



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Reflections on Moral Coherency”

© by Kate Blane and Dan Everett

Two Reflections delivered on June 22, 2014

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts

For I do not do the good that I want to do, but I practice the evil that I do not want to do. Paul

Everything's got a story in it. Change the story, change the world. Terry Pratchett

If at first you don't succeed, redefine success. Anonymous

Reflections

Dan: Good morning! Once again, Kate and I are delighted to provide summer filler for UUFA. We always have a fun time working up our yearly sermon together, and we like to present it

Kate & Dan: IN STEREO!

Dan: What is “moral coherency,” anyway? We started with an assumption that moral coherency means changing our actions to conform to our moral values.

But it turns out that we often obtain moral coherency the other way around: redefining our vision of how the world works, so that what we want to do is actually the morally correct thing to do.

The more we looked into how we decide on the right thing to do, the more we realized the central importance of the stories we tell about the world.

We like to think of ourselves as rational beings, making our decisions after carefully weighing the evidence. And we frequently can't understand how another person could be so stupid as to look at the same situation and not only choose a different action, but actually believe that it's the moral thing to do! It typically turns out that that person's story is more compelling to them than our story.

Kate: The mythologist Joseph Campbell has a lot to tell us about the power of stories. To Campbell, a myth is an especially compelling story, so powerful that it resonates and replicates over generations. Campbell does not use the term “myth” to mean a story that is not factual. To him, the factual basis of a myth is less important than the power of the story to move us. The elements that make a story so powerful include:

- an Explanation, that tells how the world works in a way that expands our knowledge
- a Meaning, which gives us a sense of our identity and place in the world;
- and a Ritual, which provides us with a way to live the story out in our own lives.

Campbell's best known story is the Hero's Journey. The hero of this story is the seemingly helpless outsider who learns that she has a destiny far greater than she imagined. She accepts a call from a mentor, takes a dangerous journey, and returns with a gift to make the world a better place.

Campbell said that we listen to these stories of unlikely heroes rising to their own power because it made listeners believe they could be heroes in their own lives.

Dan: Here's the version of the Hero's Story that I learned growing up in the fifties. There wasn't any wise elder who told this story around the campfire; it was something I unconsciously assembled from watching the adults around me and from all the books I read:

The hero of the story follows the rules, pays attention in school, becomes a good citizen, and punctiliously does his job every day. He earns the love of his family and the respect of his community and lives happily ever after. Or as Pink Floyd would put it, "All in all, you're just another brick in the wall."

Well yeah, sounds pretty boring when you put it that way.

Kate: How about the counter-story of the sixties? The hero is now a James Dean or Jack Kerouac character -- a rebel against the conformity of the fifties.

And things have loosened up enough so the hero can now be a woman -- a Janis Joplin or Grace Slick rock and roll rebel.

I see the rebel story as a version of the Hero's Journey. The hero is an outsider -- she doesn't fit into the boring conformist culture. She has to metaphorically leave the village in search of the secret wisdom that is actually hidden in plain sight:

The Bohemian Code: Truth, Beauty, Freedom, and most of all Love--which she brings back to the village, gifting the village with color and joy in their lives. Yes, I loved that story and still do. But what happens when we grow up? I mean, job, kids, and all that.

Dan: I think the first challenge is to resist the consumer story that is constantly being drummed into us by the media. The Hero is the shopper who buys all the really cool stuff--

"He who dies with the most toys wins," huh?

Pretty lame, isn't it? Remember right after 9-11, when the nation was reeling and we all wanted to know what we could do to help? During World War II, Americans who did not go off to fight planted Victory Gardens; women became Rosy the Riveter; the whole country pitched in. After 9-11, the President told us all to go out shopping, so the economy would keep ticking along.

Kate: But shake ourselves loose from the consumer story, and there is a much deeper citizen story. As citizens we have the potential to be heroes in a much deeper sense.

Have you seen the short film “Story of Stuff” by Annie Leonard? This film is a brilliant critique of the consumer story. The Story of Stuff tells us we must do the hard work of creating solutions ourselves. Annie Leonard argues that changing the world didn’t mean changing the way we shopped but changing ourselves. The most important social shift of our day is people reawakening to their identity as citizens and leaving behind the outdated consumer story.

So now we’ve got these two alternative stories that define our overall place in the world: the consumer story and the citizen story. Let’s look at some specific ethical decisions we make as individuals, and the stories that might inform us in those decisions.

Dan: You find yourself in the produce section of the grocery store, choosing between organic green peppers for \$2 a pound versus \$1 a pound for conventional.

