

Origin Stories

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

October 1, 2023

Reflection on the Theme by Ronnie Mars

Two weeks ago, I was scheduled to operate the camera for our church services. It would be my first Sunday after we'd returned to having two services. That meant we'd be starting our rehearsal time earlier than before. It disrupted my Sunday morning routine. I'd rise, spread out my yoga mat on the living room floor, and tune in to the CBS Sunday Morning news broadcast while contorting my body into various pretzel like configurations.

Routines can be hard to break. That morning, I had to move a lot faster and decided to purchase a fruit smoothie on the way here instead of throwing my concoction into the blender while Jane Pauley introduced the next story.

I arrived late and entered the sanctuary without speaking to anyone. A couple of voices greeted me, but my response was less than enthusiastic. I noticed two new faces; one was shadowing Deborah Willoughby, our Worship Associate, and the other our new Director of Religious Education.

We went through our rehearsal and then fifteen minutes before the church service, the staff and volunteers met in the kitchen to check in with one another and prepare.

I used to pooh-pooh that but have come to recognize the need to do just that. How are you and are you present? Are you ready to do your task at hand? I was thinking what an impression I must have made about my earlier demeanor as we went around the room introducing ourselves to each other.

I was reminded the day before during a phone conversation with my younger sister Blanche about how we had been raised. She works in a daycare and regales me with stories of her interactions with the kids and their parents. One mother said to her that her child gleefully ate their dinner before the dessert because Ms. Mars said that is the correct way. Another time my sister entered a restaurant and saw one of her "kids" acting up at the dining table with the family and immediately stopped when the child saw my sister seated at another table. My sister tells me her kids are the most behaved and the parents greatly appreciate her. She says our mother taught us to treat people the way you want to be treated, and she applies that rule to her work.

Blanche was not blessed with children of her own, but she has cared for three generations of children. Our temperament with children contrast. Before boarding an airplane, I'm quick to note the number of screaming memes before the flight even takes off. That is almost music to Blanche's ears. I believe my sister is gifted in the caring of children. Who we become begins with the adults who care for us.

Fifteen minutes before each church service, the staff and volunteers working the service meet in the kitchen to check in with one another and prepare. I used to pooh-pooh that but have come to recognize the need to do just that. How are you and are you present? Are you ready to do your task at hand?

I entered the church that morning only thinking about having to adjust to a new schedule and was probably grumpy. I failed to check my ego at the door. There's no crying in baseball, nor should there be any whining in the sanctuary.

Origin Stories© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

I love the artist, Nimo. His music is life-affirming. Actually, I don't know the rap music which made him famous initially, when he was an MTV featured rap star. I only know the music he makes now, after having given up money and fame, retiring from music entirely, working on himself for 7 years and then rediscovering how his music could be used in service to the world. His music is free and I never worry about permission to play it, because he gifts it to the world. Empty Hands Music is the name of his nonprofit with a mission to spread seeds of goodness in the world through selfless service, music, and love. Empty hands because, he says, "We arrive on this planet empty handed. We will all leave empty handed. So, then, how do we want to spend the time in between?" He likes to quote Gandhi and Mother Teresa. The Gandhi quote he likes is "the best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others." And from Mother Teresa, "Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love." Both of those quotes are brilliant, really.

Nimo has a well-practiced and finely tuned origin story. He set out in High School to make money and be famous, worked hard, went to the Wharton Business School and worked on Wall Street, then pursued his passion for music as a rap star. Despite having conquered his dreams and living the life, Nimo realized, "I was not at peace, not content and not in a daily space of joy and gratitude. I began wondering, where does all this go, when does it stop, where does this end?" This led to the next part of his story, where he gave up the material possessions, he simplified, then he experimented a la Mahatma Gandhi. If you're familiar with Gandhi's autobiography, it's called *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. In his own way, Nimo conducts experiments with truth, in order to get meaning back into his life. Learning to meditate in the Himalayas, he devotes his life to service. He takes seriously the Gandhi quote about finding yourself by losing yourself in the service of others. But don't forget that he took time off first, learned to meditate, and focused on his own life as he began serving others. He started volunteering with children in the slums of Ahmedabad where he has impacted the lives of thousands of children over the last 14 years. In his Ted talk, he says that "the world conspires when your heart is connected to what you're doing." I love that. He insists that you can't change others, that we can barely change ourselves, but that we can plant seeds and like Mother Teresa, while not all of us can do great things, we can do small things with great love.

