

March 26  
Rev. Linda Simmons  
Stories that Save Us

This sermon is called Stories that Save Us so I thought I should start with some words about what I think saving is all about.

I think being offered a place that tells us that there is nothing that can redeem us from our sins past or in the future but our own accountability and compassion, that there may or may not be a heaven or hell but the way we live our lives now matters more than the investigation of that terrain, that working for a just world is worthy of a life; that all people, including each of us, based not on our beliefs but on our humanity, has worth and dignity- is life saving. And that of course is a succinct description of Unitarian Universalism.

And this life saving story and has pulled me from many an abyss in my own life. One of them was during my cancer surgery last year when I had to decide who I was and where I was and if I was worthy of saving in some very real and true sense. Of course, I was never at risk of death, beyond the normal risks of surgery. It was a small, non-metastatic cancer and easily removed. But on a larger scale, we all have to decide over and over again in our lives if we are worthy of saving, don't we?

I remember when I returned from that month off after my cancer surgery, I gave a sermon called, *Sacred Journeys* and spoke these words to you:

*What if this flesh and bones is the map of something truly sacred? This cancer, these wrinkles, this grief, this false tooth, this broken and stitched bone, this belly that gave birth, these ankles veined from treading so much ground? What if as the Christians say, that God is incarnate could mean that the sacred is this flesh and bones, this map, this terrain, this day, these words, this journey, this life, your life, my life, our lives and that the sacredness of the journey does not lie in the past, present or future but in them all, all of which exist in this flesh, all of which is mapped on these bodies, through these voices, this longing and love and despair? What if we have already arrived and all we need to do is learn to read the map?*

It was Unitarian Universalism that allowed me to find that courage to read the map of my own life and occupy it in a way that made it worthy because there was no where else to look but right inside where I was, right inside of the moment, my flesh, my illness and the story being told through me.

And there is more. This faith says in the dark of the night, begin where you are, with who and what you are and the rest will follow. What courage it takes to live into this creedless faith!

This faith also reminded me that doing this alone is folly. We are a covenanted faith that understands that the context of all truths is made within and through each other.

This faith guided me through cancer. It saved me really by reminding me to listen to what was happening right where I was, to stay awake, to engage with those who were near me, to reach out and ask for help, to remember we are partial in so many ways, that we need the visions and love of others to be whole, that the only salvation we can know is the salvation found right here and now, in our eyes and hearts, in our stories and voices and visions.

Our faith does save lives. It has saved mine and I know many of you have a story of how it has saved yours too.

And now I want to make the story bigger, to throw a wider net and ask, where does this story meet the story of these times of social unrest and how can it hold us and carry us into a greater story of hope and resilience?

I am part of the Immigration Task Force, as are many of you. We are in our beginning stages and recently heard from Chief Pittman about the Nantucket Police Force's policies concerning immigration. We are lucky to have Chief Pittman here. He is a humane and community focused human being.

At our last meeting, we had 92 people. After the meeting, so many people came up to me to express one idea or another about what we should be doing to move forward. So much anxiety do these times breed. So much urgency and need to help. So much immediacy.

These are not easy times to feel that what we are doing is enough or ever can be in the face of the inequities or injustices happening all around us.

The work of Robin Wall Kimmerer in her book, Braiding Sweetgrass and the idea of mutual flourishing has taught me much about how to go on, about where to start, about what to hold as necessary and good while all else swirls around us. And this allows others things to come next.

Kimmerer uses a beautiful illustration of mutual flourishing in the example of the aster and the goldenrod. They grow side by side. The aster is royal purple, the goldenrod golden yellow. These two flowers populate field after field together and dazzle the eye.

Kimmerer writes that one of the reasons these two colors are so striking together is because they are complimentary colors; they are opposite on the color wheel, and such pigments put beside one another have an energetic reciprocity for our eyes. They leave a color afterimage so that we see them even after we turn away.

This of course does not matter to the asters or the goldenrod, except bees see these two colors in similar ways that we do. Their contrast in a meadow makes them bee magnets, and so they are pollinated more rapidly when they grow together than apart.<sup>1</sup>

They grow together because it is beautiful and beauty creates more beauty. It is science and spirit. It is mutual flourishing rather than mutual domination.

What paradigm can we build in which we each flourish while contributing to each other's flourishing?

How can we take what we need as individuals, fulfilling the scripts of our own storylines, while considering what those around us need too or while contributing to the thriving of others? How can our thriving, as a function of itself, support the thriving of others?

I think the key lies in redefining individuality as something partial, contingent, interdependent. Again, Kimmerer is useful to us, as is Unitarian Universalism and some studies about non violent resistance. Let's start with Kimmerer.

Kimmerer writes about the rules for an Honorable Harvest. She says they have never been written down before but she writes them down as she has intuited them growing up as a Native American and through her work as a biologist. In them can be discerned the rules for an Honorable Life too:

- Know the ways of the ones who take care of you, so that you may take care of them
- Introduce yourself. Be accountable.
- Ask permission before taking. Abide by the answer.
- Take only what you need.
- Share.
- Give thanks for what you have been given.
- Give a gift, in reciprocity for what you have taken.
- Sustain those who contribute to your sustenance.<sup>2</sup>

How much better the world would be if we abided by these rules.

