

Being Seen by our Stories  
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Yale law professor and social critic Anthony Kronman, wrote of whether it “is possible to explore the meaning of life in a deliberate and organized way even after its religious foundations have been called into doubt.”<sup>1</sup>

Well, as Unitarian Universalists, that is what we do! And there is always so much left to explore. Take stories for instance. I have been reflecting on stories, the kind of stories we tell to people when we meet them, when we are in relationship with them for a while, when we are just getting to know them: about ourselves, about others. But every story is really a story about ourselves, isn't it? Even when we are talking about others, when we look back on it, what we were really revealing was ourselves, a jealousy or fear or excitement or anxiety or joy or love. We are really in many way, always sharing something about ourselves when we are talking.

Emily Esfahani Smith in her article “The Two Kinds of Stories We Tell About Ourselves”<sup>2</sup> writes that we can shape our stories “to live (into them) with more meaning and purpose.” Smith writes about the anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson who says that “[w]e are all storytellers — all engaged, in an “act of creation” of the “composition of our lives.”<sup>3</sup>

The composition of our lives. I reflected when I read this on what kinds of stories I had told the very day when I had written these words. What did I say about others? How often did I complain; say words about being unhappy in some way; what words did I utter that were pieced together in a ‘composition’ that made sense of the world by criticizing it or someone I loved or even was close to? down? Well, I have to say, more often that I was comfortable with!

Smith writes about a “Northwestern University psychologist Dan McAdams who is an expert on a concept he calls “narrative identity.” McAdams describes narrative identity as a story you create about yourself. He likens this to our own personal myth. Like myths, our narrative identities contain heroes and villains and everything in between and we use these to help us go forward in our lives or to keep us living out a story that maintains our reality as it is.

I am not suggesting that there are not real heroes and villains in the world. There are. There are real abuses that happen and this is not up to how we see them. But so much

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, Emily Esfahani. *The Power of Meaning: Finding Fulfillment in a World Obsessed with Happiness* (p. 7). Crown/Archetype. Kindle Edition.

<sup>2</sup> The two kinds of stories we tell about ourselves <https://ideas.ted.com/the-two-kinds-of-stories-we-tell-about-ourselves/>  
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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

really is up to what McAdams calls a “narrative choice” or on what we choose, when we have a choice, to focus on- which will determine how we experience and make sense of an event. Smith writes that “[p]eople who believe their lives are meaningful tend to tell stories defined by growth, communion and agency.”

McAdams goes on to write about people who have stories of real difficulty: growing up in poverty, alcoholism and with terminal illnesses, who tell stories that are redemptive and other people living in similar circumstances who tell stories that cripple them.

Smith and other psychologists suggest that when we make even small edits to our stories, real differences can be experienced that give us a sense that we have some authorship over our lives. When this happens, we are less likely to construe the world as out to get us, and others as bad or working against us. We can give others the benefit of the doubt though McAdams concedes that when we can tell these more redemptive stories it does not mean that our pasts have objectively improved.

It means that the way we view the world and therefore our stories of it and ourselves in it, have improved.<sup>4</sup> Turn out, this makes all the difference. Of course, authorship of our lives is what is so difficult to get ahold of for so many of us who grew up in chaos, either in our homes or in the world around us. And this world around us is not teaching us that this is a good time to start trusting that we have any control over anything.

Brene Brown, research professor at the University of Houston and writer of most recently the book, Braving the Wilderness writes about what happens when we can occupy our own lives with peace and integrity. According to Brown, when we can do this, we can risk then standing with others and standing alone; we can risk being together without needing to talk about others as our ticket into community: we can be in our own skin, comfortable with who we are and where we are and we can risk standing alone sometimes too when we need to, with courage and respect.

These are not easy points in my opinion. I know when I am home for Christmas with my mom, the lure to talk about relatives as a way to bring us closer and therefore have no need to talk about who we are, what has become of our own lives and relationship, our own fears and mortality and maybe even tendernesses can be avoided.

It’s like chewing bubble gum and blowing bubbles. In fact, I always feel like I’m bowling when I give into this with my hair in curlers like Laverne and Shirley, remember that show?

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<sup>4</sup> Smith, Emily Esfahani. *The Power of Meaning: Finding Fulfillment in a World Obsessed with Happiness* (p. 109). Crown/Archetype. Kindle Edition.

Do you do this too? Talk about others to avoid your own story, even though each word we gossip about another reveals us as if we were speaking our deepest secrets and fears? Braving the wilderness means that we do something else to make meaning. We enter our own stories with courage.

Brown writes about one of her friends, Jen Hatmaker. Jen is a writer, pastor, philanthropist, and community leader who spoke out in favor of LGBTQ rights and experienced a backlash from her conservative-to-moderate Christian community.<sup>5</sup>

Hatmaker writes: “I won’t sugarcoat this: Standing on the precipice of the wilderness is bone-chilling. Because belonging is so primal, so necessary, the threat of losing your tribe or going alone feels so terrifying as to keep most of us distanced from the wilderness our whole lives. Human approval is one of our most treasured idols, and the offering we must lay at its hungry feet is keeping others comfortable. I’m convinced that discomfort is the great deterrent of our generation.”

Protecting the status quo against our internal convictions is obviously a luxury of the privileged, because the underdogs and outliers and marginalized have no choice but to experience the daily wilderness.”

