

Does the Story Have an Ending?

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Advent Candle Lighting

We are entering a time of year where the earth grows colder, the animals begin to hibernate, and the days become continually shorter. This morning marks the beginning of the Season of Advent. In the Christian tradition, Advent is the beginning of the church year, recognizing the transforming power of God in the world and looking forward toward the birth of Jesus and the celebration of spiritual light. And Christianity is not alone in celebrating light at this time of year: Hanukkah, Solstice, and Kwanzaa all involve candles, fire, and lights as part of their celebrations.

Each week until Christmas, we light a new candle on the Advent wreath, a circle of evergreens, along with each of the preceding candles. The flame of each new candle reminds us that something is happening now, but something more is still to come. The light of Advent grows brighter and brighter guiding us toward personal peace, shared joy, and more love.

This morning we light the first candle. We light this candle as a symbol of hope and expectation. May we dare to open the shadowy places in our lives and memories to the healing light of community. With the creative power of hope, we express our longing for peace and prepare our hearts to be transformed.

Prayer [[Jan Richardson, Night Visions](#)]

God of our hopes and dreams:

When I scan other skies
For signs of hope,
And when I walk other paths
With a longing for home,
God of the exile,
Lead me back
Through my own door.

Tell me
My forgotten stories,
Feed me

The words I have given away,
And draw my gaze
From the far horizon
That I may see the lights
In my own sky.

We see the signs
But cannot always
Divine their meanings.
You call us to move forward
Not always knowing
Whether what we grasp
In our hands
Will prove to be
A seed of hope
Or a thorn in our flesh.
Train our fingers,
That what brings life
We may with persistence hold,
And that which wastes
Our souls
We may with grace release.

In the name of all we call holy, Amen.

Sermon

Those of you who are friends of mine on Facebook may have seen my post on Thanksgiving day. I said this: "I can't begin to describe my gratitude this season. After coming through serious surgery last March that could have gone wrong in many ways, I've regained a level of physical health I never would have thought possible. I'm doing satisfying work with lovely people, and enjoying the multitude of blessings being close to friends who are family. My cup truly runneth over!" Clearly, saying such things out loud to thousands of people on Facebook was a way of tempting fate. The very next evening I tripped and sprained my foot.

Laying in bed after this accident I started coming up with dozens of catastrophic possibilities. What if my foot is broken and I have to stay here in Boston for several weeks? What if I have injured my back and have to have yet another back surgery? What if, what if. Luckily everything is fine, except for me having to gimp around for the next few weeks. But I've been thinking about why the story I told myself about the future was so full of dire outcomes. I think one of the hardest things about being sick or injured is feeling like how I feel now is how I will always feel, if not worse. Sometime, of course, in the case of fatal illnesses, that is the case. But much of the time, for many of us, we do recover. It's what the human body does: it strives continuously for health.

But somehow our brains tell us a different story. This is not just true of our stories about ourselves as individuals. We do this collectively, as a culture. As a case in point, let's have a little pop quiz: In all low-income countries across the world today, how many girls finish primary school: 20%? 40%? 60%? The answer is 60%. Let's try another one: In the last 20 years, the proportion of the world population living in extreme poverty has almost doubled? Remained more or less the same? Almost halved? The answer is c. I could go on.

I get all these statistics from a book called [Factfulness](#): ten reasons we're wrong about the world — and why things are better than you think, by Hans Rosling. In it he gives example after example of how life on this planet is actually far better, for just about everyone, than it was 20 years ago, and also tells the story of how many of us refuse to believe that's the case. I found myself doing it: "That can't be right," I kept muttering to myself as I was reading. Rosling goes around the world asking people these questions. And on average, his audiences only get about 5% of the questions right. He actually tested monkeys on this, thinking they will just randomly answer the questions. And monkeys were right 30% more of the time than us humans. And the more educated we are, the more we get it wrong.

What is going on here? Why do we persistently want to think the world is going to hell in a hand basket, as my mother used to say. Part of it is simply how our brains work. Usually the brain wants to divide things into two categories: good or bad. And the slightest indication of bad makes us choose that almost every time. Part of it is because the levels of stress and anxiety seem to be going up higher and higher, even while humankind may be getting better, in the largest sense. And bad things do continue to happen. The idea that life is always getting better is what can lead us into a willful blindness of the ways in which we might still be contributing to suffering. For example, looking at racial justice through the lens of "but haven't things gotten better for black people?" ends up allowing those of us who are white to avoid naming the deep systemic oppression that continues to be the boot on the back of black people.

But I'm still interested in how we willfully refuse to believe those things that have objectively improved. I think its something even deeper: data and facts actually don't make much of a difference in how we see things. Even for those of us who are fact-saturated, Rosling shows that we really don't pay attention to the facts that don't coincide with the larger story we are telling ourselves. Here's my theory of why: Because story is what matters more to us, to all of us, than facts do.

I talked about this in my very first sermon here. Story is what rules us. The dramatist [Lisa Cron](#) said, "It turns out, the only way to get people to really understand you has very little to do with objectively outlining the facts and making detailed analytic arguments. The only way to convince anyone of anything is hard wired into the architecture of the brain. And there's no overriding it. It's story." Story is hard wired into us because it is what helps us make sense of the past, contextualize the present, and find hope in the future.

