunity in their minds, ready to humbly represent the best of human endeavor. We – the rightful inheritors – go to good schools, workout with friends, study, go to church. We – the rightful inheritors – go to more good schools, become first or second in our class, work and earn

Oh, wait. That might not be entirely accurate.

I heard recently the old saying: *You think you hit a triple, when actually you were born on third base.*

Oh, shhhh, they say. It's our story. It's known and familiar – it's comfortable ... for some of us, anyway. It is the story we learned at home, or at least the one we learned in school. And to be honest, we're not really interested in writing a new story just now, even if the details of our old one are a little ... slippery. This one has served us very well for a long time. It serves us all well, doesn't it?

Somehow, I reply, I doubt that.

C.C. Chang reminds us in *The Practice of Zen*:

The greater the doubt, the greater the awakening:

The smaller the doubt, the smaller the awakening.

No doubt, no awakening.

Here's the deal: when we sit in the certainty of our stories, in the sanctuary of our stories, in the comfort and complacency of our stories, personal or cultural, there is no room for anything or anyone new: for any growth, for any vitality, for any emergence, for any awakening.

If all we ever want to do is coast through this magnificent gift of life with blinders to anything rejuvenating or hopeful, or – of course – if we are beneficiaries of the story to begin with, all we have to do is insist: that's my story and I'm stickin' to it.

But, my friends, it does not serve us well – ever, even the ones who think they are benefiting. In truth, even if our story never changes significantly, it does not serve us to leave it unexamined, it does not serve us to pretend there is no room for edits, for additions or deletions, or total overhauls, even.

You've heard about Christopher Columbus, I'm guessing? Not the one of our childhood, not the 1492 and oceans blue, but the one who raped and pillaged and abused and enslaved? There is one part of that story that is true, I suppose ... the part about the money, about finding and controlling resources ... that has always been, and continues to be a primary motivator in our American narrative, so I guess we don't have to rewrite the ENTIRE story.

But we need to reconsider the story about who came here and why; who settled what and how; who they befriended and who they destroyed. We need to factor all of that into the stories we shape today, else we continue living the myth, willingly perpetuating a tale that is simply not true.

Oh, shhhh, they say. It's working for us!

I know, and you know that's not good enough. If the arc is to bend in the direction we would have it bend, toward a sustainable and life-giving justice, toward an authentic existence, no matter what color, gender, class or ability, we must all be willing to consider our stories. We must all be willing to give up the sanctuary of the familiar for something more true.

This is not a time for despair, friends. The rewriting is already happening. We have been witnessing the insistence that some stories be corrected. The courage of the #MeToo movement, for example, has been shedding a bright light on many stories that needed to change.

The pushback can't surprise us. The same old guard that Peter mentioned earlier, that sent what they considered the dregs of society to seed their profits, lives on in new generational garb, and they're trying hard to hold onto their version of truth that would have them pictured as bold and courageous when the truth is closer to acting on behalf of what benefits them and those like them, a myth of deserving rather than taking.

We can't be shocked, because we know how hard it is to adjust our own stories, right? How much longer does it take to rewrite our cultural ones – so long embedded, so long our collective sanctuaries. But it's happening, even with what feels like the occasional setback.

The arc that bends towards justice is not one that bends itself, necessarily. It requires our engagement and our commitment to a love that will bind us – a love greater than each, but within, between and among us all – a love that can heal our wounds, put to flight our fears. Our human folly is in not knowing, at least not yet, the story that will unite us – all of us – a story that will guide us together, instead of dividing us.

Let us commit to finding that story – and sharing its truth, instead of holding on to the ones that give US sanctuary, alone in our own trees, no matter how safe, no matter how familiar. And let us invite any and all who are willing to join us in that rewriting.

It will take time, and tenacity, and commitment. But it is the only way forward. Beyond red and blue, beyond either/or, as Rumi suggests “Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing there is a field. I’ll meet you there. When the soul lies down in that grass the world is too full to talk about.”

Maybe that’s when we get to laughter, in the new story, the true sanctuary.

So may it be.