

An Act of Creation

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD November 14, 2021

“Each of us, of course, must assume the responsibility for awakening,” writes Forrest Church. “Others may be responsible for our being born, but what we make of our lives, how deeply and intensely we live, is our responsibility, and ours alone.”¹

Making the most out of the life we have been offered – this is our goal, perhaps our ultimate goal surpassing only that of basic survival and the survival of those around us. May this be our ultimate framework in how we approach each day, each moment, each decision we make. It is our responsibility, and ours alone. And yet the present – how deeply we are living - does not exist on an island, isolated from what comes before and what is to follow. While now – this moment – is what we are offered, each moment is built upon foundational and crucial collective moments experienced before. Moments in our history that shape our truths and our worldviews and our basic beliefs and morals; how we understand ourselves. Last week, we examined “how” we remember events and critical moments in our lives – either trapped in a cage of regrets, ruminating, and not offering our souls much more than misery, or living with nostalgia – connecting with life – stripped of the nonsense – making our best way forward. And yet it is not only “how” we remember that shapes and molds us, but “what” we remember. Memories have a façade of permanence, of truth and ultimate reality. And yet if we examine them, if we truly examine them, nuances shift, what seemed important shrinks into the distance while ignored truths surface, what tore us down can build us up.

I think of those formative moments in childhood – seemingly simple events with lasting impacts. A nervous, shy, child, for example, assigned to give her class a presentation, standing in front of a sea of eyes while focused on her research and yet nervous to present it. In slipping

¹ Excerpt in *Singing the Living Tradition*

over words, what she remembers in that moment is a chorus of laughter meeting her ears - her peers giggling as she nervously stumbles through. This memory, while potentially dismissed by everyone else involved, to this young girl offers a lasting impact –interfering with public speaking skills decades later. To the woman, this is a memory of shame and ridicule – that is what she perceives and holds with her. And yet in this burdensome memory, what may she have forgotten? Perhaps the attentive observer shushing those around them as they learn, or the teacher scolding the others, or the compliments she received afterwards as she made her way to her seat, or the thoughtful question posed later in the hallway. With all the positive feedback she encounters – all those pieces that can foster confidence and strength - what shapes her are the giggles of a mere few. Does this sound familiar? I know elements of this narrative ring true to me. Instead of fear, this memory could offer courage; it can be a source of affirmation.²

This is but one example feeding myriad more. The college student who did not do well on a test, focusing, in retrospect, on their feelings of inadequacy instead of all they learned and enjoyed while studying; putting their best foot forward. A participant sharing in a small group setting, intent on remembering her own insecurity as she stumbled over her words, instead of admiring her own strength in sharing vulnerable stories. What is held on to is a judgment of intelligence and insecurity instead of motivation and bravery.

I think of our memories as a garden. Each time we notice it, it's slightly different. The kind of attention we offer the blooming mix of azaleas and poppies and daffodils alters whether they flourish and offer us beauty and a reminder of dedication or decay and a sense of failure. Just as we water and weed the earth giving life to those pink and yellow petals, leaves reaching for sunlight, so, too, may we nurture our memories, so they offer strength, wisdom, and perseverance.

² https://www.huffpost.com/entry/mindfulness-practice_b_4047094

We each have the power to re-write our stories, to craft our histories, to take ownership of what we remember while we build and live in our present. Ostara read earlier the words of neuroscientist Rosalind Cartwright, “memory is never a precise duplicate of the original... it is a continuing act of creation.”³ Studies in neuroscience discovered that every time we engage with a memory, it changes, it alters. How we are in the present moment impacts our recollections of the past. Whatever emotions we feel or situations we are in changes our memories – without our even being aware! This understanding of memories as malleable is significant! We can change our memories which in turn changes the story of ourselves – who we are and why.⁴ If we do this subconsciously, can we intentionally do this in order to garner strength? Can we tell ourselves stories of empowerment that may formerly have brought us sorrow? As we recreate memories, we recreate the meaning and significance that comes with it. We are given the power of intention, fostering the act of life-changing creativity.

I think of our truths. Who I am. What made me. What my childhood was – what my present is. My faith, my morals, my history, my passions, my stories. If the past that created us is malleable, so is our present. I think of rediscovering our truths when we find someone who loves us for just who we are – the traits we were ashamed of become beautiful. Through the lens of another, our own self perceptions are changed. Even, perhaps, a mentor who asks us to re-discover who we are – someone who sees in us what we cannot yet see in ourselves. I think of a person I know who was self-conscious of his history of infidelity and substance abuse who met someone who saw in him and all he was a minister. This affirmation recreated the story he told himself and he became a force for our Unitarian Universalist values of faith and justice in the world. His marriage is secure, and he is sober. His truth was drastically altered and what was withering is now thriving.

