

“Once Upon a Time...”
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There have been times in my life, when I recognized that I was living with old stories that are no longer true. There came a point in my religious development that I settled on some answers to meet my needs. But when I experience significant losses, or other life-changing events, I sometimes find that the old answers are no longer sufficient. Then it's time to reconsider whether these beliefs still fit the person I have become.

When my mother was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 2005, the Akron congregation graciously gave me a leave of absence for almost three months to care for her in Staten Island. My mother's illness allowed me to focus on things greater than the “to-do” list that normally shaped my days. My mother was a lifelong Catholic. The diagnosis of incurable cancer shook her to the core. My Mom was someone who believed in taking care of herself and others. She exercised regularly way before it became fashionable. She ate healthy food. She took care of my father, and then her sisters. “Why did this happen to me?” is the question that kept recurring. She wanted to know what she had done to deserve this.

“Do you feel as if you're being punished?” I asked her. She could only nod in agreement. It pained her too much to acknowledge that the God in whom she placed her trust had now turned on her.

When I was eight, my mother was so ill that she had received the last rites while in the hospital. The story was told that through all the tubes and lines keeping her alive, my mother said to my father: “I don't know what he (meaning the priest) is thinking about, but I don't plan to go anywhere.”

Years later I questioned her about this incident. I had become curious about the story because my mother was never one to talk back to a priest or a doctor – or even my father. And, if she was attached to all those lines and tubes, how could she talk anyway?

She told me a new story. She said it was as if she had been looking down at the priest giving her the last rites. She had actually met God – “and he looked just like he did in the holy pictures – white beard and all!” She told God that she couldn't go with him right now because her children were young and still needed her. And God let her “come back” and get well.

In the midst of her anguish, I reminded Mom gently that God had given her almost fifty years more with us, at her request. “Think how fortunate you are that you've already met God. Most people don't have that experience. You already know what to expect” I told her. “And, I'd love to be a fly on the wall when you tell God how pissed off you are right now!”

When I first came to Unitarian Universalism in 1975 it was with a deep appreciation for the freedom of belief this religion affords us. At first, I eagerly discarded all the stories and “truths” learned as a child. None of that mystery and miracle stuff for me!

Then, as I became more secure in my unknowing, I began to sift through the different aspects of my childhood faith and retrieve the elements that still held meaning: lighting candles; saying prayers; attending church even when there was no service taking place; and creating rituals to mark particular events.

Later, during the academic preparation for ministry, we studied how to articulate our theology. This was most difficult for us Unitarian Universalists, because we didn't really "have" a theology. We pursued "a rational inquiry into religious questions." We studied the nature of God and religious truth. Most of us never arrived at "a theology." Our individual beliefs didn't fit neatly into any one religious perspective – except Unitarian Universalism – which doesn't force us to have a theology. Our theology became the continued inquiry into religious truth.

Several years ago, the Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association addressed these questions:

What is at the center of our faith?

What is it that holds us together?

Is there a unity in our theological diversity?

These are questions that I had been asking for years, first as a lay leader, and then as a parish minister.

The Commission on Appraisal conducted many interviews to discern answers to these questions. Rev. Gordon McKeeman, Minister Emeritus of the Akron congregation, was consulted for this report. Gordon

suggested that many of the problems and issues Unitarian Universalists have encountered and struggled with in recent years may actually be symptoms of the underlying problem that was created at the inception of the UUA at consolidation (of the Unitarians and Universalists in 1961). Faced with the messy possibility that identifying a core for the consolidated movement might be too contentious, we seem to have decided instead to leave a question mark at the center. (*Engaging Our Theological Diversity*, The Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association, p. 4)

We're proud of that question mark. Unlike many religions, Unitarian Universalism has grown and evolved without a creed at its core. We place great faith in our human capacity to make sense of our own existence. We believe that people are responsible enough to act for what is right and good without the threat of eternal damnation to enforce it.

From our Jewish and Christian roots, we have grown to embrace the teachings of humanism and the world's religions which inspire us. We draw from the spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions to celebrate the circle of life of which we are a part. We hold shared values and principles. But when it comes to a shared theology, we remain steadfast to our heritage that holds sacred our freedom of belief.

That is why stories are vital to our religious practice. Once upon a time, before the Council of Nicea decreed that Jesus was one of a trinity with his Father and the Holy Spirit, there were Unitarians and Universalists. The Unitarians believed that God is one, not three Godheads in one. The Universalists believed that a loving God would not condemn anyone to eternal damnation.

As "organized Christianity became more and more a religion *about* Jesus rather than the religion *of* Jesus" (Henry H. Cheetham, *Unitarianism and Universalism*, p. 10) Unitarians and Universalists were declared to be heretics. Our legacy as heretics is part of our religious story today. Heretics, from a Greek root meaning "those who choose," have an identity as people who

choose. (*Engaging...*, p. 48) Not unlike Jesus in his day, we choose to weigh in on the side of justice, love, and mercy in human relations.

