

Searching for Simple Truths

UU Church of Vancouver

May 21, 2023

Reflection on the Theme by Jennifer Springsteen

I remember telling my first lie when I was seven. My sister and I shared a room then: twin beds with matching checkered bedspreads. We each had a framed picture above our beds. I wasn't a napper as a child, so what I did was sneak my mother's keys into the room, remove the picture and nail above my bed, push one key into tiny hole, and pretend I was turning a lock three times. Doing so opened a magical world inside the walls with dragons and princesses and animals that spoke. (This was me freely searching for truth and meaning.)

My imaginings continued on until one evening when we were jumping on the bed, the picture fell from the wall. My parents came in to see what caused the commotion. *Look at what she's done!* My sister said pointing above my headboard. What she had noticed that I had not, was that by turning my mother's large hoop keys into the magical lock, I had widened the nail hole so much it no longer held the nail and the plaster had been damaged behind the picture.

When questioned, I did the only logical thing I could think of to do: I said, *I have no idea how that happened.*

My sister said something like, *Of course you do, you scratch the nail hole with the keys and twist them all around, then stand there like an idiot staring at the blank wall.* (Before you judge the oddness of my wall-staring truth, let say I can't tell you how many times in my adult life I've stared at blank walls or ceilings while imagining short stories and characters and chapter scenes and sermons... It isn't that weird to writers.)

After I had confessed to entering my magical realm each day, my mother said it wasn't the taking of the keys or the wall damage that upset her, but the lie. The lie? I understood then that truth was a powerful thing.

So, will the truth set you free? Maybe. Sometimes it just makes you feel like a jerk when you're faced with hard choices. Truth is powerful and sometimes powerfully damaging.

I had a mommy group when Charlotte was little. One of those children was a pusher and a hitter. Some of it was temper, sometimes it came out of the blue. After a year of seeing my poor kiddo get knocked around week after week during our play dates, I decided I didn't want to subject Charlotte to that anymore. How could I establish trust if I purposefully allowed her to be harmed? I'll tell you, we tried many avenues for steering away from the hard conversation that needed to happen, but since none of that worked, I was left with the choice to tell the mother the truth and ask her to leave the group or that I would, or lie about why I needed to stop coming to the group. Neither path felt easy—Charlotte and I would lose our close friends, or I'd hurt someone I cared for.

Well, I told the mother my feelings about her son, and it indeed wounded her. She admitted to having no delusions about her son's behavior, but she'd hoped it would all sort out. It was a hard time for the whole group, and ended our connection to her. Had I been responsible with my truth telling?

These lessons in truth are so difficult. I'm sure you have many, too, from your childhood and youth and into your adulthood. Lying stinks, but telling the truth stinks, too. On the flipside of that, learning someone we care for has lied cuts deeply. So does learning a hard truth about ourselves from someone we love, even if we grow as a result. This "being human" stuff is a hard way to go.

But here we are, all of us muddling through. We stand before blank walls with the wrong set of keys and pretend locks searching within ourselves— and for a power greater than ourselves— to help us create meaning of it all.

Searching for Simple Truths by Bonnie Long

So where are you, this bright, promising morning? I can see plenty of **bodies**, here in the sanctuary. And more are at home, zooming from the couch. But before I asked, maybe you were mentally—or emotionally—replaying some part of yesterday or anticipating what tomorrow will bring? Somewhere in the past or future, instead of soaking up this current, precious moment? If so, welcome back. Please stay with me for the next few minutes, **right here** and **right now**.

We all live in three different time zones. . . the Past, the Future, and Now. Sometimes it's hard to keep them separate—we toggle back and forth among them, like they co-exist seamlessly in our consciousness. But maybe the truth is, trying to juggle all three in the same headspace all the time is multi-tasking at its worst. Our present selves are easily highjacked by those other two culprits.

My past self is grateful for all the ways I've been blessed, but I'm also haunted by a boatload of couldas and shouldas, along with several cringeworthy renditions of "what-was-I-thinking?" We can't—and shouldn't— disregard the past: cherished memories, humbling mistakes, the grace we received when we most needed it. Plus, our past constantly shapes and re-shapes the person we are now. The childhood memory Jennifer shared with us just now gave us an authentic glimpse into how and why she became the writer she is today. Grasping the past's influence on a macro level—our ancestral heritage, our family culture, the place we grew up-- that's relatively easy. But our "micro-past" also influences us, in less obvious ways. Each of us this morning is a different person than who we were five minutes ago. And each of us will be changed by participating in this morning's service.

