

## **“Re-storying Hope”**

**Rev. Alison B. Miller**

*GA Sunday Worship, June 28<sup>th</sup> 2015*

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qe7mvYf6KXQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qe7mvYf6KXQ)

On a flight from Boston to New York, I wound up in conversation with the teenager seated next to me. She was bubbly and filled with a spark. She shared the story of how she just spent the week with some fellow youth in Boston at a church conference focused on social justice.

My ears perked up. Boston... social justice... I wondered, is she a Unitarian Universalist?

Other religions care about making a difference in the world, and not wanting to be narrow minded about it, I said, “It sounds like you’ve just had a powerful experience. Tell me, what church are you a part of?”

She responded, “Oh, the normal kind.”

“What’s the normal kind?” I asked.

She said a bit apprehensively, “Well, you could say it’s one of the Protestant traditions.”

Now, I knew she was UU, and I just wanted her to be able to say it to a stranger out loud.

“Oh, which one?” I asked.

“You’ve never heard of it,” she said.

I finally said, “You’re a Unitarian Universalist, right?”

Her eyes widened and she exclaimed, “How did you know?!”

“So am I.”

This experience and others like it have me wondering: *How do we tell our story?*

Is the story, “No one will understand our religion. I can’t talk about it with a stranger, especially on a plane!”

Is the story, “We are small. No one has heard of us. This person wouldn’t be interested.”

What if the story changed into, “This is a chance to share how my faith has made a difference in my life.”

What if it is, “People are hungry to know a religion like ours exists – a religion that honors many paths to wisdom and sees the divine imprint of love on every human being.”

Yes, how do we tell our stories? How are we equipping one another to share the stories of our lives and of our faith? For that matter, what are the stories we choose to tell? Who and what do we include, and who and what do we leave out? Ultimately, what meaning do we draw from the way we tell our stories, and can that meaning change? Can the story change?

Many treasured stories engage our imagination and plant possibilities of healing and transformation where hope has grown dim and all seems lost. The three readings from earlier in this worship – the Jewish Midrash about Nachshon and the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, the Buddhist parable of the Mustard Seed, and the Christian parable of the Good Samaritan – are prime examples.

When most of us think of the first story, the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, we remember two things. Moses lifts his staff, and God parts the waters. Midrash, a rabbinic tradition of filling gaps in the torah, imagines there is more to the story. In this retelling, Moses raises his staff, but... nothing happens. Just when it seems the Israelites have journeyed all this way only to perish, Nachshon emerges from the crowd, bravely puts one foot in front of the other, and wades into the water until he is in, literally, over his head. His courageous act inspires others to join him. In another midrash, it is only when *every* man, woman, and child joins Nachshon that the waters part and the path to freedom unfolds. The story shifts from one of divine intervention to one that calls upon ordinary human beings, like us, to step out into prophetic possibilities.

In our second story, Kisa Gotami cannot imagine life going on after the devastating loss of her child. The Buddha sends her on a journey to hear tales of sorrow and survival that reflect her pain and remind her she is not alone. Kisa realizes that to love what is mortal inevitably comes with risking the pain of loss. The story invites us to seek out help when we suffer – there is no pride in going it alone. We are also invited to be the ones who

open the door to another's grief, to be present to it, and to share the story of our own lives in ways that might lead to healing.

Finally, the Good Samaritan is about much more than being a good neighbor. Jesus tells the story to a fellow Israelite. The enmity between Israelites and Samaritans was *legendary!* (I picture their looks like those I received when I went to Fenway Park, Boston Red Sox territory, in full New York Yankee regalia.) It is therefore shocking to hear it is a Samaritan who cares for the beaten man, carries him to an inn, and promises to pay whatever the cost. The story imagines a future where the lines we have drawn between 'ourselves' and 'others' are erased, and where we act out the religious truth: We are one human family.

Wisdom tales remind us, the stories we tell matter. They have the power to shape who we are and who we are becoming. As Unitarians, we lift up stories that call us to live into the spark of divinity, or the depths of humanity, that resides in each of us. As Universalists, we lift up stories that call us to act out our belief that all life is interconnected and our fates are intertwined. As religious liberals, we get to choose guiding stories from myriad sources – sacred texts, literature, science, nature, the prophetic deeds of ancestors, and out of the pages of our lives.

The following is a story of finding hope in the face of uncertainty from a UU family I know well. Illness and grief struck three times in less than two years. First, a woman lost her husband. Then, she lost her father. Then, her sixteen-year-old daughter noticed a mass growing in her arm.

