

The Soul's Journey: Meditations on "Before" and "Beyond"

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver

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Reflection on the Theme by Kelly Kanyid

Mother's Day is a weird day for me, as it is for so many of us. I was really close with my mom, who was diagnosed with a terminal illness when I was 15 and died just after I graduated from high school in 2001. I felt the loss of my mother so completely that I have been extremely skeptical of a higher power or an afterlife ever since. I am 43 now, a year older than she was when she died, and though I remain a skeptic, I have found something like spirituality as I've grown through that loss.

In the late 1990's Seattle was where a person with Myelodysplastic Syndrome could receive the most advanced treatment; even world famous scientist, Carl Sagan, who succumbed to Myelodysplastic Syndrome himself in 1996 sought treatment there. In my junior year we moved to Seattle and lived in a special apartment complex meant for cancer patients and their families. I attended an alternative school meant for those residents. My classmates were a mix of kids living in the same reality I was, as well as kids living with cancer themselves. My experiences in Seattle formed what would become the foundation of my world-view. If before I had believed that everything happens for a good reason, it only took that formative proximity to death - the death of adults as well as the death of other kids - to lead me to the conclusion that stuff just happens, and probably with no plan or purpose.

That framing lends itself to a view of a world steeped in casual cruelty, and the natural world is rife with examples that bare this out. And though that was a fairly bleak observation to make as a teenager, my early exposure to Carl Sagan's television program called Cosmos offered a more balanced view of facts that informed what would become my sense of spirituality; a world of casual cruelty that is also wide open to miraculous possibility.

If there is no grand plan, if all of this is malleable and ephemeral, then all we really have is here and now. The fact that we all find ourselves here, together, right now, against all odds, is a miracle. It's sacred.

In my favorite episode of Cosmos, Sagan opens by explaining "in order to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe." It's the idea that everything we have right now in this second started with a cataclysmic cosmic event and ended in the choice you made to be here. Billions upon billions of years ago stars collapsed and those molecules now make up all matter, they became you, and you are here, right now, out of the chaos, out of stardust, a

statistically improbable, miraculous collection of matter with no grand planner, with no path but the one you choose. Somehow through space and time, everything is in its place - the awful and the wonderful, the agony and the ecstasy.

My mom's death was awful. It makes holidays and milestones weird for me sometimes, but I draw comfort in knowing that in order to have had my mom, even for the short time I did, a whole cosmos had to be invented first. I stand in awe of the throughline that was birthed in the heart of collapsing stars and continues on through me and through my daughter. I stand in awe of the statistically improbable, miraculous collection of matter, that rearranged stardust that composes our everything, and that feels relentlessly spiritual.

The Soul's Journey: Meditations on "Before" and "Beyond" by Bonnie Long

"I am sitting here wanting memories to teach me—to see the beauty of the world through my own eyes. . ." That song was written by a remarkable woman. Ysaye (eezay) Barnwell. . . former member of Sweet Honey in the Rock and a career composer and teacher. Inherent in this beautiful song is a universal **need to know our story**.

We are all born into an on-going generational story. I believe it's our responsibility to learn what we can about it and then **tell its truth**. Even if we don't have all the facts, we are a key interface connecting the past with the future. There's growing evidence that keeping family stories alive has impact on younger generations' mental health and resilience. I'll be happy to share that research with you if you'd like.

First let's take a quick look at the strange bedfellows TRUTH and FACT. You might think that being factually accurate is the same as telling the truth. Not necessarily. When we try to communicate the inner workings of the human heart, the **truth transcends mere facts, in order to reveal deeper truths**. Facts are concrete realities that no amount of opinion (or "alternate facts") will change. Once established, they're not arguable. They are simply acknowledged. **Our truths**, on the other hand, are subjective, personal, and even malleable over time. But they nonetheless profoundly inform our authentic selves, our belief system, and our spirituality.

Within this room full of curious UUs, our personal truths are wildly diverse. My subjective beliefs, my values—how I choose to relate to the world around me—they are my truths. If I could list them all for you, and you did so too, no two lists would be the same. I once heard Rev. Kathryn say during a sermon (paraphrasing), "If I don't believe in god, it's probably a different god from the one you don't believe in." That's what drew me to this place 14 years ago. Here, I'm free to do me, while respecting and supporting you doing you. And as a hard-working,

dedicated beloved community, we are learning to honor and respect that reality.

Many of our well-known brilliant scientists have recognized and made use of the symbiosis between the objective and subjective—left brain/right brain—linear thinking / intuition.

Astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson and primatologist Jane Goodall are two clear examples.

Even Frank Lloyd Wright—that genius architect—liked to remind his clients: “The truth is more important than the facts.” And of course, we hear a sermon now and then from one of our own resident scientists who fit into this enlightened “whole picture” profile. They all look INSIDE themselves to find truths. And OUTSIDE of themselves to find facts.

Before moving on. . . how about a short quiz on distinguishing personal truth from fact. Say it loud! When someone says, “Rhubarb is delicious” . . . is it a truth or a fact? Desert landscapes are dry.” . . truth or fact? “This country is off the rails. . . .” truth or fact? —oh never mind. You get it.

