

For Your Consideration:

“You are the author of your life’s story. Is it fact or fiction and how will you write the final chapters?”

Worship Leader: Ronnie Mars

UU Church of Vancouver

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Reflection on the Theme (Alexis Balkowitsch)

I don’t want to shock anyone this morning, but some of you may have already noticed...I have a shaved head. I know, it’s a huge surprise.

But all joking aside...it’s been three years now since I started shaving my head, and it’s just become part of who I am. There were certainly lots of questions at first—usually well-meaning worries about whether I was sick or in treatment (rest assured, my hairless state has nothing to do with an illness). For the most part, I kept my answers simple: yes, it’s just a personal aesthetic choice, and yes, I do love it. But there is definitely a deeper story that I haven’t really had a chance to share.

It starts with my mother, who began losing her hair in her late thirties. Whether from genetics or hormones, medications or stress—she never really found out why. And it certainly wasn’t something that was talked about or that had a lot of resources or answers for, anyway. Growing up, I watched my mom truly suffer from hair loss—crying after salon visits, anxiously asking me if I noticed any bald spots, avoiding activities she used to love.

So when I started to show signs of thinning hair in my late teens, she kinda freaked out on my behalf. She made doctor’s appointments for me, found special shampoos and serums...and not surprisingly, her anxiety became my anxiety. I spent quite a few years going down the same road she did—worrying, avoiding events and photos, and yes, sometimes crying.

Until sometime in my late twenties, when I finally said NO—this is not my story. I understand why it was hers, but it is not mine. If I couldn’t control how many

strands of dead proteins were growing outta my head, I was absolutely gonna be done letting them control me. I let my hair be my hair...there were some ups and downs, and bouts of worry, but for the most part, I had made my peace.

Cue Pandemic Lock Down. It was the perfect storm of not being able to get my hair cut, not being able to go out where people would see my hair cut, and a lot of people with a lot of time on their hands, sharing their stories online of self-acceptance, body positivity, neurodivergence—all the million and one ways we can be proud of our unique selves.

So in August of 2020, I grabbed the shears and took the plunge. I decided I wasn't just done with worrying about my hair—I was done with hair entirely. And it was AMAZING. I felt free. I felt like I was finally seeing my true face for the first time. I felt—pardon my honesty—like a badass. I was truly myself—I was not only writing my own story, but putting it out there for the world to see as well.

And it's made me take another look at many of my other stories, and stories I tell myself, to see where I might need some edits or write new chapters. I spent a lot of time thinking about pronouns and gender, and came to the realization that both she and they feel right to me. I looked back at past interests that I gave up because they seemed weird or silly—and now I'm trying them on again to see what fits and what brings me joy. It's a journey that is as fulfilling to be on as it is to share.

So I've come to understand how important it is to consciously review our stories, our journeys, our lives...to be willing to make the edits, redirections, and changes that speak our truths...and, maybe most importantly, to share those stories. Because you never know who that story might empower while you're also empowering yourself.

Sermon (Ronnie Mars)

You talk too much
You worry me to death
You talk too much
You even worry my pet
You just talk...

Talk too much

I heard that a lot when I was young; not the song, but that I talked too much! I was very inquisitive and asked a lot of questions. It was my timing that got me into trouble.

My fifth-grade teacher, Miss Duffie, sent me to the principal's office for talking in class when I should have been paying attention. My punishment was corporal, involving a leather strap and the palm of my hand. Never was there a time I needed the teachings and principles of Unitarian Universalism than at the age of ten in 1963.

In the Western world, the corporal punishment of children has traditionally been used by adults in authority roles. Beating one's child as a form of punishment is even recommended in the book of Proverbs: Chapter 22:15 Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it from him. Well, if it was in the bible, then it's okay? Those beliefs made me question authority.

The school did direct my energies toward the stage. I portrayed George Washington in a still pose during a short reading of his biography at an assembly. Imagine me in a white powdered wig, a tri-cornered hat and a colonial jacket.

(Slide 1) My stage debut in the fifth grade predated Christopher Jackson's portrayal of the first president in Hamilton. *(Slide 2)*

My elementary school teachers at Mary H. Wright were Ms. Shavers, Ms. Patton, Ms. Sanders, Ms. Rivers, Ms. Duffie and Mr. Barksdale respectively. One of them said, "Never be afraid to admit you don't know something." The philosopher Socrates said, "The only true wisdom consists in knowing that you know nothing." Another teacher said, "You can learn a lot sometimes by listening. Those nuggets of wisdom remain with me today.

