



The Path

The Spiritual Theme Newsletter of the First UU Society of Burlington

November 2, 2015

What Does it Mean to Seek a Life of Story?



Dear First UU,
This month, we are considering what it means to live a life of “story.” Our human lives are made up of stories, and they are also made by stories. At some point, most of us will feel shaped by a story. Or maybe stuck in a story, or unsure about the way a certain story in our life will end up.

And sometimes, the stories that shape us most profoundly are the ones others tell about us. My colleague Rev. Scott Taylor tells a story of a friend who, in her family, was known as “the clumsy one.” Yet, as he observed, “I have never seen my friend trip, not once. Or drop a thing, ever. And yet, somehow, when she goes home, she spills coffee on at least one outfit, stubs at least one toe and stumbles down at least one step. The power of story!”

At the same time, we have the power to cast off or reshape the stories others tell about us. Rewriting the stories others tell about us can be challenging soul work. But, embedded in the theology and history our UU faith is an affirmation that our lives need not be “predetermined” by one divinely-decreed set story. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the dominant Puritan tradition, from which our ancestors broke away, taught that God had predestined not just the larger story of the world, but each of our individual stories too. Some of us were slotted for heaven and others for hell. Nothing any of us could do about it. *(continued on page 2)*

Upcoming Services

Sundays 9 & 11 a.m.

November 8- "Stories of Blessing"- Rev. Mara Dowdall

November 15- "Old Friends and New Chapters"- Rev. Mara Dowdall and Rev. Phyllis O'Connell

November 22- "All Ages Thanksgiving Celebration" - Rev. Phyllis O'Connell and Martha Dallas

November 29- Guest Storyteller Colin Ryan

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But our spiritual ancestors rejected the idea that we were all pre-storied for heaven or hell. The Universalists, believing in a God of Love, rejected the religious narrative that some people were going to hell. The Unitarians, believing we humans have divinely-endowed free will and a related capacity to improve and change over the course of our lives, didn't believe that the creator scripted some of us for damnation from the start. In this view, as Scott Taylor puts it in *Soul Matters*, "God is not so much the author of the story as she is the magical muse that needles and nags us to put our own stamp on the story, or even have a little fun and turn the story on its head. In short, we come from a long-line of spiritual relatives who agreed with Shakespeare that 'all the world's a stage,' but [even more,] improv show to which we've all been invited."

So we invite you to *The Path* this month, honoring both the power of stories in our lives, and our power to write and rewrite our own stories. The questions, spiritual exercise, and sources of inspiration are offered to help you go deeper on your exploration. May it be a rich one indeed!

See you on the path,

Rev. Mara



2015-2016 Themes



December: Possibility

January: Time

February: Grace

March: Passion

April: Strength

May: Faith

June: Revelry



Looking Ahead Seeking Input on January Theme

The creation of content for each edition of *The Path* is a collaborative effort. Your submissions of readings, stories, songs, videos, podcasts, visual images, questions, and spiritual exercises help supplement the basic materials on our designated theme that we receive from **Soul Matters**. While we may not be able to publish all submissions, they are all shared with First UU worship leaders so it can become rich fodder for Sunday services.

Because we need to be working a few months ahead, this month, we welcome your contributions on January’s theme: **“time.”** Please send your related materials on “time” to **themecircles@uusociety.org** by the end of this month, November 30.

Self-Care on the Spiritual Journey

I believe that if we’re doing our job as a faith community well, then the spirituality territory we cover in our worship services, educational experiences, and social witness should be deeply relevant in our own individual lives. After all, one of the core purposes of congregational life is to inspire us to lives of meaning and purpose, but also to help us navigate

“all that is our life,” the joys and the struggles, by being a community of wisdom, challenge, care, and mutual spiritual support.



When we go deeper into spiritual exploration together and individually, as theme-based ministry and our related **Theme Circle** are designed to encourage, however, we might encounter some tender spots in our own souls and/or find ourselves revisiting challenging times in our life histories. Therefore, it is important, when doing deep spiritual work, to have trusted companions and adequate support on the journey, and to know you are welcome to care for yourself and your spirit along the way, engaging in the theme only to the level that’s comfortable for you.