Like The Little Tree in this morning’s story, being open to new perspectives is liberating in some important ways. In the little tree’s case, recognizing that his truth may not be working for him, he grew. . .literally. . .and survived. The world may seem like it is derailed, but I believe we are at a crucial tipping point that holds promise. We may not know the facts of what’s going to happen tomorrow . . . but do we need to know? We do need to shore up our sense of personal agency, and live each day guided by our truths. Stay with me, as we explore a simple approach to getting the world back on track by honoring our truths, respecting the facts, broadening our reach, and loving the hell out of it—and of one another.

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Stories of time travel captivate me. Mostly because such fiction —when it’s well imagined and written—artfully blends **factual history** into **fanciful story**. It’s fun, and a good way to escape when the real world’s crowding too close. My first adventure into the genre was Madeleine L’Engle’s classic *A Wrinkle in Time*. (Thank you, Kelly, for reminding me of it.) In the 65-year-old book, young characters embark on a journey through time and space, from galaxy to galaxy, in search of their father. As the characters mature into adolescence, they wrestle with questions of spirituality and purpose. L’Engle weaves her story with her brilliant view of how science and art can work together. On a more adult level, there’s *The Time Traveler’s Wife*, Diana Gabaldon’s series *The Outlanders*, and so many others. A few years ago, I was drawn into my favorite example by our dear, departed friend, Sue Morey. She loved the *All Souls Trilogy*, by Deborah Harkness. Sue was right—it’s not to be missed if you’re at all curious about life in London during Elizabethan times, witches who don’t yet know they’re witches, and smart, wealthy, sexy vampires.

The popularity of these stories suggests that there may be people “out there” who are

believers. A few actually attest to having been there and done it. It's their truth that, given the appropriate level of "open-mindedness" and receptivity, our bodies **are** able to beam into another time and place. While I find it fascinating, it sort of stretches **my** "truth." But—as I look out at you this morning—I'll try to not be surprised if I see one of you evaporating into thin air before my eyes. Please check in with us when you return.

While **bodily shifting** in time and location is considered a bit woo-woo by many, the **purely cognitive version** of time travel is more credible (and more doable.) **This** is where I've been taking you, and I have some science to offer to explain why. One of the more remarkable and evolutionary elements of *experiencing time* is something psychologists and cognitive scientists call **mental time travel**. Shifting our thoughts back in time, we tap into our **episodic memory**. . . a term coined in the early 1970s by Canadian neuroscientist Endel Tulving. In contrast to **semantic memory**, where we store facts like dates, directions or where we parked the car, episodic memory is our **subjective archive**—autobiographical events like birthday parties, weddings, career achievements, mistakes and failures that we've experienced in the past, along with emotions and relationships we associate with them. These memories have a reputation for being **highly** subjective, of course—they are colored by the person doing the remembering. Just ask six bystanders how they experienced a recent bank robbery. Their semantic memories may be in synch, but typically, their personal recall of what drama they witnessed during the incident will be different.

Scientist Dan Falk writes in his book *In Search of Time: The History, Physics, and Philosophy of Time*, that episodic memory allows us "to peer back across time, using our imagination to revisit just about any event that we choose." Sometimes we have flashes of a specific memory or a fleeting sense of déjà vu, as we move through our day. Such "blasts from the past" are spontaneous openings into our episodic memory. Perhaps inviting our closer attention? Sometimes my dreams feel so authentic and spiritually true that I recognize them as past experiences. . . in this life, and in times **before**. I've had visits from friends and relatives—both two and four leggeds—who have passed, if only to let me know they're looking out for me. And a few months ago, of all people, the Persian Sufi poet Rumi—from the 1200s—showed up. This was after I'd been thumbing through a book of his poetry before bed. In my dream, I was living in an elaborate tent next-door to his. He often asked me to tea. . . or whatever. He was brilliant, charismatic, spiritual. . . and real. In my dream, we were friends, even though we disagreed about some things. When I awoke I tried to jot down what I learned from him. But my notes turned out to be the very pieces I had earmarked in the book the night before. But it was still quite energizing and enlightening to get to know Rumi. If you are able and willing to recall and track your dreams, there may be some clues that they're bringing you. If you already do, maybe pay closer attention to what they may be telling you about your past—or your future.

Tulving and Falk take this to the next level: **mental time travel is bi-directional. There is a profound link between remembering our past and imagining our future.** By telling stories around the fire—passing on experiences to future generations—ancient societies were more likely to **repeat** behavior that worked, because making the same mistake twice was often a matter of life or death. Perhaps the *evolutionary advantage* of **mental time travel** has more to do with the **future than the past**. Modern neuroscience appears to confirm that line of reasoning: As far as your brain is concerned, drawing on our lessons from the past is indeed related to the act of imagining the future. Falk puts it unambiguously: “Without it, there would be no planning, no building, no culture; without an imagined picture of the future, our civilization would not exist.”