After many scans and tests, the woman sat with her daughter waiting to hear what next. The oncologist said, "Your daughter has a very rare form of cancer for which there is no successful protocol. I give her a 3% chance of survival. She would have to go through excruciating and debilitating treatments. If it were me, I would take her home and love her for the little time she has left, and not bother with such torture."

His words were filled with confidence. The mother was stunned. Like Kisa, she was still clinging to loss. Her story seemed to be everyone she loved would die (and soon). Like Moses and Nachshon, she faced an ocean of trouble, one that would likely lead to the death of her daughter. Should she step forward into the turbulent waters? Or, should she accept what the oncologist interpreted as a clear end to the story?

I am so grateful my mother did not choose to follow that doctor's script.

My mother and I visited another doctor, who looked at all the same tests and shared the same dire numbers, but who told of a different possibility.

She said, "I need to be honest with you. There is no successful treatment for this cancer. However, let's go on an odyssey together to figure something out. Any chance is worth it."

We did go on an odyssey and it included a degree of torture, but here I am – alive, a minister and a mother – against all odds. You would have no idea this happened, but for the scars and diminished capacity of my left arm.

My story isn't complete without sharing how my religious community – Unitarian Universalists, especially at All Souls, NYC – buoyed me up on turbulent waters and allowed me precious moments to catch my breath. In fact, that community ensured I would experience a degree of healing even had I not survived. I was held by our religion without easy answers. It reflected real life. I remember spending hours talking to my youth advisors and peers, as they helped me live into the question marks that punctuated my days. Youth group moved to the pediatric oncology ward on some Sundays testifying to their willingness to go to hard places to share the healing power of community.

It gets better because YOU were in the story. I was here at General Assembly the week before I started chemotherapy, and I sat right there in Youth Caucus. The radical acceptance and love I experienced when sharing my story with strangers for the first time fueled me with courage for what would come next.

150 people in my congregation gave blood in my name! Quite literally, I am here in part because Unitarian Universalists gave a piece of themselves so I might live. These experiences as well as others have given me a deep perspective that while life is not a given, **Life is a Gift!**

Each of us arrives at this moment in part because of the love and compassion or the courage and sacrifice of others, and each of us can offer the same in return. Moses and Nachshon need each other, and they both need the rest of the group to reach the road of freedom. Kisa needs neighbor after neighbor to open the door of their hearts and bear witness to life after

loss. The Israelite beaten in the road needs the Samaritan's care, but the Samaritan needs the Israelite to accept his help, and together they write a new story based on unity rather than division.

Sacred stories, ancient and modern, speak of a creative healing power of love that is able to break through suffering and brokenness in our lives and in the world beyond. Do we tell stories and act in ways that make the bonds of love visible? Who are we in these stories?

Representatives from Wind of the Spirit, an immigrant rights organization, visited the Morris Area Interfaith Clergy Council, and they invited us – actually, *challenged us* to live into the story of the Good Samaritan. They were creating a story of solidarity and caring between immigrants from different countries, and now they wanted to build healing bridges with non-immigrants.

The man wounded by the side of the road spoke at this gathering. He is a Day Laborer who waited by the Morristown, NJ train station with many others hoping to find work. A landscaper picked him up and took him to a jobsite where he was injured. The landscaper offered him a ride to the hospital, but instead abandoned him by the road two towns over, bleeding, without pay.

This incident was one of a growing number of inhumane actions towards undocumented immigrants in our community. Our mayor had publicly vowed, “to sweep the streets clean of immigrants.” He applied to have our police officers deputized as Immigration and Customs Enforcement with the purpose of expediting deportations from our county jail.

The Mayor presented this plan at a Town Council meeting. There was a visible line of separation as white members of the community stood by the PRO microphone and Latino members of the community stood by the CON microphone. Immigrants shared story after story of false arrests, raids to their homes, separation of families, and the propensity of officers to draw guns against unarmed people, even children. Like the travelers who walked past the beaten man in the road, the council members averted their eyes and asked few questions.

While I wasn't sure whether my words would suffice, I felt called to speak out. I joined the immigrants at the CON microphone and began, “Mayor, as a person of faith, I believe this plan will further divide rather than unite our community. We have more work to do of listening to all of

our residents, cultivating compassion, and choosing a solution to benefit all.” I lifted up our state’s history of racial profiling and countered his narrative that fewer immigrants is good for the economy.

