

“Telling Our Story from Deep Inside”

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Horseracing doesn't usually appear on my radar screen, but last spring I got caught up in the saga of Barbaro, the Kentucky Derby winner who fractured one of his legs shortly after the start of the Preakness Stakes. His story could have ended there, for the predictable intervention would have been to put him down. Instead his owners decided to attempt the nearly miraculous—to make him well again, even though they knew his racing days were over. After a demanding, 5-hour operation that went smoothly, Barbaro was given a 50-50 chance of survival, due to the likelihood of complications.

In the aftermath of his surgery, Barbaro probably had more people pulling for him than he had ever had during an afternoon at the racetrack. Every day for a week or so, I scanned the *Register Star* sports page, eager for news of how he was faring.

At first the prognosis was guardedly optimistic, and then the dreaded laminitis set in, and it looked like Barbaro was done for. But then he managed to turn a corner, and as of last month, he was enjoying daily walks outside his intensive care stall, continuing to show improvement, and receiving get well messages via the inter-net.

As I found myself swept into the Barbaro “fan club,” I asked my husband, Jerry, “What do you think it is about this story that is so interesting?” “I don't know,” he replied. “It doesn't interest me.”

One creation myth has it that the Great Spirit of Life brought human beings into the world out of an appreciation for stories. As for us mortals, just about everyone enjoys a good story, though we all have different tastes. Even an account of a horse who flew to the moon wouldn't interest some people, and probably most of you don't share my

husband's leanings: When I asked him what kind of stories fascinate him, he told me, "Stories about the Roman Catholic Church."

We are surrounded by stories all day long, from the news broadcasts we may switch on when we wake up or get in the car, to the provocative headlines that try to hook us when we log on to aol, each season's sagas of our favorite TV series and sports teams, and the ongoing stories of our lives in progress that we tell and listen to as we share the happenings of our day with friends, co-workers, and family members. Many children fall asleep to stories, and during our non-waking hours, we all become actors in the sometimes bizarre, sometimes enlightening stories that are our dreams.

Some stories are true, others are fictitious, and probably most are a mixture of both. Stories told by eye witnesses can give us a sense of eras, events, and places we haven't experienced in the flesh—or contradict our own firsthand impressions of what happened, where, when, and how. Stories spun by visionaries can alter the present and change the future.

Whether set in our own neighborhood or the Land of Oz, good stories convey a reality that can make us laugh or cry, disturb our sleep, raise our blood pressure, or heal us. Though they evoke a variety of responses, the common denominator of great stories lies in their power to move us out of the isolation of our own idiosyncratic experience and connect us to a larger, and boundless, whole. They enlarge our consciousness like a kaleidoscope, to create infinite possibilities.

Centuries ago, there were native American nations who limited their storytelling to wintertime, to preserve the

stories' potency. During the season of monotony and hardship, they depended on their stores of myths and legends to nourish their spirits, even as they preserved food to fuel their bodies. It is no wonder that these tribes, as well as other pre-industrial peoples across the ages, gave their storytellers an honored place within their communities. Contemporary storytellers continue to speak with a powerful voice today, but with a different effect on the psyche.

Journalists, TV producers, filmmakers, and, to some degree, novelists are the prominent storytellers in our modern world. In our consumer-oriented society, storytelling has become a profit-making business, and the professionals involved compete for an audience and the dollars that audience brings in. Many of them bank on the idea, as writer Rob Breszny put it, that "tales of affliction and mayhem and corruption and tragedy are inherently more interesting than tales of triumph and liberation and pleasure and ingenuity." Bad news and violent story lines are pervasive, having indeed found a solid market, and they are having some alarming side effects. As Michael Moore and others have suggested, the amount of violence that is depicted in our media—through both news reports and fictional drama-- has cultivated widespread fear and suspicion in our culture, based on a false impression of the true incidence of crimes such as armed robbery, rape, and murder.

And let's not forget the advertising industry and the unhealthy "salvation" myth it perpetrates--we're fat and wrinkled, we smell bad, our teeth aren't white enough—and neither are our clothes, and we're plagued by pounding headaches and acid indigestion; but if we buy enough cool products, we'll be as young and attractive, as happy and well-off as all those gorgeous and glamorous models who are

peddling all that stuff to us.

In this age of anxiety, cynicism and despair, we may hunger for stories and storytellers that give us hope and confidence, remind us that we are not alone, and inspire the gamut of good feelings that make us glad to be alive. Our Unitarian Universalist faith and this religious community can be a life-giving source.