Likewise, please know that we, the First UU staff, are here to offer support if you find yourself struggling with something surfaced by the monthly theme. Please reach out to find out more about the pastoral and spiritual care available in our First UU community and referrals to other related resources.

The easiest way to get in touch is to email **pastoralcareministries@uusociety.org**, which forwards to whomover is on-call for pastoral care: for the next two weeks, that will likely still be Rev. Mara (**revmara@uusociety.org**). Starting, **November 15**, that will be Rev. Phyllis O’Connell (**phyllis@uusociety.org**), our parental leave minister, or Rev. Jennifer Pader, who provides supplemental pastoral care on a referral basis and will be covering the holiday weeks during Phyllis’ tenure. You can also call the office at 802-862-5630; someone will be able to assist you.

Each month, we will offer a spiritual exercise or a few that will allow you to engage more deeply with the theme. **Theme Circle** group members are invited to partake of at least one, and bring any related insights or reflections from their experience for sharing at their monthly meeting.

“What’s Your Wizard of Oz?”

When she talks about the lion, a woman named Susan Woodward lights up. Susan is a teacher with a keen awareness of how stories are our greatest teachers. And companions. That’s where *The Wizard of Oz* and the lion comes in. And Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodsman, Toto too. This mythic tale isn’t just “a favorite story,” it is one of those “made-up” stories that have long helped my friend make sense of the “real” world. It’s led her to courage when fear left her blind. It’s framed real life problems. It’s guided her choices. Even warned her about types of people to look out for. And maybe most of all, it’s reminded her that answers are often found by having the courage to return home rather than running away. It’s a “made up” story that’s been essential to helping her see and navigate her “real life” story.

Visit <http://swoodward62.wordpress.com/2011/10/22/lessons-from-the-yellow-brick-road/> for a first hand account of how Susan Woodward honors the wisdom of Oz.

We all have formative stories. Rev. Scott Taylor writes, “as a preacher’s kid, many of mine came from the Bible. But there also was Star Wars! It’s grandiose to say that I saw myself--or wanted to see myself-- in Luke Skywalker, but who of us of that age didn’t?! For another friend, it was the Nancy Drew book series that shaped her world and gave her the notion that women are smart, savvy and cool--not second-hand supporters of men. My Dad grew up with Westerns, so his world has always seemed a bit dangerous, with the necessity of always having to go it alone. My neighbor’s favorite book was *Treasure Island* and it led him to see life as a grand adventure, with him traveling the world more than anyone from our tiny Ohio town.”



This month you are invited to identify and reflect on one of your favorite “mythic” stories and find traces of it in your life. Then, if you are in a Theme Circle, bring some “proof” to share with your group of how that story still lives in and shapes your life.

Don’t make that second part of the exercise overly complicated. Your “proof” might simply be pulling the book or off your shelf and bringing it in or calling to mind your favorite scene/chapter. The point is to simply take the time to look around your life and find some trace of the fictitious story in your literal world. And that word “trace” is key in another way. For the ultimate point of this exercise is to make time this month to TRACE the influence of these mythic tales though our lives--honoring not simply what they’ve done for us, but noticing how they still might have some more guidance and gifts to give us.



Living With the Questions



Here are some questions for reflection and discussion. We invite you to “live with them” throughout the month, and see how they break into—and break open—your ordinary thoughts. If you are in a **Theme Circle**, please come prepared to your gathering to address whichever one(s) speak to you most strongly (don’t feel you need answers to them all!).

1. How do you use story?

Sometimes, we use story as a way of saying “look at me”; other times, we use it to say, “look at all of us.” In our lives, we each use stories for different purposes. To connect. To heal. To conceal. To remember. To pass on. To teach. To say thanks, or celebrate. How do you most often use story?

2. What story did you walk away from?

Can you think about that other life--that other story—which you turned down for the one we have now? Maybe we became a teacher rather than a fire fighter. Maybe we stopped at two kids rather than having one more. Maybe we bought a Honda civic rather than the Mustang convertible. It’s not always about regret. Sometimes it’s just about curiosity, wondering “what if.” What role does “the story you walked away from” play in your life?