During the break, the mayor shook me by the arm and shouted, “How dare you speak against me in public!” When the meeting resumed, he began a tirade, “How will that woman minister feel, when the next woman in our town is raped?...” (Lines chillingly close to those the shooter shared in the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC.) The mayor continued with a racist set of points that I won’t share. I guess he did not appreciate my re-storying of his narrative.

After the meeting, I was asked to visit with a family in urgent need of a pastor. I spent the rest of the evening in prayer with a mother and child the night before a mastectomy without her husband present because he was in jail awaiting deportation... on loitering charges. My heart was broken and my eyes were fully open. It was time for us to change the story.

Thankfully, many others – clergy and lay people, including from the Morristown Unitarian Fellowship, immigrants and citizens – were ready to cross lines and cross turbulent waters to fight for justice. When the “Pro-America” Rally was organized at our town hall with hundreds in attendance, we were ready. We showed up in greater numbers and demonstrated through non-violent protest our fervent belief that all people are children of God.

After the rally, we coordinated an educational campaign to shatter myths about undocumented immigrants. Then, we formed a Workers Center Taskforce with a vision of connecting immigrants and citizens to work that paid fair wages. We were intentional to include connecting women to work, a population so often left out of Workers Centers. I was honored to co-chair this collaborative partnership between immigrant rights organizations, faith communities, and non-profits.

The mayor did his best to thwart our efforts. He said we were wasting our time. He predicted we would never get our diverse community to come together. He leveraged bureaucratic roadblocks at every turn.

We did not let any of that stop us. We were like Nachshon and the Israelites moving forward as far as our limbs and spirit would take us. It wasn’t a waste of time. Our community did come together. “Pathways to

Work” successfully opened and has since connected thousands to employment, legal counsel and other vital resources.

By the way, a new mayor was elected with a more inclusive vision.

However, the struggle for economic justice, to end racism and to counter oppression is never about removing one person from power. We are far from the end of this story. That would be too comfortable and too complacent a narrative. No, it is about the continuous work of disrupting narratives of privilege that are woven into the fabric of our society and our institutions – in Morristown and *every* town – that rationalize why some people deserve the benefits they receive while others merit less.

We must continue to write the story. We have written a number of chapters since the opening of Pathways. Some are a painful reminder that the work of justice and healing does not ascend in a straight line from brokenness to wholeness, while other chapters are a hopeful reminder of what is possible when we co-create with a love that excludes no one. Two recent examples: Last month our police officers began to wear body cams, and this summer we figured out a way to open access to the town pool to children whose parents work all day, which disproportionately excluded children of color.

What are the stories you and your congregation are living into? The stories you tell are powerful spiritual tools. They impact the way you see the world and how you respond to it. One story may cause you to be fearful and less resilient in the face of uncertainty and challenge. While another story may provide the fuel you need to find hope and strength, compassion and creativity.

Unitarian Universalists are always on the lookout for new narratives that invite us into a greater wholeness than we know today. Our faith asserts revelation is *never* sealed. As we grow into a more multicultural and multigenerational community, we welcome in new stories that teach us more and more about what love requires of us. Is it time for a new story?

There was a time I needed a new story. Long after being cured of cancer, when I thought my healing was complete, I was serving as a hospital chaplain. I recall intentionally reaching out to patients with my “good” arm and not my “bad” arm. I wanted to be sure to touch them from a place of strength and wholeness. One day, I met a patient, the only person I have ever met with the same cancer.

When she asked me to pray with her, for the first time it felt right to reach out with this arm, my “bad” arm. I opened the fingers as far as I am able, and placed them on her shoulder. I knew in an instant I had the story wrong. This is my strong arm. This is the one that knows a lot about pain and loss and so much about healing. This arm embodies strength, and what’s more these two arms embody my fullness as a human being. This is my “healing” arm.

You too, have known suffering,  
You too, have known healing!  
You have been in over your head,  
And others have reached out to save you.  
You have seen others in pain,  
And you have reached out to save them.  
These are our stories!

Tell your story with pride, with hope, find meaning in the broken places!

Raise your arms to the sky!  
You shall make way for freedom!  
We shall make way for justice!  
Together, your strength and my weakness,  
My strength and your weakness,  
Can find a way through turbulent waters.  
Let us learn to tell a new story!

Here is a delicious story from this week: Marriage Equality is finally here! And yet, the story of equality is far from over. We need to continue writing new chapters of racial justice, of trans justice, and of justice for our earth.

Oh, yes, let us weave new tales of hope.

And let us live into these new stories with the precious gift of this day.