

The Stories We Tell

First Unitarian Church Albuquerque

June 24, 2018

Unitarian Universalist congregations promise to encourage One another in a “free and responsible search for truth and meaning”. It is our fourth principle. We frequently speak of seeking truth as if it were an objective and replicable part of reality. And I am confident that we enjoy many overlapping mutually affirmed truths among us - today is Sunday June 24, it is another beautiful day in Albuquerque, this is First Unitarian Church and all are welcome. These are not the truths that need free and responsible searches. The truths we need in order to sustain this majestic and amazing planet are often subjective, usually provisional and more about meaning than factual reality. The truths we seek for are the ones we need in order to bring our best selves to this wild and precious life and to encourage others to do the same. Often these truths are about ourselves and our relationships –our self-understanding and our sense of urgency and agency in the world:

- Who loves me? Why do they love me?
- Who respects me? Why do they?
- Why do I feel this way?
- Why do I keep making the same kind of mistakes?
- What do I want? What do I need? Where do I fit?

The answers to these deeper questions inform personality and identity. These answers are usually grounded in the private stories that continue to shape our lives in memorable ways.

Salman Rushdie wrote, "Those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives, the power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, truly are powerless, because they cannot think new thoughts.

Rushdie makes it sound like it might be easy to seize this power and reframe the fundamental stories of one's life and identity. It is not a simple task to wrestle one's past into a new shape, a new understanding, a new narrative. It is the work of personal reinvention. It is profound and important work AND it is neither easy or quick. Why would it be? These are the stories that have shaped the most fundamental assumptions of our lives: are we lovable, worthy, smart, acceptable? And yet, without the discipline to re-imagine the core stories shaping our lives we are not open to new perspective, new experience, new truth and new life. Many of the stories that inform our personal assumptions and shape our lives occurred when we were young. That is when the 4th grade teacher made it clear I am not artistic or when the music teacher told my brother to just move his lips. We treat these as funny stories now, but I don't paint and he doesn't sing. Were these teachers right at an important level or have we never tested their quick and biting assessment of childhood talent? Often, we think that our initial understanding of an event is the most authentic or accurate –the one closest to the "truth". It is true that those teachers said those things. It is true that we, as children, believed that we should not paint or sing. That is about as far as we can go with that story. I say to you friends, meaningful TRUTH is a complex thing and one we

do not perceive fully or quickly -and hardly ever in the fourth grade. The life shaping events of our lives take time to understand. We must revisit them with a willingness to revise our understandings. Most of our important stories will need several new frames before the compelling or lasting import can be discerned. It is worth noticing whether your frame around an important story is getting bigger or smaller. Have you been diminishing the most important stories of your life? Or have you made a single message far too important.

Is there a theme, story or event that you know has shaped your life? Is there a pattern you follow over and over again even as you profess to want something different? Is there a devastating failure from which you have not recovered your balance and confidence? Is there a profound heartbreak that has not released you to new life and love? Are you denying some essential part of your identify in order to "fit in"?

In my childhood family we kept big secrets about my father's drinking. We didn't do things that might upset him. We didn't invite friends over when he would be home because friends wouldn't understand how careful we all needed to be. We lived in a small and anxious story. It was what social scientists call a closed system now. As a teenager this way of living embarrassed me and made me angry.

When I was a young adult my father disowned me for a year, bizarrely thinking that would bring me home and straighten out my liberal thinking. During that time my grandmother told me my father's formative story. With this new information I began to understand his demons and the story got much more complex -there were events and nuances I hadn't known and couldn't have understood as a child. As an adult I could bring a bit more compassion and I could set my own boundaries with my father. If he

drank I left with my children. My daughters only knew a loving grandfather as they grew up. And he did love them. That was always true. They know of his drinking only through my stories. It seems I had considerably more power in that relationship than I would have guessed. Who knew?