3. Who haven’t you told your story to yet?

Is there a story of yours that your grandchild has yet to hear? Are you hiding part of your story from the person you say you “trust the most”? Is there an unactualized story in you that you need to say out loud to someone? Does someone in your life need the wisdom of your life story? Who have you been wanting to share a story with and why?

4. Are you faking a story right now?

Are you following a storyline that isn’t really you? That you dread or makes you feel stuck? How might you bring this story to an end?

5. How do you find a new story?

Story lines end. Life events and changes such as retirement, a divorce, an illness, a death or an empty-nest close the book on one story and invite us to leap into a whole new adventure. But sometimes the next chapter is a blank page. And we have writer’s block. Have you ever had trouble finding a new story? And what got your writing again?

6. What stories won’t others let you leave?

Rev. Mara’s introduction talks about the stories others have about us – maybe we’re “clumsy one” or the “smart one” or “the outsider.” What “unfair stories” still shape you? And what helps you “just let it go”?

7. Do you understand the story you have?

Before we rush off to find a new story or create a new life, or we convince ourselves that healing and hope and freedom lay in leaving our “old” worlds and stories behind, it might be good to ask: do you understand the story you already are? Other cultures are clear: “You don’t know where you are going unless you know where you come from.” Are there parts of your “old” story you need to reclaim or notice, before moving on?



Words for Wisdom and Inspiration

All humans are storytellers with their own unique point of view. When we understand this, we no longer feel the need to impose our story on others or to defend what we believe. Instead, we are all of us artists with the right to create our own art.

- **Don Miguel Ruiz, Soul Matters Collective member**

The forgiveness inherent in our faith teaches that all of us are much larger than the good or bad stories we tell about ourselves. Please don't get caught in just "my" story, my hurts, my agenda. It's too small. It's not the whole You, the Great You. It's not the great river. It's not where life is really going to happen.

- **Richard Rohr, Everything Belongs**

Stories have power. They delight, enchant, touch, teach, recall, inspire, motivate, challenge. They help us understand. They imprint a picture on our minds. Consequently, stories often pack more punch than sermons. Want to make a point or raise an issue? Tell a story.

- **Janet Litherland**

Tell me a fact and I'll learn. Tell me a truth and I'll believe. But tell me a story and it will live in my heart forever.

- **Source Unknown**

During a long retreat, I had what seemed to me to be the earthshaking revelation that we cannot be in the present and run our storylines at the same time! It sounds pretty obvious, I know, but when you discover something like this for yourself, it changes you.

- **Pema Chodron, from When Things Fall Apart**

"My Story?"

My story.
 How should I tell my story?
 Should I tell it for me?
 Should I tell it for my mother, or, my father?
 The stories, though mine, would indeed be different.
 Should I tell it for my children or my grandmother?
 For the white world? The 1%, or for the world's majority?
 For women? For men? Again, so drastically contrary.
 Do I share for those marginalized, for those without, or those with?
 Do I tell my story the way my grade school friends know it, expect it?
 For my college soul mate,
 or for those 2 a.m. people whose names I never knew?
 What is my story?
 Do I actually know?
 Is my story my profession? That has changed.
 Is my story my family? They never truly knew me.
 My partner? Is that what my story will turn out to be?
 Or, my garden, my church, my book group, my neighbors, my pets, the PTO?
 Would my story be a short story? A song, a double feature?
 Or simply a few words on a tombstone?
 Could it be that sparkle of love and belief in a child's eye?
 Can my story be my hope, unwritten as yet, but marinating toward perfection.
 But what if my story is not flawless, not perfect, not even close?
 What if my story is just me?

- **Kristin Kany, First UU member**

"Remember on this one thing, said Badger. The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each other's memories. This is how people care for themselves."

- **Barry Lopez, Crow and Weasel**

A story is a judgment on experience expressed in terms of character. Plot is the means by which character is revealed.

- **Douglas Grant**

If you don't know the kind of person I am
and I don't know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world
and following the wrong god home we may miss our
star.

For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,
a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break
sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood
storming out to play through the broken dyke.