We’ve all been in this situation, with the little angel over one shoulder and the little devil over the other. And the little angel says, “You realize, Kate, that green peppers are one of the most important foods to buy organic. The pesticides used on peppers are really damaging to the earth. Organic food is healthier for us and for the soil.”

But the little devil says, “It costs a dollar more! Think of the things you could do with that dollar.” So we grab the conventional pepper and slink off to the checkout stand

Kate: But then, a few weeks go by, and maybe we notice that some of our friends are going the extra mile to be conscientious about buying their food. You realize that food commercials are subtly feeding us a vision of bucolic family farms that doesn’t really match the way supermarket food is produced. And you find yourself resonating with your foodie friends, wanting to be on their team. So the next time you are in the produce department, the little angel says, “We are standing up for our values.” This time, you happily march up to the checkout with that organic green pepper in hand. Or perhaps you shopped at a farmers’ market instead of the corporate grocery store. This time, the little angel didn’t just give you the facts; she told a more compelling story that we are standing for up for our values and that is more important than the dollar saved.

Dan: In this case we might have changed the food story by ourselves, but our foodie friends made the change a lot easier.

Yes, it’s partly because more people telling the same story normalizes that story. But it’s also because our friends acted out their story through their own food choices. Actions can tell their own stories! As Thich Naht Hahn says, “If I clap my hands, the effect is everywhere in the faraway galaxies.”

Here’s another example of moral coherency. How about that good health resolution you made? You were going to eat better, go to the gym, or whatever, but you are finding it hard to follow

through. You know you ought to do it! You know bad things might happen if I don't follow through, but somehow that isn't motivating enough.

You need a more compelling story, a story where you are the hero! For folks in our generation, it's about redefining the story of aging. In our parent's generation, the assumption was that by retirement age a person was pretty much used up.

That made sense back when people worked in the factories and on the family farm.

So even in their forties, our parents' generation took it for granted that they were slowing down and losing vigor.

Kate: But now "sixty is the new forty," as the saying goes. Our new story of aging goes like this: we are staying in shape and enjoying energetic, fun lives and living our new vision of civic engagement. So we can be the heroes of the new aging story.

Dan: You expect me to believe that?

Kate: Sure! We can tell our own stories and define our lives any way we want. We can choose stories that serve us by enhancing our lives.

Let's get back to that citizenship story. How do we know what to do, to be a citizen hero? Marshall Ganz created a method for strategic storytelling he calls "public narrative," a way of connecting one's personal story to a larger narrative framework.

There are three parts to Ganz's public narrative. First, the Story of Self – What do you care about and why? How have you responded to challenges? Then, the Story of Us: What are our common experiences and values? And finally, the Story of Now: What are we called to do, right now? How can we take action together?

Dan: And the Story of Us is where social justice comes in, isn't it? When I was a kid, the Story of Us said that things were pretty fair and good in our society. Seeing slums for the first time rocked my world. My story was that the U.S. provided a high standard of living and that was for every American. Slums were for 3rd world countries. But what really rocked my world was the atrocities of the Vietnam War. This happened during my college years. At the time, it seemed immediately obvious that whatever train of logic had led our leaders to this place could not be correct. Now, I might say that I had grown up on a story of my country as a noble hero on the world stage, and I just couldn't buy that story anymore. At any rate, I experienced a profound loss of faith at that moment,

Kate: There's a counter-story of America as the Evil Empire, but that is simplistic also. Forty years later, we are still trying to understand what is really going on with our country. Indeed, we have not found any single story of America that resonates with us -- the tapestry of our society is just too vast. But we can tell some more specific stories:

How about the ‘wars and rumors of war’ in the Middle East and elsewhere? The crisis in Ukraine and the Islamic militants who have taken over a chunk of Syria and Iraq? What’s the story there?

One story sees this as a challenge to American leadership. The world is full of people who want to do us harm, both wild-eyed Islamic jihadis and cruel dictators like Saddam Hussein, Assad in Syria, and now Putin in Russia. Trying to deal with these bad actors with sweetness and light is a waste of time -- hard-nosed, bare knuckled action is what we need. Unfortunately President Obama has a manhood problem. He’s too wimpy to provide the bold leadership we need.

Dan: Here’s a different story. Our leaders see the world as a Grand Chessboard. The goal of the game is long-term commercial advantage, especially control of the world’s remaining hydrocarbon resources. We support regime change in places like Iraq, Syria, and Ukraine not because we care about human rights, but because those rulers are in our way. Americans are not the only outside actors who intervene in these local conflicts. But our leaders are content to exploit these conflicts when it weakens our perceived adversaries. Unfortunately, the result of this meddling is not democracy but chaos and civil war. Where national governments have been destroyed, warlords and terrorist groups flourish. The losers in the Great Game are the people who live on the chessboard.

