

Co-authoring Our Shared Story

UU Church of Spokane

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Time for All Ages

The dancer

Once upon a time,
a young child realized
that she wanted to be a dancer.

It was winter,
and she was in the audience of a giant theater watching The Nutcracker.
Have any of you seen The Nutcracker?
Well, this child had never seen anything like it,
and she *loved* it.

The dancing and music was so beautiful
that it filled up her **eyes and ears,**

and **heart, and mind,**

and then it spilled into her **legs and arms,**
and she just couldn't help but

JUMP up from her seat

and twirl around in the aisle.

And she thought to herself,

“Maybe one day,
if I'm very very lucky,
I will be a dancer.”

The child grew bigger, and older,...
and took piano lessons.
She forgot she wanted to be a dancer.

Then she moved to a new school,

She danced danced danced!

And she enjoyed it.

And that was enough.

Then one day, a terrible scary thing happened.

And she woke up in a hospital bed.

And she couldn't move her legs, even when she tried.

And she couldn't talk, because there was a machine helping her breathe.

Her family was there,

and her friends were there,

and a nurse was there,

and the nurse sang,

“Every little thing
s’gonna be alright.”

And our friend, the one who wanted to be a dancer...

she moved her shoulders to the beat.

“Every little thing
s’gonna be alright.”

The nurse said, “Honey,

You are a *dancer*.”

And the dancer

nodded her head ever so slightly,

and smiled.

Even though it was very scary and terrible

that she was in the hospital

and her body was so changed

and she didn't know if it would change back,

She was a dancer.

Her body kept changing.

One day she wiggled her toes.

Another day she got out of the bed

and rolled herself around the room

in a wheelchair.

Another day she learned to breathe without the machine.

Another day she started talking again, very softly.

Many days went by.

The dancer learned to walk with help.

The dancer learned to walk without help.

The dancer learned to walk down the street, very slowly.

The dancer learned to walk down the street, very slowly, humming very softly

One day, she was walking slowly down the street, humming softly,
and a stranger asked her, very loudly

“What happened?”

And she said nothing, because she didn't know what to say.

Another day, she was walking down the street, humming,
and someone asked her, looking at her body,

“What happened?”

And she said, “It's a long story that I don't want to tell right now.”

Another day, she was walking down the street, humming,
and someone asked her, “What happened?” And she said,

“I became a dancer!”

The dancer's body kept changing,
and she grew into an even older young adult.

And one day, when she was walking somewhat slowly and humming a bit off-tune,
she suddenly realized

that if she was very very lucky,
someday she would be old,
and creaky, and wise, and still

a dancer.

Sermon

Half a lifetime ago, my high school dance teacher invited me to an improvisational dance class at the local university. I got there a bit early but people were already warming up, running around, leaping into the air only to land on each other in spectacular beautiful shapes. I was the youngest person in the room, trained in traditional dance forms (and keeping my hands and feet to myself) and I was *intimidated*. To make matters worse, there was not just one sign-up sheet at the door, but two. One had the heading, "Movers," and the other, "Shakers." Someone called from midair across the room, "Don't forget to sign in!" Apparently, I had to choose. Was I a Mover or a Shaker?

Now, I was raised a Unitarian Universalist, that is, *both* a Mover and a Shaker. But I have to keep relearning that I don't have to choose. The outside world endlessly demands that we label ourselves. When we're in a community that loves us just as we are, we remember how distracting the labels are. I think that was the joke these dancers were making, a joke that flew right over my head.

Dance is one of the many art forms to *get around* this compulsion to put ourselves (and each other) in boxes. It's a way to connect, beyond the same-old scripts of everyday life, an embodied form of storytelling. The most beautiful stories, whatever the medium, can take us out of our boxes, hold up a mirror, give us a sense of community. They *reveal*. When I tell you a story about the world, you get a glimpse from my eyes. When I tell you a story about myself, the "us" between us changes. When you allow a story into your heart and body, *you* are changed.