And as elephants parade holding each elephant's tail,
but if one wanders the circus won't find the park,
I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty
to know what occurs but not recognize the fact.

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,
a remote important region in all who talk:
though we could fool each other, we should consider--
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.

For it is important that awake people be awake,
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;
the signals we give--yes or no, or maybe--
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.

- **William Stafford, "A Ritual to Read to Each Other"**

For you never know how much of a
difference they make and to whom.

- **Caroline Joy Adams, Power to Write**

What kind of people we become depends
crucially on the stories we are nurtured on.

- **Chinweizu, Nigeria**

Everywhere, every day, someone is
changed, perhaps even saved, by words and
stories.

- **Roxanne J. Coady**

A story can change your life.

-**Peter Everwine**

Furthermore, we have not even to risk
the journey alone; for the heroes of all
time have gone before us; the labyrinth
is thoroughly known; we have only to
follow the thread of the hero-path...and
the many stories which tell his [and her] tale.

- **Joseph Campbell**

You have to understand, my dears, that the
shortest distance between truth and a
human being is a story.

- **Anthony de Mello**

These are the days that have been given to us;
let us rejoice and be glad in them.

These are the days of our lives;
let us live them well in love and service.

These are the days of mystery and wonder;
let us cherish and celebrate them in gratitude together.

These are the days that have been given to us;
let us make of them stories worth telling to those who come
after us.

- **William R. Murray**

Forever, people have listened to the sounds
of the streets and the music of the spheres
and seen in them patterns and rhythms and
melodies and meanings that helped them
understand both the earth they live on and
their place in the greater scheme of things.
To ask whether those patterns and
purposes are really there is beside the point,
for that's how we learn about death and
disease and darkness and desire and the
power of the wind and the waves and of
love and hate and hope and fear, and how
we make sense of them. We know that
these are real, and we know they are
nothing but stories and songs.

- **Edward Chamberlin**

Going Deeper: Further Resources Related to Story/Story

Books

Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-narratology, A.W. Frank
Listening Is an Act of Love: A Celebration of American Life from StoryCorps, David Isay
The Faraway Nearby, Rebecca Solnit
The Hero with a Thousand Faces, Joseph Campbell
The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Human, Jonathan Gottschall
The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics, A.W. Frank
When Things Fall Apart, Pema Chodron

Friendly for younger readers, too:

33 Multicultural Tales to Tell
A Lamp in Every Corner: A Unitarian Universalist Storybook, Janeen K Grohsmeyer
Mira and the Big Story, Laura Alary
Sacred Stories Wisdom from World Religions, Marlyn MacFarlane

Songs

"Hurricane" - Bob Dylan
"Breaths" - Sweet Honey in the Rock
"Our Journey Is Just Beginning (Instrumental)" - Cosmos: A SpaceTime Odyssey, Theodore Shapiro
"Dreams Go By" - Harry Chapin
"The Story" - Brandi Carlisle
"Symphony No. 9" - Beethoven

Films, Documentaries, Websites, Videos, and Podcasts

StoryCorps: <https://storycorps.org/>

The Moth: <http://themoth.org/>

The Danger of a Single Story: TED Talk by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en

The Future of Storytelling: Paul Zak
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHeqQAKHh3M>

Wisdom in the Age of Information: Maria Popova <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bjoO6Y29f7I>

The Neuroscience of Narrative <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q1a7tiA1Qzo>

Everyone Has a Story: Ted Talk by Dave Isay
https://www.ted.com/talks/dave_isay_everyone_around_you_has_a_story_the_world_needs_to_hear?language=en

Race: The Power of an Illusion, Episode 2 "The Story We Tell"
http://www.pbs.org/race/000_About/002_04-about-02.htm

Stories We Tell
<http://storieswetellmovie.com/>



Creative Space

Use this section to write, doodle, and create!

AHA! Moments

Notes





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Creative Space (Continued)

Doodling

Credits: This edition of “The Path” relies on material from the *Soul Matters Collective*, of which First UU is a member, with additional material drawn from the May 2015 edition of *New Horizons*, the theme-based ministry newsletter from the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto, and submissions from our First UU staff and members.