Kate: These are quite different versions of the Story of Us. How do they affect the Story of Now: what actions do we need to take?

That’s a hard one, because ordinary citizens like us feel like spectators when it comes to decisions of war and peace. The worldwide protests that preceded the Iraq war of 2003 were the largest in history, but they did not stop the war from happening.

I admit I feel discouraged too, but we keep trying to act in the civic space. That’s the citizenship story: having been given the gift of representative government, we feel an obligation to get in there and try to speak out for what we believe.

Let’s move to the domestic scene, a little closer to home. What about poverty and rising inequality in our own country?

Dan: Well, the story here is pretty simple. Some folks get off their butts and make something of themselves, and then there are the lazy good-for-nothings who would rather sit back and collect welfare. Fortunately, society is finally waking up to the cost of supporting these parasites. In fact, it’s morally better for these welfare types to take their crutches away and give them an incentive to work. And if we want to provide more opportunity for working people, we should start by removing the oppressive taxes and regulations put on businesses, which are the wealth and job creators of our society.

Kate: Here’s an alternative story. All of us work together to create wealth and jobs in this society, not just business owners. Back in the fifties and sixties most Americans shared in the rising prosperity of the time. Nowadays the top few percent have captured the lion’s share of America’s

increasing wealth. These greedheads are locking in their advantage by privatizing social goods our generation took for granted, such as by passing more of the cost of public education to the students.

Dan: Public education: that's a story of its own! I've heard that our public schools are failing the students because of lazy unionized teachers. That's the story behind the big push to standardized tests and charter schools.

Kate: There's a counter story put forward by advocacy groups such as Education Uprising: the great majority of public schools are succeeding, but are being hampered by a lack of resources, Our public schools are expected not just to teach the students but to help them overcome the burdens of poverty. The push for constant testing, even of kindergarteners, drives out the creativity that is the soul of teaching and the spark of learning.

Perhaps those of us who believe in public education ought to be telling that second story a lot louder. As a lifetime college teacher, I believe that K-12 teachers are some of the great unsung heroes of our society.

Now that we're warmed up, let's move on to stories about humans and the environment. We can get a bit touchy about these stories, because instead of being heroes, people can end up as the villains.

Western environmental narratives often go something like this: Too many people are using too many resources and producing too much carbon. Unless we take drastic action right now, we're headed for catastrophe. There's only one thing that gives this story urgency: fear. But fear rarely leads to action – and often leads to apathy and inertia.

Then there's the climate justice narrative. Not only are humans abusing the planet, but relatively rich people like us are particularly at fault. Not only do we gobble up an unfair portion of the world's resources, but we then turn around and dump our pollution where poor people live; for example, when we send our toxic electronic waste to be recycled in India or China.

When we resonate with these stories not only do we feel guilty, but there's no obvious Story of Now telling us what to do, except stop enjoying ourselves so much. Aren't there any more uplifting environmental stories, with heroes and a positive Story of Now?

Well, how about the emerging Bright Green movement? Instead of focusing on ecological limits, Bright Green environmentalists look towards new technology and improved design, with which they hope to solve environmental problems within the capitalist economic model. Bright Greens are enthusiastic about renewable energy, electric cars, dense urban design, and closed-loop material cycle.

Bill McDonough is one of the Bright Green heroes. McDonough helped design a carpet factory in which the effluent from the plant was cleaner than the water coming into the plant. He has

promoted the Cradle to Cradle concept, in which products are designed to be fully recycled into equivalent products, leading to a zero waste society.

The Tesla Motor Company is another Bright Green hero. Tesla has pushed the limits of electric car design, not only making highly rated cars but provoking other makers to enter the electric car field. Their Gigafactory project aims to reduce the cost of batteries by at least 30%. And Tesla has announced that they will allow other companies to use their technology, as a way of promoting electric car use.

That is definitely a more engaging story! How can we be heroes in the ecological story? Should we all go out and buy a Tesla?

Yes, I have heard the Tesla is a really good car, if you have about \$70,000 to spend. But there are many points of intervention available to us. In the civic space, we can join the Beyond Coal campaign to shut down coal fired power plants or work against new landfills and incinerators. By making dirty technologies more of a hassle for the companies involved, we will encourage them to go ahead and migrate to the new clean technologies.

We can also support the groups that are trying to restore democracy by getting money out of politics.

In the personal consumption space, I have been advocating that those of us who aren't using solar panels to generate our power should consider buying clean energy credits or carbon offsets in the voluntary market. For a couple hundred dollars, you can theoretically offset your family's carbon emissions and become carbon neutral.