Each religion promotes, reinforces, and originates out of a central myth about the nature of life, the universe, and ultimate reality. (And when I use the word “myth” I do not mean “fallacy,” but, rather, truth represented in a metaphorical way.) Sometimes this myth is explicit—documented in sacred writings called “scripture” (though this story may be open to different interpretations), and sometimes it can only be read between the lines of a faith community’s history, theology, and traditions. The latter is the case with Unitarian Universalism, which has no designated holy book. My take on our faith’s cosmic myth is this:

People of all times and places have asked questions about the mystery of life and death: Where did I come from? Who am I? Why am I here? And what will happen to me when I die? There are no easy answers that will satisfy everyone. We are part of a long line of seekers, and each of us must find our own answers-- the truth that we can live by.

Human beings—as well as all living things--arise out of an identical, common source, and when our life processes cease, we share the same ultimate destiny. Creation, birth, and death will always be mysteries, but we know that we are here now, and it is important to make the most out of this life. Each of us has the potential to do good and to cause

harm, and we are all part of a single, human family. We are here to bring out the best in one another, share in one another's struggles, appreciate and celebrate the gift of life, and create a world of freedom, justice, and peace. Whatever comes to us next when we die is nothing to fear.

From there, Unitarian Universalist "scripture" is an open-ended and diverse anthology. One portion of this tome addresses our identity as a religious movement, particularly through stories about noteworthy Unitarian Universalists we can look to as role models. From Joseph Priestley and Ralph Waldo Emerson of centuries ago, to May Sarton and Christopher Reeve of more recent years, and Drs. T. Berry Brazelton and Mary Pipher of the present time, the work and the writings of the most prominent among us have spread a kind of gospel that has brought some of us into the Unitarian Universalist movement.

But because we believe that truth cannot be captured in any one book, person, religion, or theology, the stories that teach and inspire us are not limited to those that come out of the our own faith tradition. In addition to factual stories about Unitarian Universalist heroes, heroines, and history, our religious education curricula include myths, legends, scripture, and biographies from other religions, cultures, and disciplines (such as science) which highlight the universal quest for truth, meaning, and right living and focus on the wisdom and strivings of all of humankind. Sunday services and adult religious education classes may incorporate news stories that draw our attention to current events and remind us of our responsibility as citizens of our local community, our nation, and our world.

The Buddha, the Sufi Masters of Islam, and Jesus (among other rabbis) used stories called parables to teach

lessons about truth and right living. One of my favorite sources of wisdom literature is children's picturebooks. The Rev. Gail Seavey, minister at the First Unitarian Universalist Church in Nashville, asserts, "The job of worship has always been to tell stories and do some interpretation... and intellectual reflection on them... [In a multi-generational setting a story] doesn't have to have a moral... but it does have to have concrete, sensate imagery. Tell it well and all ages of people will take their own meanings from it." In our congregational worship, we regularly use stories to build community, connect the generations, provide illustrations for sermons, introduce the offertory, and speak to the right brain as well as the left.

Another dimension of our sacred storybook lies in the personal realm of the religious and spiritual quest and life journey of each one of us. From Misha Lentz' account of the Sept. 11th experience that led her and her family to put down roots in this congregation, to Ann Haub's memories of "lots of jello, meat loaf, and scalloped potatoes... but no Unitarians," our chalice has glowed, this fall, against the backdrop of unique and yet universal stories about what has brought our members into this religious community and why they, like us, call it home. Even more powerful are the sacred stories called "eulogies" that we tell at our funerals and memorial services.

The first eulogy I ever wrote was for a baby who died within hours of birth; and the first time I scattered ashes along our nature trail, I was holding the remains of a man who had died while serving prison time for rape and murder. In the seventeen years I have been part of this congregation, we have held memorial services for doctors, lawyers, community activists, church members who were part of the Dutch resistance during World War II, young people who

took their own lives, persons who struggled (successfully or unsuccessfully) against alcoholism, adults who died in the prime of life, seniors in their 80's, 90's, and even 100's who gave us a new vision of what it means to be "elderly," and scores of individuals who thought of themselves mostly as people who had done their best to help their partners, raise their children, and support their families. The life story of each person we have memorialized in this way has been fascinating in its own right while conveying a common message: "None of us is insignificant. Each life is worthy of being remembered, and, in death, holds lessons for those of us left behind."

How often, through a eulogy, have we learned something about another church member that we wish we had known while he or she was still alive...or left a memorial service regretting what we had lost in not getting to know that person better? Which brings me to the chapters in our Church's anthology that tell the collective story of our ongoing life and history as a congregation.

As Dave Weissbard was approaching his retirement last year, I suddenly became aware of the number of friendly ghosts that are regularly visible to me when I here within this church family. I see Floyd Palm, when I look at Evelyn; and Bill Paulson, when I see Janet. I see Walt Lewis sitting next to Elizanne and Steve, Del Hotchkiss, as I nod at Kay. Dave Connolly's smile in Francie's. Lotta and Hub Eklund smile at me when I approach the Rehnberg Window—a memorial to Lotta's father, Axel—and today's flowers, in memory of Ron Bell, also conjure up images of Mavis. For those of you who have been part of this church longer than I have, I know this congregation is also graced by the presence of Clarence Magnuson, Bob Bourland, Herb Gausebeck, and many, many other departed church members I wish I had known,

too. I've grown conscious of the fact that as time rushes on-- as ministers leave and long-time members die-- this cloud of witnesses begins to fade, on the way to becoming lost to recent memory. This is part of the natural order of things, but I don't want us to lose more than we have to.