My high school reunion in May was fun and a little reminiscent, seeing former classmates and noticing how we have aged. *(Slide 3)* Three weeks ago, I

attended another reunion. It was with people I worked with at WSPA-TV in my hometown of Spartanburg, South Carolina, and hadn't seen in thirty-six years. *(Slide 4)*

Preparing for that trip, I felt that I not only sprouted wings but soared the two years I worked there. Only then, I understood how Harry Campbell might have felt when he threw a football for a touchdown in high school. Those years were the launch pad for my forty-year career. *(Slide 5)* Fred Tuck, the gentleman with me in this photo, was one of the directors that trained me on the studio camera, and it was important for me to express my gratitude to him.

My life's been filled with instances of being in the right place at the right time. Television news had been an interest throughout my youth. I believe it was only natural that I would work in the field of disseminating information.

The events of the Sixties remain ingrained in my memories. Watching Walter Cronkite, considered one of the most trusted figures in the United States, report John Glenn's NASA launch, JFK's assassination and Dr. Martin Luther King's I Have A Dream speech, just to name a few, were historical moments I'll never forget.

As I was preparing to enlist in the Army, I gave my boss my notice. A reporter, who had come to us from WCBS in New York, learned I was leaving. I told him my first duty assignment was at the United Military Academy at West Point, which is fifty miles north of the Big Apple along the Hudson River.

He asked if I would be interested in taking a tour of the news bureau on West 57th. My reply of course was yes! He gave me the name of the overseas assignment editor and told me to look him up when I got to New York.

I went off to Basic Training at Fort Jackson in South Carolina. When I completed my training, I spent a week at home for the Christmas holidays. With my bags packed, I took my first airplane flight to LaGuardia Airport. From the airport, I took a shuttle bus to the Port Authority on 42nd Ave.

I arrived midday, and didn't have to report to West Point until six pm. I threw my duffle bag in a locker in a locker at the Port Authority and called the phone number given to me. The gentleman said he was expecting to hear from me and asked if I could be at his office after 2pm. I decided to grab lunch at a deli along the way. Except for a few days I spent in Atlanta, I had never been in a Metropolis like New York, the Big Apple. Before crossing 5th avenue, something in the back of my mind said not to look up! I would stand out like a tourist. (Slide 6)

Approaching the tall granite building, also known as Black Rock, (Slide 7) I entered the revolving glass doors. At that moment I could relate to Dorothy entering the Emerald City to meet the Wizard.

I walked up to the reception desk and gave the receptionist my name. She asked me to take a seat. The assignment editor came out to greet me and had me come with him to his office.

After he made a phone call, he introduced me to some staff members. This man took time out from his busy schedule and for the next ninety minutes showed me around the news bureau. I didn't get to meet Walter Cronkite, but they were recording 60 Minutes. We passed Morley Safer in the hallway. I thanked him and returned to the Port Authority, retrieved my duffle bag and caught my bus for West Point. You can't make this stuff up! As my sister Jewell would say, I've been blessed.

On the weekends before I left home for Sunday school, the television program Christopher Closeup would be on. Their founder, Father James Keller, chose an ancient Chinese proverb as the church motto, the credo, for the movement: "It's better to light one candle than curse the darkness", which resonated with me.

Tracy Reilly Kelly passed that flame to me last winter when she asked if I would like to teach a course at Clark College. After some thought, it became clear that I would want to talk about The Civil Rights Movement. Because every incredible thing that had happened in my life would not have been possible if not for the mass protest movement against racial segregation and discrimination in the

southern United States that came to national prominence during the mid-1950s had not happened.

In preparation for my class, I sat in on Sam Robinson's class on the Chinook Indian Nation to give me an idea of how to present my topics. I called my class for Clark College's Community and Continuing Education, TV and The Civil Rights Movement.

During my research for the many topics we discussed, I realized I too was a student while compiling the many events of recent history. My students, like me, lived through this period but weren't necessarily familiar with all of the stories because it wasn't their story to tell. My first class, consisting of eighteen students, seventeen who were white and one of color, was five weeks from early February to early March. (*Slides 8, 9, and 10*)

I used the presentation program PowerPoint and news archive videos from YouTube to carry us back into history. We had some interesting discussions (*Slide 11*) and made some interesting discoveries, like the first woman to serve in Congress. (*Slide 12*) Jeanette Rankin, from the state of Montana, served from 1917-1919 and later from 1941-1943.