Creation is our theme this month of October. And I'll confess to you all that if I believe in God at all, it is a process God, the verb, not the noun, a God of creation, a God that co-creates the universe with us. A God that conspires with us when our heart is connected to what we're doing.

What got me interested in this topic of Origin Stories was the book I talked about last week, *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Robin Wall Kimmerer begins the book with an origin story, Skywoman Falling, shared by the original peoples throughout the Great Lakes. She contrasts that origin story, in which Skywoman creates a garden for the wellbeing of all, with the story of Eve who is banished from the garden and instructed to subdue the wilderness into which she was cast. Writes Kimmerer, "Same species, same earth, different stories. Like Creation stories everywhere, cosmologies are a source of identity and orientation to the world. They tell us who we are. We are inevitably shaped by them no matter how distant they may be from our consciousness. One story leads to the generous embrace of the living world, the other to banishment. One woman is our ancestral gardener, a cocreator of the green world that would be the home of her descendants. The other was an exile, just passing through an alien world on a rough road to her real home in heaven." (p.7)

Our Universalist ancestors embraced and rejected the notion that our real home is in heaven, is in some other place or time. While many of them continued to believe that Heaven was hereafter, they insisted that everyone was invited. But it became common overtime among the Universalists to claim that Heaven was ours to create, here and now, in this place, on Earth. That was the Universalism I inherited growing up in this tradition. It is through that lens that I relate to the Skywoman story where she creates a garden for the wellbeing of all.

I hope you are all here next Sunday when my colleague, the Rev. Joseph Santos-Lyons, is preaching. He'll be speaking to our thriving faith in communities beyond Unitarian Universalism in the West. We're doing a fair amount of looking at Unitarian Universalism this month as we study Creation, because we have been creating, or trying to create, a new story for Unitarian Universalism – a story that doesn't just *talk* about embracing everyone, but a story **that** embraces the diversity of humanity – *to my people, yeah, you're my soul, you're my roots, you're my family, my life and my truth*. Stephani Skalak, a UU minister in formation, is also speaking later in the month on a foundational story of our faith.

I think it is important that we look at our origin stories and decide whether or not they serve us or harm us. If they cause harm, it is our responsibility to create something new. Nimo looked at the story of his life, in the height of his fame and wealth, and wondered why he was not feeling joyful or grateful, and then went about creating a new story for himself. Ronnie looks to his sister who reminds him that their mother taught them to treat people the way you want to be treated.

I have to wonder, after reading *Braiding Sweetgrass*, if some of the decline of religion and church in the United States has to do with the failure of the Adam and Eve story to speak to us in this moment of time in which our planet needs us to co-create the garden and not subdue and subjugate the wilderness.

There's something here also about capitalism and subjugation – something about turning life into capital or a commodity or bringing life under domination or control, something that we have done in this society to its detriment. And it may have started with this Adam and Eve story, but we've certainly added a layer of capitalism which has complicated things - to the detriment of many institutions, including church. It has been true for many years that increasing numbers of people visiting churches come with little church background and they relate to church as if it were a service to be bought and not a community to join. They come and consume but contribute little.

I have to tell you, I love the former Mormons who join this church. Having spent a lot of time in Utah, I know a little about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and how it operates, without professional clergy, entirely with lay leaders. Karl and Carolea Anderberg, both departed now, but they were huge lay leaders in this congregation, and had both grown up Mormon. I didn't know Carolea as much, as she was declining when I arrived, but I got to know Karl well– he served on a Committee on Ministry and as a Worship Associate, he stepped up and served, and I always attributed that to his Mormon upbringing. Our recent Acting DRE, Erin Nugent, was also raised in the Mormon church, and when we had all these families coming to church and couldn't find a Director of Religious Education to hire, she jumped in. And she was ready to relinquish the role when we found Elise, she said, because she wanted to volunteer in other areas of church life. Now there are lots of things about the Mormon church – lots of things – about which I strongly disagree – but something they do around community and responsibility for the community really works. They tithe as well, generally 10% of their income to the church, which is one reason the Mormon church has money and can evangelize all over the world.