Despite that neat one paragraph summary I would guess that I have framed and reframed the hurt, anger, threats and disillusionments of my relationship with my father 100 times. Sometimes I had the help of a gifted therapist. Sometimes it was a sensitive partner. Often it was my siblings or even my daughters who asked a question I had never considered or told a story I had never heard. The story gets bigger and better with each new insight. It doesn't get nicer or happier but it does become more whole, more understandable and more tragic than personal -and that is better. I found a greater truth -one that allowed me to recognize his virtues -he did not disappear from his family -going to bars or stay away from home. We never had to go find him or rescue him from a bad situation. He did not have car accidents. He seldom missed a sports event or a school performance. He worked conscientiously and carefully, saving so that he could help four kids with college costs. He was the unconditional lover in the family -often confused by our tears or our needs but steadfast in his presence. It is very confusing to a child -of any age when the person with the biggest problem and the most erratic behavior, is also the person offering unconditional acceptance and encouragement. That realization doesn't erase the ugly events but it invites some proportionality -it makes room for the contradictions in my father's life. It begins to honor the significance of our relationship over the influence of his disease. It allowed me to let go of some of the most painful memories. I have not forgotten them but they

no longer dominate who I am and how I move in the world. With each letting go - letting go of the hurt, anger, disappointment, fear, frustration. Letting go of the missed opportunities, all of the “what ifs” and “if onlys”. With each letting go of the deep hurt of a 10, 16 or 21 year old daughter the story fills out. At some point I could see a complex, deeply wounded and loving man who handled his own anxiety, disappointment and fear exactly as he had been carefully taught by his own father and grandfather –with a drink or 10. With each new understanding of my father I understand myself better. Alcoholic behavior aside I am more like my father than different -a devoted parent, a conscientious professional, a social liberal and fiscal conservative, I can fix things and make things, I love to be outside, I read a lot. Before he died we saw one another clearly and loved one another in all our wounded imperfection.

I urge you to this work of “retelling, rethinking, deconstructing, joking and changing” the formative story of your life to find deeper truth because I want you to be happy and fulfilled in this precious life. That is true. It is also true that understanding your own life in story, requires some level of acceptance of the contradictions and paradoxes that will not reconcile. For me it is the reality that the man who caused the most pain and confusion in my young life is also the only person who has loved me unconditionally since the day of my birth. The whole story requires both truths.

Learning to live creatively with our own paradoxes, is to recognize at a fundamental level that everyone copes with their wounds and their insecurities with whatever strategies they have been taught or seen modeled. There are no authentic separations between us -only the tribes we construct to allay our fears. Centered in a

secure identity can we develop the social courage to cross tribal lines or party lines with an abundance of compassion and a holy curiosity? Can we learn to nurture relationships across the chasms of our polarized society by listening and telling our stories? Can we do this?

Is your life diminished by a depleted story -a story that has too little power or too little love? Are you denying that voice still and small that wants you to heal? If you are, please know that I believe your story. And, beloved, it is not the only truth. It is not the whole truth. There is another truth to balance the painful one you have taken into your heart. Only you can discover that other truth, that larger truth, that additional perspective that escaped you when you were younger. Unitarian Universalism offers you a religious community within which to expand your self-awareness, increase your emotional maturity and deepen your spiritual understanding. This is our religious way:

- to work with our own histories to better understand ourselves;
- to find additional truths in the stories we tell ourselves;
- to acknowledge the lessons of our inescapable suffering, in order
- to break open a new, engaged and resilient future within beloved community.

As your religious community, we will companion you in discovery and re-interpretation. Even with an ugly story you are beautiful. Tell your story into a compassionate circle and hear yourself grow stronger and clearer simply by forming the words. We will welcome your new, more whole, more authentic self. We will love you as you become - even as we love you now.

This capacity to excavate and expand truth is a freedom directly connected to the sense of human agency we defend as Unitarian Universalist. We offer you this

personal freedom within the beloved community so that you can tell and retell, frame and reframe your own story until it is whole and brings you life. Then encourage others to find their complex and conflicting truths, their bigger and better story. This is how we build community, respecting and exploring our independent and unique stories as we discover where they coincide and align.

You have choices my friends:

- Live in the bigger story.
- Find opportunity in the contradictions
- Claim the abundant and redemptive story.

It will make all the difference.

Blessed be and Amen

The Rev. Nancy Bowen