

## **RELIGIOUS STORIES, LEGENDS AND MYTHS**

*(the things we teach our children)*

The stories of Christmas, and the holiday of Christmas have been my favorites as long as I can remember! I like the stories of Jesus' birth and I like the stories of St Nick and Santa Claus. I like the spirit of Christmas and the season, and I like the Christmas Carols. I like the Candlelight Christmas Eve Service and I like the presents and the family gatherings on Christmas Day. Other than the insane crowds in the malls and the traffic, there is almost nothing about Christmas that I don't like! I also like the progression from Thanksgiving, to my Birthday, to Christmas, and then wrapping up with New Year's—it made for a really nice season of family gatherings, school breaks, and presents. Throw in Hanukkah, Solstice, Bodhi Day, Kwanzaa and a few other holidays and at least in this country and there is something for just about everyone!

A conversation with Lisa Jones prompted this topic, and Pat Davis' story about her father's life during World War II seemed a good fit as I started thinking about the range of lessons that come within the stories we tell. I also thought of an episode of one of the Star Trek shows, I think it was Next Generation, when the Captain encountered an opponent who only spoke in a way reminiscent of the Epic of Beowulf. There may have been a similar episode in the original Star Trek too, but it has been years since I watched either show! The challenge the Captain faced was to figure out what this creature was saying by deciphering the story and then telling the earthling story in similar form. In this rational age we don't immediately go to the form of story to convey meaning, though the story of modern life conveyed in science, mathematics, and economics is full of stories behind the facts.

The main point I want to explore this morning is the way that religion, morality, and ethics are conveyed through the telling of stories, and Lisa

and I will also facilitate a forum on this following the service next Sunday. I hope you will think about this during the week and join us next Sunday.

Throughout recorded history, there have been stories of heroes and epic events, of great journeys and important discoveries. There have been stories to explain how our people came to be, how our part of the earth and universe is at the center of reality, and why we are the chosen people. In modern times in Western culture, it is the story of science and evolution that is used to explain much of this, but much of universal history remains a mystery. In earlier times when little of what happened on the earth or in the heavens could be otherwise be explained; stories, myths, and legends were used to explain why things were the way they were and why changes happened. Early gods and spirits were seen to be like humans but with greater powers. The uniting of these powers into a single being in the monotheistic traditions was a later development which made human lives easier with only one being to worship. Once many traditions relegated worship of god to a single day out of a week, it also allowed humans to advance their own godlike powers, but that may be getting ahead of the story!

Even in these modern times, there remains a power in many of the epic stories, myths, and legends. Many of these archetypal stories make sense of human life, explaining our urges to explore and discover new realms, to wander far from home, to engage in the great quest, to go where no person has gone before, to remember those who have gone to heaven or the happy hunting grounds! For some, aspects of science and other fields may provide enough motivation, and even today many humans remain caught in the daily struggle for sheer survival, but for many humans it is the great stories that pave the pathways of our life journeys.

Most of our recent Unitarian Universalist religious forebears came out of the Jesus tradition, but in the past 2 centuries they came to appreciate the lessons and stories of many traditions, so that today we draw our stories from many religions as well science and human history.

The question that inspired this sermon and which constantly challenges our UU Religious Education programs is how do we choose the religious stories, myths, and legends that will best convey to newcomers and our children and youth who we are and why our view of reality is best. Over the last century, our religious education programs have tried to educate children and youth about world religions and humanism, but often we have served up an indigestible buffet of stories and ideas leaving our children without a religious identity. This is partly because many children participate sporadically rather than appearing every week to enjoy and learn from what is offered by dedicated religious educators.

For those who believe that the children should choose their own faith this is not necessarily a problem, but it is sad to see so many of our UU children end up either unchurched or turning to religious traditions that offer simple answers and a sense of certainty and expectations that we have not offered. Though we verbally invite and encourage families to come every week, UUs generally do not have the same level of commitment as participants in many other religious traditions. There is also a consumer mentality which has infected many mainstream Judeo-Christian and Unitarian Universalist communities which leads to adults picking and choosing to come based on topics and programs that interest them rather than a deeper commitment. With that said, it should be clear that our choice of stories and topics in religious education and worship is extremely important, matters we only rarely address as congregations.

So what are the most important stories that we should teach often enough to contact every child, youth, and adult that enters our doors? What are the lessons that best express our religious values and principles, our philosophy and spirituality? Those of us who grew up in Christian churches may have a list of stories and parables from the Bible to suggest, for there is great wisdom in parables of the Prodigal Son, the Good Samaritan, The Seed Sower, the Mustard Seed, and the Lost Coin, and the stories of Noah and the Flood, the Plagues and Passover and the years Wandering in the Wilderness. Other Religions, Unitarian Universalism and our humanist tradition may have other important

stories to offer about great leaders like Gandhi and Martin Luther King, and writers like Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Of course one of the things that makes choosing harder is that we don't have a well defined core of beliefs on which to base our choices. As an association of independent congregations in a creedless and non-doctrinal religion, we can start wherever we want in articulating our beliefs or not! Our Mission and Vision Statements and goals aren't a lot of help and we value so many traditions and ideas that choosing a few key stories is almost impossible. It is an interesting and somewhat frustrating problem!

There are so many wonderful stories that teach lessons about how we ought to treat each other and the things in life that really matter. There are lessons that offer courage for our journeys, for difficult times, for changes. There are story lessons about how to succeed in life and how to teach others. There are lessons in stories about how to relate to parents, children, friends, and spouses. And the stories give context where proverbs, rules, and laws may not. There are stories we pass down in families about good and bad behavior and there are stories taught in school and Religious Education programs that shape who we are and who we are becoming.

I encourage you to think about the stories that have helped shape your attitudes, beliefs, and worldview. I invite you to make your own list of the most important myths, legends, and religious stories and bring them to our forum next Sunday! Until then, I wish you happy trails, merry dreams, and a safe and warm week!

Live long and Prosper! Amen!