The great mythic stories do this for us. I think about one of my favorite stories, [The Lord of the Rings](#): There's a scene at the end of the Two Towers when Frodo, the hobbit chosen to carry the ring through a tortuous journey, is bemoaning the fate that cursed him with this burden, and doubting whether he has the strength or depth of goodness to continue. His loyal companion Sam tries to put it into larger terms for Frodo:

"Still I wonder if we shall ever be put into songs or tales. We're in one, of course; but I mean put into words, you know, ... read out of a great big book ... years and years afterward.

Frodo: "You and I are still stuck in the worst places of the story, and its all too likely that some will say at this point: shut the book now, we don't want to read anymore."

Sam: "Maybe, but I wouldn't be one to say that. Things done and over and made into part of the great tale are different [than they are when we are living them.]"

Isn't there a part of us, like Sam, that longs for our lives to take the on the significance of a great heroic tale. And yet how many of us feel like Frodo, at times, that the ending isn't clear, and we doubt our ability to go on and are tempted to say, just shut the book and stop the tale.

This is the reason many seek out religious community: to understand themselves in the context of some larger story in which the purpose is clear and a good ending is possible. Christianity revolves around the story of Jesus. The teachings of Jesus are important, absolutely, but if there weren't the story of Jesus to help make those values come to life, would there be millions of people following him? Christians find themselves in this story. Returning over and over again to the comfort and promise that lies there. We heard those themes in the wonderful music shared with us this morning. The story of Jesus has an ending, an ending that at first looks like the worst possible ending, but ultimately it shows where faith can lead you. For Jews, they have the central story of God saving their people: told through different people at different times, but still the same story of salvation.

I had a conversation once with one of my theology professors. He said to me that people need to know the story and know what is the beginning, the middle, and the end. I honor that in Christianity and Judaism, and I even envy it at times. When my 107 year old grandmother was dying, she had a vivid picture of Jesus in her head and she knew she was going to join him. Who am I to take that away from her? I just heard yesterday that as George Bush lay dying he asked: "where are we going?" And someone replied, "to heaven" and he smiled and closed his eyes for one last time. For someone who gave as much as he did, regardless of how we may or may not have agreed with him, I believe he deserves to dream of eternal rest.

As Unitarian Universalists, we don't have one central story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Even for those of us who hold the Christian or Jewish story as primary, we also recognize that there are other sacred stories that can be life-giving and affirming and from which we may learn. In Unitarian Universalist congregations we offer many stories, both sacred and secular, in the hope that we can each make meaning in our own way from them.

Early in our history one of our forebears said: Revelation is not sealed. There is more light waiting to shine forth from God's holy word. We see the ever-evolving life before us and look for the sacred within. We realize that even if you have just one story, it can be interpreted in a variety of ways, depending on what you bring to it. And we want to know what you bring to it. Because for us, its not just those stories out there, of other people, mythic or real, but also of ourselves, and those around us. We believe in trying to create heaven here on earth. We recognize that all we do and say has impact on others, and we look to stories to inspire us to do the right thing; stories that show us courage to to take the harder path; stories that ask us to choose love, over and over again.

As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm clear principles, that ask us to recognize the good in everyone, to honor the search for truth, to strive for peace, to make room for everyone's voice, to value the earth and our interdependent relations with all things. These are all good and important goals and reminders, but they don't speak to us in any depth until we hear the stories of people who try to live them out in life.

All around you are people with stories of what brought them here: stories of pain and stories of celebration, stories of a burning desire for justice and healing, stories of feeling different from the mainstream and still welcomed for who they are, stories of the relief of finding someone to talk to, and of making friends across lines of difference. Your story is welcome here, and here you will find a chance to tell it. We don't often feel like heroes in our own stories, but hopefully here you will see ways in which you may do heroic things. Here you can find yourself in the larger story of human life and feel both awe at the majesty of it, and comfort that you are a part of it.

In the Lord of the Rings, Sam Wise Ganjee put it well: "its like those old stories you didn't want to know the end of, because you couldn't believe it could come out all right. You want to shut the book and stop the tale because it was too scary. But I've realized that those folks in those stories, even if they saw themselves as small, learned that they could do something, even if they didn't understand what it was at the time. Those folks understood something – that there's good in this world and its worth fighting for."

So let us find inspiration to seek the good in the world worth fighting for. Let us resist the stories of doom and gloom and hopelessness and dedicate ourselves to playing our part in the story of life that promises new life, with understanding, compassion and hope. Amen.

Lighting of the Menorah

In the Jewish tradition, the season of Hanukkah teaches us to open ourselves up to the possibility of miracles. The eight candles tell the story of the Maccabean liberation battle, in which the faithful survived for eight days, even though there was only one day's worth of oil, it continued to shine its light.

We light the Hanukkah candles in wonder, joy, and gratitude, each candle a miracle.
We rededicate ourselves to the miracle of light in a season of darkness
To the miracle of trust in a time of anxiety

To the miracle of hope in a time of despair
To the miracle of faith in a time of cynicism.
We rededicate ourselves to the miracle of wholeness in a time of fracture
In a time of hatred we rededicate ourselves to the miracle of love.

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