How have you experienced this “vital survival function” of episodic memory? Please close your eyes for a minute. . . Do you remember learning how to drive. . . and who taught you? What did they look like? The worst, scariest mistake you made? If you don’t make that same mistake on the way home today, it’s because you just vividly recalled—re-visited-- making it then. Maybe you recall the first time you made love? (I bet you do now.) No need to get into how that’s worked out.

Remember that mental time travel is bi-directional. Just as we can vividly recall a certain experience, and *sustain our learning from it*, we can as vividly imagine our plans and hopes actually happening in the future. I know, this was pretty woo-woo stuff back in the ‘80s, when I was first introduced to it. One self-improvement guru I followed back then coached his clients that we could achieve anything if we visualized it powerfully enough. Olympic-sized swimming pool in the back yard? If we worked the magic, we’d somehow stumble across the cash—and the back yard to put it in—to make it happen.

The successes with this phenomenon that I can attest to are limited--like ensuring a parking place in front of the business I’m heading to in downtown Portland is waiting for me. And you know how avocados can be rock hard when you bring them home and are suddenly squishy and yucky two days later? Well, one morning last week, I had two hours to make some guacamole for a potluck luncheon that day and I had no avocados. On the way to Safeway, I envisioned myself standing in front of a perfectly arranged avocado display, carefully testing them and managing to find the number I needed. Amazingly, it turned out they were ALL at that perfect point of ripeness. And they were on sale.

Make what you will of THAT, but—on more profound, spiritual levels-- we know it’s not unusual for cancer patients to be encouraged to imagine their cancer as a monster they are vanquishing. And there’s seemingly an unending call for us to “picture world peace.” And we

also know that people who are carrying trauma from long-past experiences sometimes benefit from being gently guided into recalling that trauma and learning to manage their reactions to it better in the future.

There is a throughline from past to the future in our earthly experiences. And we stand as the linkage between them. How will we pass on what we know—and what we know we don't know. . . to the future for generations to come? We talk, we share. . . as a starting point. If you are a parent, please don't let your children or grandchildren mourn you without knowing you—you and your family stories. Don't leave them "Wanting Memories" like what Ysei Barnwell experienced. Pay it forward.

Also, if it's still possible, talk to your PARENTS or other older relatives and friends. So many of us say—after our parents have passed—hat we wish we'd learned more about them. It doesn't matter how old you are or how old **they** are. If you can still communicate with them, ask questions **now**. Don't wait for them to offer their stories. They may be waiting for you to ask. Then listen for their truths.

Sometimes the truths imbedded in your relationships with your elders who have passed without sharing their stories will come to you intuitively—or enough of the missing pieces will surface to help make the big picture. Trust that intuition. Write it down and pay it forward.

Hunkering around a campfire still works for these sessions. But we have a literal wealth of tools available to us now. **Genealogy** helps us bridge past stories with the present, and with the future. I've had a remarkable, no—spiritual—experience corralling the many missing puzzle pieces I've uncovered in my parents' lives. (I'll tell you more—way more than you bargained for—if you buy me coffee). The magical work **Ken Burns** has done, tapping our nation's episodic memory. Watching his programs with those you want to influence may spark some talk. Especially The Civil War and The Revolutionary War. Those particular series make it clear to me that as a nation, we are definitely at that tipping point of being able to sustain our democracy's survival. (ask: **Truth or Fact?**)

As the Reading that Kelly read reminds us, there is a **throughline**—a **holy thread** that runs from our past—*through us*-- and into our future. We are the stewards of that connection in this moment. If you're like me—with no children or grandchildren—figure out a way to tap into others their age. If you don't have that immediate access to the younger generation, look around. Try being a Lunch Buddy. There are opportunities with the city in Parks and Recreation. There's. . . volunteering as a teacher in our own RE program!

And don't assume that they—young people--don't have any truths to share. It's one of my truths that the kids among us today are truly old souls—maybe all kids are? They have at least as much to teach us as we do them. They seem to intuitively understand that they're an important part of this multi-generational connection.

Whenever—however—you might get their young souls oriented to the process, it might be interesting to ask them **what they remember**. Years ago, when I was visiting a friend's home for the first time, she was showing me around. I noticed some framed photos displayed on a table. One was of her 5-year-old granddaughter. It was snuggled against another frame holding a much older photo of my friend's grandmother. Mary commented that she'd always noticed a similarity between this youngest member of her family and her long-passed mother's mother. Then one day, when the little girl was visiting she peered intently at her 2<sup>nd</sup> great grandmother's photo, and quietly announced. "I know her." (Mic drop.)

We are all elders. We are all children. What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. William Faulkner wrote, but it took President Obama to bring our attention to it, "The past isn't dead. It isn't even past." And to that I add, "The future isn't still to come. It's here and now. I'm not concerned and do not need to know where I'll show up next, but I trust it'll be in a time and place where I'll learn what I need to learn—or unlearn.

And if I return here, I'll know it as a beloved place and I'll maybe find a few familiar faces. I imagine there is a holy space reserved for us into the future. As Rumi--my wonderful, ecstatic dream-partner—would say if he were here, "Out beyond ideas of wrong-doing and right-doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there."