I think of all our meetings together, of wanting what we want, of needing what we need, of seeing what we see as a way forward....and I wonder what if we read these rules for an Honorable Harvest first if we might be able to see and hear each other better and then come up with a way forward that included more of each of us?

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<sup>1</sup> Robin Wall Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teaching of Plants (Canada: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 39-47.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 183.

And here is where Unitarian Universalism is useful too. Because it says to us that all we have is our promise to one another and that is enough, our promise. We promise each other that we will keep listening and talking until we can discern what love is asking of us now, what the call of love is needing from us.

As Unitarian Universalists we decided a long, long time ago that when we let bishops and creeds and hierarchies go so we could be left to each other, bound by a covenant that reminded us to listen, to not always put our needs first, to step back, to consider, to temper passion with wisdom- then we would be able to hear the call of love and to learn to love each other.

You know my friends, I really think this is a miracle. It is all that we have. No heaven, no hell, no devil, no god. All that we have is this promise to show up and listen until we are changed by each other and can hear the call of love. And when love speaks, its voice is undeniable, don't you find? It is not highfalutin, it is not false, but sometimes it is scary and we do have to let go of precious things in us to hear it! It says, yes, put down that weapon, whether the weapon is made of words or metal, it says, yes, listen more, it says yes, include him and her and ze, it says yes, there is a way and if you take more time with each other and widen what each other means, you will find it.

The last important piece I want to bring in is the work of nonviolence. In the book by Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stefan called Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict they come to the conclusion after much research of many resistance movements, that nonviolent resistance is much more effective than violent resistance. In fact, from 1900-2006, nonviolent resistance campaigns were 50% more successful than violent counterparts.<sup>3</sup>

There were many reasons given but one of the primary reasons was there is a participation advantage, far more people are likely to participate in non violence campaigns than in violent campaigns because there are fewer barriers: moral, physical, commitment and informational, than in violence campaigns. Also, a variety of tasks are needed and there are different levels of risk so more people can participate which creates a higher level of resilience: new people come in all the time and are encouraged to participate and therefore there is more innovation and creativity. Also, because more sectors of society are involved, there is more potential for loyalty shifts to occur among various sectors.<sup>4</sup>

One of the best kind of concrete examples they give of how this plays out comes from an anecdote from Serbia, where a nonviolent movement removed Milosevic from power in October of 2000. At the last stages of that campaign, where hundreds

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<sup>3</sup> Erica Chenoweth & Maria J. Stephen Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 10.

of thousands of people were engaging in a demonstration in Belgrade, the police were ordered to shoot live ammunition into the crowd indiscriminately. And they just stood there in silence. They didn't retreat, they didn't join into the protest, but they didn't follow the order. When one of them was asked later why he refused to shoot, he said I was afraid my kids would be in the crowd.<sup>5</sup>

Non violence includes all kinds of acts like boycotts, sit-ins, protests, stay-aways and other civil acts of civil disobedience and non-cooperation. In fact, we just had a non violent victory in the House with the removal of a health care bill that would have pulled health care from 24 million people over 10 years.

The biggest risk to non violent movements come from within. Over time, they tend to insist on ideological uniformity and dissuade difference of opinion and perspective and this creates internal conflict and discourages participation and innovation.

Again, Robin Wall Kimmerer and Unitarian Universalism could help us here. If we were to remember that each of us has something to offer, that each of us contributes something to the harvest that is valuable, that without each of our participation one part of our nourishment would be cut off, as well as remembering that is only through listening to the whole, by letting the whole find its voice and settle into itself that the voice of love can then be discerned, then we would stay whole ourselves. When the voice of love can rise from among us all and lead us, there is no mistaking it.

People of religious institutions, and we are some of those though we are sometimes loath to claim the words religious or institution and both can be places of great strength and possibility if used well, are uniquely placed in this time to be leaders in non violent resistance.

We come, as Unitarian Universalists, from a long line of non-violent resisters who made a difference in abolition, suffrage, mental health, sanitation, women's rights, civil rights and racism, climate change, immigration, animal rights...the list goes on and on. We have in our blood the understanding of what it means to resist non violently and succeed.

We are being called to lead, to lead with mutuality, with love, with understanding of covenant, of self as a context of holiness that creates the capacity to see the holiness of all of life, armed with an understanding that the way we live into and tell our stories matters.

Difficult instructions in the best of times, never mind in anxious times. We need each other now, and our stories, and our best harvests, and our love more than ever now. We need the integrity of each of our lives, the hope and deep salvation that each of

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.npr.org/2014/08/21/342095367/why-civil-resistance-movements-work>

our stories offers another and the listening of the honorable writing and telling that love calls us to so that more of us can be part of writing this chapter together, in a language uniquely our own. We need our hands, out stretched to catch each other when we reach out from one moment of flying through the air yelling: How did I end up here anyway?

Whatever your flying, your risking, your airborne journey is about, we need these hands to guide us from safe place to safe place so that we might go on.

So what is love asking of us now? What is it asking of you? And you? And you? And how will you learn to tell that story and whose lives will flourish through its telling?

May we all learn to tend to our lives and our stories as Honorable Harvests and nourish those that come to the table of this time with the fruit of our lives.

Amen