I recall a worship service at the First Unitarian Church of Oakland, California, in honor of Black History Month, with a guest performance by a group of teenage dancers called Destiny Arts. Although I was in the very back of the sanctuary, their rhythmic movement brought me to the very center of the moment. All of the sudden they stomped in unison and froze, and a girl yelled out, into the room and into my soul, "Black Lives Matter Because *I Matter*." I was instantly moved to tears. There at the back of the room, I had a revelation: I matter, too, *and* it's not about me. The message is: *Black Lives Matter*. That Sunday, my body received it. I return to that moment every time I need to remember how to be an ally.

Dance is an embodied form of storytelling; storytelling is a dance of community building. In the dance of this gathering, I am at the front of the room. I'm not going to stomp my foot, but I do hope to call you in as my allies. Because I bring a body with a disability. You may hear the air in my voice or notice the careful asymmetric way I walk. The difference I embody becomes a story whether I tell it myself, or not. This is one of the reasons I was eager to lead worship very early on in my time here, so that I could have the opportunity to anticipate questions you may have. Two years ago, I broke several vertebrae and a leg, and punctured my lung. My spinal cord was injured and now my nerves send mixed signals to muscles all over my body. That may be

permanent. In the hospital, a breathing tube injured my vocal cords. That may be permanent. I am no longer temporarily able-bodied.

These are true *parts* of my life story, but they are not the truth *any of us* is here to search for. I hope that you and I can talk about other things, and that you will leave it to me to bring up the topic of my physical trauma. This is one of the best ways you can support me as a disabled person, which is a small but important part of the bigger project of supporting me as a new UU minister.

In her TED talk, “The Danger of A Single Story, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says, “I’ve always felt that it is impossible to engage properly with a place or a person without engaging with all of the stories of that place and that person. The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar.”

After recounting some of her own trauma, Adichie says, “All of these stories make me who I am. But to insist on only these negative stories is to flatten my experience and to overlook the many other stories that formed me.” Although becoming disabled has changed me, it is not *all* I am. People who are temporarily able-bodied, as I once was, have a difficult time imagining how life can be full without all their physical abilities, but if we’re lucky, we *all* outlive temporary able-bodiedness. If we’re lucky, we see many of our stories about ourselves, and the world, fall away. New stories arrive, old ones (we’ve never put into words before) emerge.

The changes to my body have had a profound impact on how I live my life and how I understand the world. Unable to speak for some time, I learned anew how to listen. I renewed my relationship with that still small voice within me, and between me and the world. In Hebrew, it’s called *Kol D’mama Daka*. I used to think that a free and responsible search for truth and meaning was always hard work. But I learned that sometimes, the meaning of the story reveals itself in the quiet breaths between words. This is true in personal life, but also in community life, in the places where our stories meet, in the art of blending our stories. *Listening* to the still small voice inside ourselves is an essential practice for *telling* a new story together.

I am very grateful to be in this story-rich community, one which reaches for common humanity even as it celebrates difference. A community full of movers and shakers, and people who identify as both, or neither. I don’t think Adichie would counsel me to try to understand all the stories you bring and create here, any more than I can expect you to fully understand me at the end of our church year together. But there’s a tender quality of listening and sharing that we can practice together, a respect for *Kol D’mama Daka* that I’ve seen every day this week in the church office. Even as we are fierce in rewriting justice into our world, we can be gentle in heart, soul, and mind with each other.

Take a quiet moment now, if you will, and check in with that gentle heart, gentle soul, gentle mind.

[singing] Gentle heart, gentle soul, gentle mind mind.

As you're moved, repeat after me.

Gentle heart, gentle soul, gentle mind mind.
Life is change, love remains, all the time time.

Thank you. We'll come back to this song later.