With Dave Weissbard's departure after twenty seven years as senior minister, it is time for us to empower Myrna Lake, her partners on our Communications Committee, and others to do some more work on our archives; and for our church to authorize funds to make the records of our past both more useable and useful. It is also time to set down and preserve more stories from the pre-Weissbard eras and include in the annual recognition of our 25- and 50-year members an opportunity for them to tell us what they have observed, experienced, and learned through their tenure among us.

Currently, many of us would say that we are a church in search of a new identity. We have something to learn from our more senior members, who have seen not only Dave, but also Tony Perino, Alan Deale, even Jack Mendelsohn come and go, and who can remind us that a church's identity is always much more than any single leader. They know that the stories that represent this church's history are more important to us now than ever. For knowing more about where we have been is crucial to fulfilling one of the most important responsibilities we have to one another during this interim period—to define where we stand today, in order that we may articulate a clear and compelling vision to guide us into the future.

Researching our church property for the story I told last month on Homecoming Sunday was both frustrating and enlightening. After finding out next to nothing at various

Winnebago County offices and the Rockford public library, I turned to our own archives for documents from the Auburn Street church. I came upon minutes from the 1950's, taken at both the Board of Trustees meetings and the Planning and Growth Committee, which documented years of discussion about whether to add on to the current building or perhaps buy property to build a new one; these debates culminated in a decision to buy this land, in 1960, and hire an architect, five years later.

The most interesting finding from my research came from minutes of the Growth Committee, dated March 1, 1959, attended by (among others) "Mr. and Mrs. Eklund" and "Mr. (Wink) Foster." The recorder, Patricia S. Brown, summarizes a report by Mr. Richard Arms, City-County Planner, that apparently took up most of the meeting: "He said... any new site for our church should offer coverage to a section that is not covered now, namely south-east Rockford. The area around Spring Creek and Alpine has good timber in places. It is saturated with churches now and would offer poor prospects for picking up members in the neighborhood. [But] There are also good potential sites directly north of the Alpine forest preserve... and adjacent to the college... Mr. Arms said the present site clearly is not adequate for the foreseeable future and a new site, for either the one church or a second church, is absolutely necessary. We should acquire land that would serve either of those two purposes." True enough. But note the comments of the meeting's presider, Dr. Cavan, as reported by Mrs. Brown: "Dr. Cavan said that based on the growth pattern in the past it was predicted that our membership would be 1500 by 1970. He wondered whether if it would be wise to build a church to seat only 400 if that is going to happen."

Stories are important not only for the information they

convey but also the way in which they are told. Given all the talk about numerical growth that has gone on during the years I've served this church, and our unsuccessfully successful experiment with offering a second Sunday morning service years ago, we might shake our heads and say, "The more things change, the more things stay the same"; or we might wonder why anyone could have been foolhardy enough to predict our membership to rise above a thousand, or build a sanctuary that would hold twice as many people as this one. But in learning more about this part of our history, I have come to realize what a gamble it was for the Auburn Street congregation to buy this land and build this building, and how fortunate the rest of us are that it stands here today.

Unitarian Universalist consultant Larry Peers notes that churches on the brink of change can tell two kinds of stories about the past. The first is the "been there, done that, we tried that and it didn't work" variety. The second is characterized by something he calls "sparkling moments"—a rehearsal of pivotal events in the church's life when a leader stuck out her neck, or a congregation took a chance, and the risk paid off. Guess which kind of story is most likely to have a positive impact on the church's overall health and its potential for growth.

[Reference to the reading]

As Robert Fulghum notes, we hope for happy endings. That's part of the appeal of the Barbaro story, but it's easier, and probably more satisfying, for a horse than a church community to live happily ever after. And how can we be sure that the inter-faith marriage between Ms. Brooklyn and Mr. Detroit didn't end in an acrimonious divorce? The so-called ending of that story is less important to me than its

vision of strong individuals digging deeply within themselves, and rising above superficial differences to stand together on higher ground.

I don't know enough about the "sparkling moments" in our church's history, and I am counting on you senior members to inspire us with more examples. These concluding words are a paragraph of the Responsive Reading by Kenneth Patton. What I do know is that our future is not hidden; it faces any of us with eyes to see it. Root lie deep in our soil, seeds are already breaking, and trees have ripened with fruit that stands ready for us to eat. Within us are skills and arts and greatness we have not fully discovered. Foundations are laid, learning lies ready to be unlocked, to bring forth an offspring of vision. Our stories are the sharpened edge of already; they will cut out the shape of our becoming."