Before my last class, Clark College asked if I would like to teach in the Spring. My advisor said I would want to teach the same course in order to get new students. I shared this with my students, and some said if I were to teach the same class, they were not going to sign up for it! Why repeat it? I was faced with a dilemma.

That evening at home, I got online and searched for additional topics we hadn't discussed. I came up with twenty additional topics and found all the media to support a second course. I asked the program's administrator if I could continue the class with new topics and call it TV and The Civil Rights Movement Part 2. She approved.

Twelve of the eighteen students returned for the class in the spring, beginning in early May through early June. Several of them said they would be traveling on

vacation and would not be able to attend. I owe it to them for motivating me in continuing with the class because I was ready for a sabbatical myself.

Clark College invited me to teach again this fall. I accepted, and that class begins on September 28th and runs through October 26th and will be called Social Justice in the Media. Topics will range from The Tulsa Race Massacre, Affirmative Action: College Admissions, Police Brutality and Freedom of Speech and Religion just to name a few.

When astronaut Michael Collins of Apollo 11 was asked about the billions of dollars spent for space exploration when the poor are starving in America, his response was to the effect, "If man were to only address social ills, Christopher Columbus might not have Brave the New World. We're a nation of explorers." Are those words of indifference and arrogance?

The Indigenous peoples welcomed Columbus and his crew, but the colonizers violently killed the Native people and forced them into slavery. Indigenous were also impacted by diseases, which significantly diminished Native populations. And that was the beginning of their plight.

Sitting around a dining table at a restaurant back home three weeks ago while discussing various social issues, my friend Jimmy said, "At least we're in America." I'm not sure how I feel about his sentiment. I guess it's relative to each of our life's experiences.

My teaching has really been a learning experience. I like this quote from Aristotle, "Those who know, do. Those that understand, teach." I'm just scratching the surface.

I'm humble when some of you ask me when I'll be starting seminary. I often hear from you how interesting my life has been. I beg to differ. I'm willing to bet your lives have been as interesting as my. It's just that I've had the opportunity to stand here over three years and talk about it. The experience as a worship associate has been the gateway to not only teaching a course but planning it. My interest in broadcast news parallels my fascination with history. The things examined in my classes not only reflect the past, but also what is happening

now! Winston Churchill said, "Those who fail to learn from their past are destined to repeat it."

You've allowed me to talk, talk a lot, for the last three years. It has been cathartic, reliving moments throughout my life I thought forgotten. Although I haven't heard a calling, I did hear a few words from this poem I'd like to share with you.

"The Call" by Thomas Osbert Mordaunt written during the Seven Years' War of 1756–1763, a global conflict that involved most of the European great powers, and was fought primarily in Europe, the Americas, and Asia-Pacific when the British sought to expand into territory claimed by the French in North America.

"Sound, sound the clarion, fill the fife!
Throughout the sensual world proclaim,
One crowded hour of glorious life
Is worth an age without a name."

The roads we've traveled have diverged. Some with more obstacles than others, but those roads have brought us here today. Sometimes, the biggest hurdle to overcome is getting out of your own way.

I don't know what my future holds. The whole of my life did not follow a plan. The only course changes were my desire to try a different way, a different path. And that has made all the difference. When the day comes, and I no longer cast a tall shadow along the road, I hope those that follow will find their way from a little light I leave behind.

Please rise in body or voice to sing our closing hymn our closing hymn # 6 Just as Long as I Have Breath.

Closing Hymn: # 6 Just as Long as I Have Breath

Offering

Giving is a ritual reminder of that form of love we call generosity. The money you are able to give this morning will be split between the church and our Change for the World recipient, Martin Luther King elementary school.

We come together to deepen our spiritual experience, grow the beloved community, and act on our values in the wider world. We gratefully receive the morning offering.

Offertory

Extinguishing the Chalice

Friends, I invite you to place both your hands over your own heart as you extend your love to the world...

As Alexis removes the stones of joy and sorrow, let us take them into our heart. And as we extinguish our chalice and the usher puts out the silent candles, may we be reminded that WE are asked to be the light in this sometimes cold and harsh world.

Benediction

Our benediction words are from Emily Richards - "May You Be Changed"

May you leave this time together changed.

May the promises you have made to yourself about who you want to be feel closer to the reality of who you are right now.

May you share that feeling of transformation wherever you go.

May it spread into every word, deed, thought, and interaction

Until we are all changed, transformed and transforming together, becoming our better selves.

Go in peace and love. Namaste