But the story doesn't end there. Or, at least, it shouldn't. Because we continue to evolve as a religious tradition with each individual who becomes part of this movement. When we want someone to know something, we give them facts. When we really want them to understand, we tell stories.

The answers each of us may have found to our questions about the nature of God are not carved in stone. Like our religion, we are constantly changing and evolving. Our faith must change and evolve to meet the different life experiences we encounter.

“Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow...” said Jesus.

“Consider the flower in the crannied wall,” said Tennyson.

“Consider anything you please,” says the Zen Buddhist, “But just consider it not as a symbol of eternity, as God in miniature, as a moral lesson or as a Great White Hope, but just consider it.” (from *Worshipping Together with Questioning Minds* by Sophia Lyon Fahs, p. 22)

Let us be deliberate in what we consider. Let us teach ourselves and our children to live in harmony with all creation by paying attention to the stories we tell. We fail our youth and our members when we assume that they will “get it” once they read our Principles and Purposes. The biggest difference between Unitarian Universalism and more traditional religions is the human piece. We take seriously our commitment to one another for spiritual growth, as individuals and as a congregation. Our faith does not reside in a creed. It rests with, and within, each one of us.

Listen to this plea from a youth who participated in a Commission on Appraisal focus group:

I wish that there were more of a focus on [conversations about theology and beliefs he said] because I've been personally really struggling with it, and I sometimes get really scared about death and God and where am I going to go, because I'm scared to death that there's nothing, and honestly I'd rather believe in God and heaven and die believing I'm going somewhere than just dying and saying, “I'm going nowhere.” Sometimes I really wish I were Christian just so that I'm not scared at night.
(*Engaging...*, p. 2)

I know this feeling. During my mother's illness, I had the opportunity to revisit many of my childhood experiences and beliefs. I attended the local Moravian Church where my Girl Scout troop used to meet. There I encountered friends from my youth who I hadn't seen in fifty years. Because I had grown up Roman Catholic, I had never attended a service at the Moravian Church before. With the exception of the explicitly Christian theology, I could have been attending a Unitarian Universalist worship service. The minister understood that I wasn't a “believer.” But she treated me kindly and gently, hearing from others about my mother. And when my mother died, the minister called me within a half hour to offer her support and prayers. We never did hear from the priest at my mother's Catholic church.

Growing up Roman Catholic laid the groundwork for a life of service, working for justice. The stories of Jesus reaching out to include those that others shunned touched me to the core. When Jesus took on the Pharisees and spoke of a new way of being “religious,” I was right there beside him. Eventually, I realized that if Jesus saw what “the Church” had become in his name, he would be compelled to return from the dead and begin his ministry once again.

Oh, wait -- that sounds a bit like what we’re told he did do. The story of Jesus’ life of radical service culminated in his death. But the story didn’t end with his death. It picks up again three days later when we’re told he “rose from the dead” and once again walked among his disciples.

The scripture stories tell us that Jesus knew he was inviting death at the hands of his enemies. It’s as if he had to follow the script in order to accomplish what he knew he was called to do. By his actions, he forced others to fulfill the promise of his death.

As my sister, two brothers, and I accompanied my mother in her own journey toward death, we sorted through memories and photos. We prepared the favorite meals we remembered as children, hoping to entice my mother to eat. We retold many of the family stories, discovering once again that each of us had a slightly different memory of them. It became very important for us to get the “true” version of the stories from my mother before she died.

We discovered that there were several “true” versions of each story, not just one. Each story is imbued with the perspective of the participant. As the oldest of the four children, my memory encompasses a longer view of our family than the others. But my younger siblings have memories that I never experienced because I was no longer living at home. Our mother was the real keeper of the memories – the one constant presence in our ever-changing lives.

In cleaning out my parents’ home of fifty years, we claimed various artifacts and mementos, as if to hold onto those memories – to hold onto my parents. I kept some things that no one else wanted – like the ginger jar that had been the first anniversary gift my dad gave my mom; the boxes of correspondence between my parents when my dad was overseas during World War II; different one-of-a-kind treasures that had been displayed in a glass-enclosed cabinet made for that purpose. So, of course, I ended up with the cabinet as well. Where else would I put all those mementos? That oversized display cabinet came with me from Ohio, and has been moved twice since then.

But now, Jerry and I are moving again. And at least one of us is looking at this move as an opportunity to down-size. I’m ready to part with most of the mementos and the oversized display cabinet, and with them, my role as keeper-of-the-family-memories. It has taken more than a decade to acknowledge that my parents do not reside in the artifacts of their life together. I no longer fear losing the memory of them – or the stories of our life together – if I let go of the mementos. Parting with their treasures does not mean leaving behind my parents’ love.

“Once upon a time” tells the story of what was. But it can also be the start of a new story. At least that is my hope. This new story will be what we make of it – what we need from it in the present; it will reflect the people we have become. And that will be another story for us to re-tell.

This new story will bring the past to the present for all who hear it. Let us tell our story with love, as we remember it, “once upon a time...”