As Unitarian Universalists, we try to embrace that mystery we call the Future, and just let it be. But we worry. And when our worry turns into chronic anxiety, we risk allowing our future selves to rob us of "now." To paraphrase a bit of ancient Chinese wisdom: "We cannot prevent the birds of worry from flying over our head, but we can prevent them from building nests in our hair." My enneagram profile

tells me I tend to dither too much about what will be. I know I do. I meditate, I medicate, but some of the time it feels impossible for me to keep all those birds from at least scratching around in my hair now and then. When all this gets too awkward to lug around, we need to set both the Past and the Future down and pick up “now.” If only for a short while each day.

The truth is that the **present** is the only time in which real life is available to us. That liminal space between what’s already happened and what hasn’t happened yet is where grace and our **personal truths** can be found. When we are able and willing to slow down and notice those liminal transitions so beautifully described in the poem Jennifer just read, our brains shift into low-power mode, so there’s less drain on our battery. It all sounds wonderful, but most of us find getting and staying here and now is way more easily said than done.

That said. . . “in the moment” doesn’t necessarily mean narrowing our focus to an illusive few seconds. It can represent any slice of time, as long as we’re not trying to occupy several different slices at once, and we’re closely focused on what we’re experiencing.

Granted, the more extended that “moment,” the more likely we are to be distracted from it. But a few seconds of pure attention on a katydid resting on a leaf or a half-hour invested exclusively in creating Sunday morning pancakes for the family—can summon a sense of groundedness, of equanimity, in our otherwise frenetic lives. As the poem says, it’s in the liminal spaces—the space between what’s happened and what’s about to happen—those pure transition times—that offer us respite and renewal. Sort of like a **mini-sabbatical**.

Noticing extraordinary moments during our ordinary days **seasons** our life with magic. My husband Gale and I spent a recent Sunday afternoon at our friend Kate’s lovely Red Basket Farm. We were asked to bring some poems to share—either something we’ve written or a couple of favorites by more famous poets. We looked forward to the event as a pleasant time with pleasant people, but we came away with more than that. Settled around her cozy conversation circle, the **magic** surfaced. It may have had to do with the poems that we shared, but I’m thinking it was more that we let ourselves soften into the moment, absorbing the good, generous, mutual vibe. We carried that sense of magic with us the rest of the week.

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We same people will never gather in that same moment again—we’re all several weeks into being different people by now. Even if we could, I wonder if the same magic would happen. Probably not—if only because we would be trying to make it happen. The truth is, we need magic every day. . . but I’m doubtful we can conjure it on purpose. Don’t look for it, and it will come.

I’m not a big fan of the Academy Awards program. It’s so scripted and orchestrated, there’s little magic in it. It gets tedious fast. As you may recall, before the actual ceremony gets under way, people preen and pose for the cameras—informing reporters whether they’re wearing Armani or Jimmy Choo (while I watch at home in my Fred Meyer.)

This year, at one point, Lady Gaga stepped from her limo and glided down the red carpet in a predictable flourish of over-the-top glitz and glamor. Her cheeks sparkled with glitter, and her jewelry alone must’ve weighed ten pounds. THEN, a little while later, she’d transformed. There she was, perched on a stool alone on a dark stage. She’d changed into a black t-shirt and jeans, shed her jewels and most of her make-up, and pulled her hair back into a simple braid. Her delivery of the award-winning song “Hold My

Hand” was a riveting demonstration of what being fully present—being absorbed in the moment—looks like. For most of the song, she kept her gaze down, without making eye contact with the audience. . . *as if* we weren’t there. *As if* she were singing to *herself*. Now, I know she’s an amazing performer, a brilliant actor. But that evening, I believe we were witnessing her pure, authentic, magical presence for a few minutes.

One common “space between”—one occasion of liminality we all experience—is that magical time when we’re on the cusp between deep sleep and being fully awake. Sleep experts call this transition liminal dreaming, or in more technical terms, **hypnagogia** when we’re falling asleep, and **hypnopompia**

When we’re waking up. Even though we all experience it, each of us is more or less aware of it when it’s happening. But if we do notice the moment, it often proves to be a portal to some of our more interesting subconscious insights. A trivial example: I play Wordle at bedtime. Sometimes I’m too tired to finish it, or too frustrated by my unlucky guesses, so I close my laptop and—as they say—sleep on it. More often than not, I wake up during the night “knowing” the solution. The key to this phenomenon working for us in this way is that we aren’t consciously belaboring the problem. When we just wait for it—let the mystery be—inspiration bubbles to the surface.