It feels auspicious to be able to speak for the first time in this community on this particular day, the Eve of Rosh Hashanah, the start of the Jewish New Year. Rosh Hashanah commemorates G!d's creation of the earth and ushers in 10 "Days of Awe," also called "Days of Repentance." The High Holy Days always come near the beginning of the school year, and in recent years I've enjoyed the opportunity to learn a little bit more about the tradition as I clean my slate. As an outsider, the combination of awe and repentance and creation didn't immediately make sense to me. And as a UU, repentance makes me rather uncomfortable. And yet... I think we UUs do actually live at this intersection. We are awed by the beauty and intricacy of a world we didn't create ourselves: the forces flowing through other people's hands and bodies to create our institutions and systems, and those forces bigger than human will, from Nature, that hold and sustain us. We care deeply for creation (even if we don't call it that), and we're aware that individually and collectively we do not always care enough. As UUs, we return again and again to love and to action. We commit and recommit to a story of humanity that bends toward justice, and bring our bodies and minds to the collaborative process of making it real.

Another name for Rosh Hashanah is the "Day of the Shofar." The shofar, or shofar gadol, the Great Shofar, is a hollowed out animal horn (traditionally a ram's horn). It is blown every morning for the month leading up to Rosh Hashanah (except the Sabbath) and many times throughout the day itself. The shofar blasts on Rosh Hashanah come in a pattern, what Boston Rabbi Barbara Penzner calls a "shofar sandwich, broken notes lovingly placed between sustained notes." She considers it a metaphor: "we were whole, we became broken, and we will be whole once again." The long notes connect us to awe, waking us up. The broken notes in the middle call up sorrow and grief, the difficulty of being alive. Rabbis have historically connected to these short sounds to a story about a mother wailing after losing her son in battle. Strikingly, the man whose mother grieves is none other than a brutal general of an ancient enemy of Israel. In Rabbi Penzner's words to her congregation last year,

"In that cry, the rabbis are telling us, we... must be shaken. We must let go of the walls that divide us and pay attention to human suffering. And not only the suffering of those on our own side... [The shofar] breaks into our consciousness to face the contradictions in our own lives... But [the] ritual does not end there. Having our deepest truths shattered, we return, whole once again, but different."

“We return, whole once again, but different.”
How like a good story. How like a good life.

During my year with you, we will have times of awe. You will hear something from me or Todd or a lay leader in the pulpit that you've never considered before. I will hear something from you in a meeting or during coffee hour that reveals a depth of beauty I could not have expected. Together we will be rocked awake by stunning music here in the sanctuary. We will *also* have times of being shaken. Some of what I've learned about ministry in seminary is not going to hold up in practice! And life is going to happen to each and all of us; the stories we've been leaning on will seem to unravel. I hope that we can allow these blasts of the shofar into our hearts, allow them to change us. Allow them to change us individually, and to change our understanding of what and who “us” is.

May we stay present to this transformation during our year of learning together, as I grow into a minister and you grow into a teaching congregation for ministers. Let us invite each other in and let ourselves be changed.

As a chance to practice the art of sharing and listening, harmonizing our stories into a single shared story, I want to bring back the song we sang earlier. Deborah and Susan are going to help out. Please rise in body or spirit and repeat after me:

Gentle heart, gentle soul, gentle mind mind.
Life is change, love remains, all the time time.

Now let's do that all together three times, as it's written.

Beautiful. Now we'll do it as a round. Let's draw an invisible line. Everybody on this side will be Movers, and y'all can be Shakers. Let's have the Movers start with me and Susan. Shakers, please wait and start when Deborah cues you. Once we get it going, everybody, keep singing!

References

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https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story, July 2009.
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<http://www.templehbt.org/blog/2017/9/24/amv9rszgx3a54n6kl2cg556ewspow9>, September 24, 2017.
- Jen Myzel, “Gentle Heart.”
<https://jenmyzel.net/gentle-heart>

Readings

- Meditation: *The Social Justice Warrior's Guide to the High Holy Days*, by Dane Kuttler, p. 38
- Reading: What Makes a Story (excerpt), by Ursula K. Le Guin, 2007
 - <http://www.ursulakleguin.com/WhatMakesAStory.html>
- Benediction: *The Social Justice Warrior's Guide to the High Holy Days*, by Dane Kuttler, p. 11