I found while reflecting on this sermon the laments of a therapist that many of her clients insist that there are wholesome qualities they have never experienced. And while this is their truth

³ *Soul Matters* Packet November 2021 “Holding History”

⁴ <https://undisputedorigin.com/2019/02/26/how-to-achieve-your-dreams/>

the therapist has another – her truth is that if they dig down deep, if they apply some effort, they can find one – even if it is small. They are simply searching in the wrong places.⁵ We have each experienced joy or love or faith or laughter or that memory of being special. It’s there! I think of my own past, feeling insecure or not good enough. I can find stories to validate this, any of us can. But that I won’t share because it only serves to perpetuate a destructive story. What matters are those whispers of assurance I began to hear, the stories I forgot but found within myself the courage to unearth – to water and weed and care for as the garden of my childhood I hold in cherished memory. The embrace of my mother who came to tell me how strong I am, or the voice of my dad, time zones away, saying, “I’m proud of you, Janie.” My sister, whispering to me in a field of wildflowers, trusting me to share a secret she had told no one else. The high school teacher, scribbling a note on a research paper about the promise I held within me. Those small, wholesome memories.

“Hidden in all stories is the One story.”⁶ Sometimes we know our One story, and sometimes we have to search for it. And yet it is there, hidden in the thickets of doubts, fears and mistakes just as surely as it is prevalent amidst the joys, triumphs, and successes. “The more we listen, the clearer the story becomes. Our true identity.”⁷ When we know it, we can find it in any of our stories, and the fuzzy boundaries become clearer and clearer. I think of the single mom I know, taking care of children and an ailing parent, whose story is laughter and joy. I think of the recovering alcoholic I know whose story is love, who cares for each and every person he encounters. I think of the woman I love who suffers from schizophrenia, whose story is resilience. What is the story of the young girl who was laughed at, the story strung throughout the tale of her own embarrassment, or of the minister who was loved and validated into being? What is your story? Once we find this story it becomes our truth, and we begin to notice it weave throughout the moments of our past– those collective moments that shape our world view. Once we know what our story is, we can craft what that story will help us to do in the

⁵ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/mindfulness-practice_b_4047094

⁶ Excerpt in *Singing the Living Tradition*, Rachel Naomi Remen

⁷ *ibid*

future – we can assume responsibility for our own awakening. Our story – it is a sacred act of creation.

I reflect on the sentiments of the therapist I mentioned earlier who encouraged her clients to seek out wholesome memories, which she claimed provided them an “antidote” towards their inward suffering. This antidote? It gives us control over the stories we tell ourselves – the memories we hold on to - and offers the realization that our experiences do not control us – and we are freed. Focusing on those simple memories of love and kindness and goodness that we each have buried within us instead of the memories that cause us harm. Also in recreating those harmful memories – telling ourselves a different story - this changes who we are in this moment.⁸ We can become kinder and gentler to ourselves and others, we can create a resilience that gives us the armor to overcome whatever comes our way. We can laugh more easily and celebrate our strengths. We can gain compassion and expand our capability for love.

What do we need in each moment of our lives? The stories we need change. The lessons we need change. We can cultivate a collection of memories that gives us the guidance and strength to persevere. When we are lonely, stories about family and friendship. When we are sad, stories of love and laughter and joy. When we feel helpless, we can bring to light those wholesome memories of overcoming – our memories offer an antidote to each of our hardships.

In recrafting our memories, we recraft our lives. From our first moment of consciousness up until this very moment we are able to intentionally fill the days, years and decades with life affirming stories – creating whatever life we have been given into a tale of perseverance and strength, of kindness and love. Let us each know that we are beautiful!

I would be remiss not to acknowledge that some of us hold within us memories that no amount of imagination or creativity can soften. There are hardships in life that are simply that –

⁸ https://www.huffpost.com/entry/mindfulness-practice_b_4047094

hardships. But if we are hearing these words, it is because we have survived. If nothing else, may these tales be stories of survival.

We gather as a people of faith, a liberal faith where we are each encouraged to engage in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Let us explore our faith as we explore the stories of our lives! What story of the hereafter helped us to overcome the death of a loved one or face our own mortality? What faith in a God who loves us carried us through desolate times? How did covenanting to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of each person help us see the beauty in the misunderstood, or the pain behind anger? How did prayer allow us to converse with the dead, or connect with the source of all life? Our Unitarian Universalist faith allows us to shift and mold our beliefs as they serve us in each moment, ultimately creating a life-giving theology. We can use each of our experiences, whether an experience of flesh and blood or a sacred experience of faith – to shape who we are this very day; taking it upon ourselves to make life-giving meaning to each experience.

We are each offered a lifetime of memories which we can do with what we wish. We are granted the creative freedom to craft our lives and our histories! And here we are – in the present. Let this moment be a blessing; let all we have encountered give us strength and solace. And let us note that each moment offers us a chance to shape all that our future may and will be. As written by Matt Meyer, “May we go forward in purposeful rhythm, that we may give voice to the melody of our imaginations.”⁹ Let us be responsible for our own awakening and in doing so create a lifetime of purpose and fulfillment – an intentional and beautiful act of creation. May your memories guide you, and your faith inspire you.

May it be so, and Amen

⁹ Excerpt from *Singing the Living Tradition*