In his recent book *4,000 Weeks*, social scientist Oliver Burkman includes a chapter titled “Absent in the Present.” He says that *consciously attempting* to “be here now” is more strenuous than relaxing. *Trying to* have the most intense possible present-moment experience is a sure-fire way to **not** have one. In the *effort* to be fully present in our everyday, ordinary moments, we risk missing the moment itself. It’s like when we try too hard to fall asleep, we can’t. We miss that rich, creative experience of liminality, because we’re too busy self-consciously wondering if we’re being present enough or not. A more fruitful approach to the challenge of living more fully in the moment *starts* from noticing that we are, in fact, *already—always—living in the moment anyway*, whether we like it or not, notice it or not.

What I’ve heard Millennials call “hustle culture”—our frantic, fast track habits of constantly being productive—is stressful and potentially problematic, of course. (Do you know anyone who—if they get something done that’s not on their to-do list—they add it to the list just so they can cross it off?) We’re in constant touch with our calendars, we set goals and feel like failures when we fall short of them. Burkman suggests that living more fully in the present may be “simply” a matter of finally realizing that we don’t have any option but to “be here now.”

Thich Nhat Hanh—the beloved Vietnamese monk, peace activist, poet and teacher, is known as the “father of mindfulness.” He was a major influence on Western practices of Buddhism. He taught us the richness of being absorbed—not necessarily **working on achieving** absorption—just recognizing when we are “in the zone” and cherishing those moments, however mundane they are. His little book called “How to Walk” (hold up) is a collection of short essays on mindful walking. He reminds us that this mundane practice can open us up to the wonder-filled moments available to us. . . if we pay attention and are fully present, rather than trudging along listening to a podcast that prevents us from hearing the robins gossiping in the trees.

There’s a path around the perimeter of the park behind our house. It’s only a little over a mile, so sometimes you pass the same person going the opposite direction more than once, if you’re both doing multiple rounds. One day, a man in a business suit, dress shirt and tie, was coming toward me. I **heard**

him first—before he rounded the bend ahead of me. He was on his phone and practically yelling. After passing him twice, I gathered he was negotiating a real estate deal. In the park. Enveloped in beauty. What was he gaining, besides maybe being able to check off another item on his important to-do list?

Almost daily, my husband Gale and I do a spin on that path. Since we're currently between dogs—we had to let go of our Charlie about a year ago—we don't have a companion to help us stay present and attentive in the experience. We no longer stop and profoundly sniff the shrubs we pass, as he encouraged us to do. Or connect with others we meet on the path in his personal way. Whenever we asked Charlie "What time is it?" For him, it was always "Now." He was always here, present and accounted for. Now our walks often become more like that real estate guy's. We get side-tracked into negotiating our calendars, or deciding what's for dinner. I catch myself noting how much farther we have to go, getting it over with so I can circle back to my "productive" life. When we're behaving in **mind-filled** ways, rather than **mindful** ways, we're missing the magic.

All this may sound uncomfortable, self-indulgent for some. But the truth is, if we are not addressing our own needs, it's unlikely that we'll be able to meet anyone else's needs without eventually experiencing underlying resentments, frustration, and maybe even burnout. We will be less able to respond to people in a balanced way if we're feeling sleep-deprived or eating on the run, or conducting business during Nature walks. It is not selfish. When we honor ourselves by opening the channels in our minds and hearts through which we can access our personal power—our holiness—we are empowering ourselves to extend those gifts to others.

We all learn different lessons at different times. We may be reaching an age where we feel stuck, like we're done learning or changing. . . We may be in a place where just keeping pace with family goings-on and work demands is all we can do. . . or we may currently be consumed with joyfully following our life-long dream or passion (as our intern Jennifer seems to be.) The truth is, we're missing some magic when we don't take time to just stand and watch the exquisite display of clouds drifting across the western sky at sunset. Or admire the intricate layers of a red onion when it's sliced in half and resting on our cutting board. Or see god in a spotted towhee's complex arrangement of feathers and colors. Or compost! I'm in total awe of the **simple truth** that compost happens!

So, keep those birds of worry out of your hair. Listen to the music. Read poetry aloud. Take a walk in Nature and pay attention. Pace yourself as you wake up—give that liminality a chance. Notice the magic in the most ordinary of moments. Find truth and meaning all around you.

We all have the capacity for dwelling in a state of being beyond the realm of our compulsive doing. Bertrand Russell called it "fruitful monotony." Walt Whitman called it "loafing." The Buddhist tradition describes it simply as presence. The Pakistani-British psychoanalyst Masud Khan called this mode of being "lying fallow." I especially love that farming analogy: our minds—in quiet mode—are like a field plowed and harrowed, but left unsown for a period in order to *restore its fertility*.

Whatever we may call it, in a culture of filling the existential void with an endless stream of distractions, it is nothing less than a countercultural act of courage and resistance to tap such states of being — states in which our small, inner voice becomes clear, and we can **let our little light shine**.