

The Power of Story ©

A sermon by Rev. Roberta Finkelstein

Sunday November 13, 2016

What does it mean to be a community of story? It means that we recognize the power of narrative to remind us where we have come from, where we are, and where we are going. This is true for us as individuals, as members of families, members of congregations, citizens of a nation, residents of this precious planet earth. The challenges this presents is a variation on the age-old conundrum about fate vs. freedom. Do our stories create us or do we create our stories? Do our stories determine our fate or are we free to discard one story for another?

In this congregation, we are part of Soul Matters, a nationwide collaboration of congregations who focus each month on a common theme. This month the theme is story. A Soul Matters contributor wrote, “This is the message of our faith: We have a choice. Our stories are not predetermined. Remember that old theological debate our UU fore-fathers and mothers gave their lives for? Some said that God had predestined not just the big story of humanity, but our individual stories too. Some of us were slotted for heaven and others for hell. And God had written the list in ink. Nothing any of us could do about it. “Well,” said our spiritual ancestors, “that’s a bit harsh, don’t you think!” Forget this extreme fate-driven story, they said. Freedom has a much bigger role than we’re giving it credit for. 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 narratives before us. In other words, we come from a long-line of spiritual relatives who agreed with Shakespeare that “All the world’s a stage,” but then went on to clarify that it’s an improv show to which we’ve all been invited.”

So welcome to the improv show. In order to play your part, you need to know some of the rules. Rule #1: No denial. What you are given is what you must work with. Rule #2: Stick to your character. Rule #3: Tell a story. I think we can work with those rules as we struggle to figure out how to be citizens of a nation that has created a story line that calls Donald Trump the President-Elect. That is the plot twist we've been handed. It is up to us to decide what we are going to make of it.

Before I go further, a few words of clarification. This is not a political sermon. I have lived through many elections in which my chosen candidate lost. Those times did not throw me into spiritual crisis. Good people can believe in small government, fiscal conservatism, free market solutions. That is not what was in play in this election. What was in play, and what is still in play, is the narrative arc of our nation. The United States of America was founded on certain principles: freedom from tyranny, democratic decision making, the rule of law. But our story, from the very beginning, included both those aspirational ideas and a glaring, sinful flaw. The only way to justify the Doctrine of Discovery, which allowed Columbus and those who followed to claim these lands in the name of European monarchs, was to reduce the people who already lived here into something less than human. Savages. Heathens. The only way the institution of slavery could be tolerated, let alone embraced, by this young and bold experiment in democracy, was to reduce those enslaved peoples into something less than human. Savages. Heathens. Along with the soaring rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, we wrote a plot line that made some people into 'the other' and thus excused the rest of us from having to look at the contradiction embedded in our origin.

But, you say, we have made progress. We have been trying so hard to scrub out the stain of America's original sin. The abolition movement, the Civil War. Progress, but not linear, for sure. Reconstruction. Jim Crow. The Civil Rights movement of the 60's. The Voting Rights Act. Mass Incarceration. President Obama. Black Lives Matter. Making America Great Again.

To be perfectly clear: the reason I am preaching this sermon is not that I am upset that a particular candidate won or lost the election. It is that I am terrified that this election ushered in a new era of backlash. It has given people permission to yearn for the good old days when it was perfectly OK, it was mainstream, to dismiss whole groups of people as less than human. Savages. Heathens. And to then treat them the same way. Minister John Pavlovitz said it best. "We're not angry that our candidate lost. We're angry because our candidate's losing means this country will be less safe, less kind, and less available to a huge segment of its population, and that's just the truth. Those who have always felt vulnerable are now left more so. Those whose voices have been silenced will be further quieted. Those who always felt marginalized will be pushed further to the periphery. Those who feared they were seen as inferior now have confirmation in actual percentages.

This has never been about politics.

This is not about one candidate over the other.

It's not about one's ideas over another's.

It is not blue vs. red.

It's not her emails vs. his bad language.

It's not her dishonesty vs. his indecency.

It's about overt racism and hostility toward minorities.

It's about religion being weaponized.

It's about crassness and vulgarity and disregard for women.

It's about an unapologetic, open-faced ugliness.

And it is not only that these things have been ratified by our nation that grieve us; all this hatred, fear, racism, bigotry, and intolerance—it's knowing that these things have been amen-ed by our neighbors, our families, our friends, those we work with and worship alongside. That is the most horrific thing of all.”

So here it is. The plot twist from hell. Remember back in May when I said that for Unitarian Universalists hell was the current election season? Not so funny now. But we have been invited to be part of the improv show. Let's remember those improv rules. Rule #1 No Denial. We can't say no to the invitation to help write the next chapter in our story. We are not moving to Canada or going home to tend our gardens. We will, each of us in our own time, play our part. I have talked to many of you over the past few days and I know that we are all over the place in the ways we are feeling. Every one of us gets to feel exactly the way we feel, for as long as we need to feel that way. Every one of us needs to practice deep self-care right now. Get some rest. Cry if you want to cry. Scream if you want to scream. Reach out to others in safe circles of friends and family. We will all recover at different rates and that is fine. Because eventually we will all need to move on to Rule #2: Stick to your character. And by that I mean, stick to the values and principles you espoused on November 6th. If you were a committed Unitarian Universalist last week, then remind yourself often of your commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity and compassion in human relations; acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations; a free and responsible search for truth and meaning; the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large; the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for

all; and respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. That is who we are. That is the part we choose to play. If you are visiting with us this morning and those values resonate, then we welcome you. We will need each other in the days and weeks and months ahead as we reassert those values in the market place and in our schools and at all levels of government. Because don't forget Rule #3: Tell a story. The story we want to tell, the story we will tell, is not a story pre-determined by an incredibly lousy plot twist. It is not a story pre-determined by what has been, and by those who wish to go backwards rather than forwards. It is a story that has always been there, waiting to be told by those bold enough and brave enough and foolish enough to embrace it. Ours is a story of love, and freedom, and faith, and hope. Not the pie-in-the-sky kind, but the kind hard-earned and fiercely held. I am inviting every one of you, each in your own time and in your own way, to join together for what may be the greatest improv challenge of our lives. Fear does not get to write this story. Hate does not get to write this story. Wealth does not get to write this story.

As novelist Ursula LeGuin said, "Storytelling is dangerous to those who profit from the way things are because it has the power to show that the way things are is not permanent, not universal, not necessary." Since Tuesday I have cried and will cry some more. I have trembled with anger and fear and will tremble some more. I have asked myself how this could happen and will ask some more. But through my tears, through my quaking, and through my confusion I will do all that I can to make sure that here, in this place, there will be safety for those who are marginalized and those who are scape-goated. I will make sure that here, in this place, there will be opportunities to organize and to protest and to fight injustice, just like it says in our mission statement. I am so glad you didn't back away from that language and settle for something nicer. To everything there is a season, and this is the season to fight back against a tide of intolerance and hatred and injustice.

Once upon a time we were. And are. And shall always be a people who work to embody the values of: Love and Compassion; Growth and Discovery; Freedom and Justice; Wonder and Joy. And we shall always be a people whose mission is to be a beloved community that nourishes minds and spirits, fights injustice, and transforms the world through loving action. That's our story and I'm sticking to it. Are you with me?