How do you know the accounting behind these carbon offsets is not faked? This sounds like medieval indulgences to me. We pay this money that allows us to not feel guilty while we continue polluting.

That's one story. Here is another story: Global warming is the existential challenge of my generation, just as the fight against fascism was the challenge of my father's generation. This challenge is going to require an unprecedented level of international cooperation, and the willingness of citizens to make decisions based on the word of scientists, decisions whose impact will not be felt for generations.

The fight against fascism required the special abilities of young men, who could summon up incredible physical bravery while shouldering 80-pound field packs. We Baby Boomers couldn't manage that feat! But we do have the experience and maturity to organize campaigns, testify in utility rate cases, compose county ordinances, and the various tasks in the long battle against global warming. And as we retire from our jobs, we'll have the time and hopefully the good health and energy to make a difference. They call our parents' generation the Greatest Generation, but the great challenge of the Baby Boomer generation is just beginning. Now is our chance to step up and do something that will make a difference to many generations to come.

We have saved one final pair of really big stories for you. One story tells us that humans are inherently sinful and that this material world is shallow and pointless. Only by turning away from the material world can we find happiness and fulfillment.

The other story that comes to us from science, particularly evolution: the story of human progress. A particularly compelling version is told by Jeremy Rifkin in his book Empathic Civilization. In this story, the progress of material civilization has freed millions of people from the struggle for survival and allowed us to experience more empathy and compassion. As a result evils such as slavery, oppression of women, cruelty to animals, and homophobia are gradually disappearing from the world.

At the same time, the very civilization that has liberated us also threatens to devastate our planet. Ironically, in order to fend off global warming we, as a global community, need the very same ability to empathize and cooperate that civilization is liberating in us. Rifkin describes this situation by saying that our world is in a race between empathy and chaos. Which will win?

We'd like to finish up -- About time too! --with a few reflections on life and stories in general.

First, we can learn about ourselves by articulating the stories that are driving our decisions.

Second, we can recognize the stories that aren't working for us, and change them.

If at first you don't succeed, redefine success! Find stories that stroke your positive qualities, stories that evoke your better consciousness.

Next, we can remember that other people have stories too. This might help us be a little less self-righteous about our own stories. When we run up against people's religious dogmas, we can remember that these are stories that help them understand their own lives.

And finally -- when we want to change the world, change the story!

George Lakeoff – Don't think of an elephant. Hierarchical model vs partnership model

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Which Self Will Win (Making the Choice to Live and Age Consciously

Many of you are familiar with the oft-told teaching story, attributed to the Cherokee people, where the young person asks the wise elder, "Which wolf will win?" I'd like to offer you a revised version of this story as it relates to conscious eldering.

A passionate woman in her early sixties, feeling she was finally emerging from a difficult passage that led her out of her mid-life adulthood into her next life chapter, approached a wise, white-haired elder widely recognized in the community as an exemplar of wisdom. The young emerging elder said to the wise elder, "I have within me a beautiful vision, or at least parts of a vision, of

becoming like you. I have an inspiring sense of how I can use my best qualities, skills and gifts to serve our community and be personally fulfilled as I age. I'm having some wonderful experiences of spiritual connection. My creativity seems to be coming to life again. I'm feeling more peace, joy, and optimism than I have in a long time.

However, I'm also very aware of a whole other side to me. I often feel fear. Sometimes it is fear that I'm just deluding myself about conscious elderhood, and that growing old is really just a drag. Sometimes it's fear that no matter what visions I have, there's no way I can achieve them in the real world I live in. Sometimes, it's just a free-floating fear of the world and my life and the future. I'm also aware that I have so many habits that I can't seem to change that seem to numb me out. My passion and optimism seem to fade so easily, and I don't know why. My heart feels open one day and closed the next. It seems there are two selves within me, at war with each other. How can I resolve this painful conflict? The elder looked into her eyes with understanding and compassion and said, "The self in you that will win is the one you feed."

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. There are at least TWO ways to relate to anything – a large minded way (producing less suffering and more creative possibilities for all) and a small minded way (increasing suffering and decreasing creativity for all). Reflect on an example of each way of thinking that you currently have in your own life. How would you change the small minded thought (or story) to large minded?

2. There are at least FOUR Beginnings (relates to being the hero in your own story): 1. We are partial, we seek to be whole; 2. We are asleep, we seek to be awake; 3. We are enslaved, we seek to be free; 4. We are reactive, we seek to be response-able, i.e., able to choose our responses. Take one or more of these Four Beginnings and think how you are currently manifesting it in your life or how you would like to.