We have been struggling of late both with money and volunteers here at the UU Church of Vancouver. Some of it can be explained by the pandemic, the shut-down, the reconfiguration of the congregation. We have many new people, and new people, understandably, don't wish to jump into the life of a community until they've checked it out first and discovered for themselves whether or not this is a safe enough place, a place where they can be brave and contribute – then figure out where they want to contribute and how. And many people are in crisis still, the effects of the pandemic linger – not just the disease, which is still out there and killing people – I hope you're all getting vaccinated this season - but the long term effects of isolation, job loss, and stress mean that fewer people seem able to cope. They need church to help them cope, but they're unable to give back to the community while still in crisis. It all makes sense. And that's where we are.

I am delighted, however, to let you know this morning that we have new volunteers to organize coffee hour! We are so grateful for the many years that Tracy Reilly-Kelly took it on, and more recently, Christine Smith, but even more excited that two newer folks to our community have volunteered to make coffee happen. In time, we're confident it will be offered every week. Ben Kessler and Alyssa Brin have joined forces to organize Coffee Hour (which I've started referring to sometimes as Social Hour when a member told me she never went to Coffee Hour because she doesn't drink coffee. We serve tea as well, just for your information.) Head over to the other building this morning after service if you'd like to find out. While not all of us can do great things, we can do small things with great love.

I'm going to widen the lens and talk about this country. This story of capitalism – which treats people as profit - this subjugation grew out of our country's founding under European Imperialism. Settlers from a foreign land colonized the land, exerting political and economic domination of this land and its people. Colonizers profited by exploiting the human and economic resources of this country and imposed religion, language, cultural and political practices on the indigenous population, those they did not kill directly.

This is not the origin story that most of us like to tell or hear, because it implicates the ancestors of many in this room. I think that story is probably banned in Florida. I myself prefer the story of the religiously persecuted fleeing Europe to found a free nation where all can worship as their conscience dictates. But, the problem with that story is that it leaves out the people who were on this land we now occupy. We could tell that story with impunity only as long as we didn't consider the inhabitants of this land, well, as people. And that's the problem with the Adam and Eve story, it gave their descendants permission to subdue, subjugate, and control the wilderness – including anyone we deem as “wild,” hence the characterization of Native Americans as ‘wild savages.’ Who else might we think of as wild in this country? People who are homeless? People who don't speak English? People with severe mental illness? People with drug addictions? So many times, our attempts to help have been from an imperialistic need to control and subdue, with a view of the other as less than fully human, or “wild.” I say all this in full knowledge that our congregation includes people who are homeless, have severe mental illness and addictions – it's one reason we drop a stone in the water each Sunday for those who feel their identity puts them on the margins of society. You know you are human, and you know that you are not always treated as such. Too many times, attempts to help have been from an imperialistic need to control and subdue, with a view of the *other* as less than fully human, or “wild.”

That's why the quote Nimo Patel loves from Gandhi is not one you've heard from me over the years...“the best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.” I'm too familiar with the

colonizers, my ancestors, whose attempt to help has often come from a need to control and subdue, rather than from that place of introspection, listening, and responding to the humanity of the other. Nimo calls it “living life from the inside out.” “The world conspires when your heart is connected to what you’re doing,” he says. I think of Ronnie’s sister, Blanche, and her care for children. My sister, Anna, is similarly inclined. “The world conspires when your heart is connected to what you’re doing.” But these sisters and Nimo Patel stand out for their introspection and care.

But times change. And now, instead of seeing a world full of people who want to help, sometimes without that introspection and humility, I see the world with many who are so overwhelmed that the thought of service paralyzes instead of motivates. My cousin in Portland who volunteers at her kid’s school says that this is the first year ever that they have not been able to find a room parent for the kindergarten and first grade class. The tasks of a room parent can vary with each classroom, but generally kids and parents are so enthusiastic about kindergarten and first grade that volunteers used to be found easily. We are in a different time.

And I don’t think we know yet how the story ends. I tried hard to find an ending for this sermon, but I was stuck. I don’t know how it ends, but I’m pretty sure we know how it should begin. It needs to begin with an origin story that takes into account all of the people - *to my people, yeah, you’re my soul, you’re my roots*, and all of life. It needs to begin with story that places at least some of the responsibility of creating the story on the people themselves and all of life. We need to participate in the story. The story can have a God or a Goddess or a Divine Entity, but that God isn’t a savior, but rather a co-creator. It has to be a closed system. All the elements of the story must be utilized – there is no garbage or anything to throw away. We can recycle and repurpose, but we can’t throw out. And the story needs to be beautiful. It needs to be simple and elegant and memorable, so that we want to tell it again and again, until we live into that story, and create a new way moving forward. We can do this. This I believe. We can build a new way. And I think we’ve already started.