“But choosing the wily outpost over the security of the city gates takes a true act of courage...Speaking against power structures that keep some inside and others outside has a cost, and the currency most often drafted from my account of belonging is hard, but the authenticity out there is life.”<sup>6</sup>

This makes me think of what is happening now with the conversation on this island around the temporary protective status or TPS being revoked for our El Salvadoran friends and neighbors here.

This status is given to folks from countries who are affected by armed conflict or natural disaster. El Salvadorans have been here since an earthquake devastated their country in 2001. Our current administration says the threat is over, they can go home. Of course, El Salvador has the highest murder rate in the world, something we participated in creating with our contribution to the destabilization of that country.

In El Salvador, more than 75,000 lost their lives during the US supported 12 year civil war of a right wing totalitarian government against a Marxist alternative, which lasted from 1980 until the 1992 peace agreement.

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<sup>5</sup> Brown, Brené. *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone* (Kindle Locations 1799-1804). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

<sup>6</sup> Brown, Brené. *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone* (Kindle Locations 1808-1813). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

The United Nations Truth Commission found that more than 85 percent of the killings, kidnappings, and torture had been the work of government forces, which included paramilitaries, death squads, and army units trained by the United States.<sup>7</sup>

The breakdown of society caused by this war and the consequent loss of economic, social and political status was not regained. Gangs and social upheaval filled the vacuum. Sending people to this so called *home* now is often sending them to their deaths. They often leave their American born children here who are US citizens. There are estimated to be between 2,000 and 3,000 (I changed this from my spoken sermon after doing more research) El Salvadorans on this island and over 70,000 in Massachusetts, an estimated 200,000 in this country.<sup>8</sup>

I do not know of those approximate 1,000 on island, how many have TPS status, but there are many I have already spoken to that have TPS status and are afraid. Someone said to me, "Linda, what do I tell my young son?"

How we no responsibility? Are we not morally implicated?

The Pope recently wrote in his "Message of this Holiness Pope Francis on the 104<sup>th</sup> World Day of Migrants & Refugees" which is January 14, 2018: "I wish to reaffirm that "our shared response may be articulated by four verbs: *to welcome, to protect, to promote* and *to integrate*. Considering the current situation, *welcoming* means, above all, offering broader options for migrants and refugees to enter destination countries safely and legally. This calls for a concrete commitment to increase and simplify the process for granting humanitarian visas and for reunifying families. At the same time, I hope that a greater number of countries will adopt private and community sponsorship programmes, and open humanitarian corridors for particularly vulnerable refugees. Furthermore, special temporary visas should be granted to people fleeing conflicts in neighbouring countries. Collective and arbitrary expulsions of migrants and refugees are not suitable solutions, particularly where people are returned to countries which cannot guarantee respect for human dignity and fundamental rights."<sup>9</sup>

There was a big talk about this on facebook group called *Nantucket Year Round Community*. I watched it happen. It all flowed over me. Many were supportive of the island El Salvadorans here.

Others wrote that *those people* have been here a long time; they lost out because they did not apply for citizenship soon enough; they did not bother to learn English which was their problem; that if they were not criminals they would be fine and be able to receive citizenship.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.thenation.com/article/time-for-a-us-apology-to-el-salvador/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.wbur.org/news/2014/12/19/el-salvador-nantucket>

<sup>9</sup> [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco\\_20170815\\_world-migrants-day-2018.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20170815_world-migrants-day-2018.html)

Finally, someone called me out by name by mentioning the Immigration Resource Center and said I could be relied on as a resource. It was time for me to brave this wilderness.

I am afraid to speak on Nantucket social media, especially into heated conversations. I was being asked to know that I belonged here enough that I could risk standing alone. To that I could risk this was a kind of moment for me about deciding that I belong here and that I was not alone. I stand in this web of interconnectedness, with my Immigration Resource Center cohorts, with so many others who support immigrant rights here.

When I wrote into that media stream, I felt like I planted myself, like a small tree, on Main Street. Here is part of what I wrote:

“It is very difficult for South/Central/Latin Americans to become citizens in this country without a special status. The thousands of lives being affected by this revoking of TPS status whose children are citizens here, the breaking of families and destruction of lives is inhumane. It is all of our responsibilities to insist that the path to citizenship become more attainable and reasonable. We are one world and one people. Please stay tuned for an event with immigration lawyers that the Immigration Resource Center, open the first Monday of every month from 5:30-7:30 at the UU Church, in liaison with our partners will be co-hosting soon.”

When we are able to edit our own stories of the past so that we have more authorship in our lives, we find courage, no matter where we start, we receive not only the benefit of strength and bravery, but of belonging to ourselves, of living within our own lives, of occupying our own narratives with integrity so that we can access that integrity, remember that we are all interconnected when we need it most, like when we are confronting language of exclusion and privilege that frightens us.

The wilderness is not only wild and uncertain, it is also the place where everything lives in relationship to everything else. It is a place of ferocity and deep peace; a place of hope and simple nature; a place where there are consequences for acting out of rhyme with nature and room to be free; a place where we know that we are one and many, part of something so much bigger than we are alone.

Brene Brown closes her book Braving the Wilderness with these words, “Someone, somewhere, will say, “Don’t do it. You don’t have what it takes to survive the wilderness.” This is when you reach deep into your wild heart and remind yourself, “I am the wilderness.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Brown, Brené. *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone* (Kindle Locations 1949-1951). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

All I could see was an image of Laverne and Shirley busting out of the bowling alley, spitting out the bubble gum, unrolling those curlers from their hair and finding motorcycle helmets and riding into the sunset. Oh ya. May it be so.

Amen.