

“The Power of Stories”
Dianne M. Daniels; UUCN, September 29, 2024

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Sermon: “The Power of Stories” by Dianne M. Daniels
Remember to SLOW DOWN

Storytelling, especially now, holds a particular power. In an increasingly divided and polarized world, the narratives we share—and those we choose to silence—define our collective memory, identities, and interactions.

In times of great political and social upheaval, stories serve as both mirrors and windows: they reflect who we are and open us up to the lives and experiences of others.

Storytelling as a communication, reflection, and learning practice has never been more relevant. Stories allow us to understand the past, present, and future we want to create. They help us think, teach, and learn—and perhaps most importantly, catalyze change.

Whether we are sharing the narratives of marginalized voices or redefining what it means to be part of a global community, storytelling is a radical act of truth-telling.

It is through the stories we tell, both individually and collectively, that we affirm our values, confront our histories, and imagine new possibilities for justice, equity, and compassion.

Storytelling hails from a cultural practice recognized by many cultures, including:

- The Vikings, who called their poets Skalds (scar – dee),
- The people of Northern India, who called their storytellers and dancers Kathakars (ka-ta-car),
- West Africans, who called their storytellers, musicians, and praise singers Griots (Gree-ohs),
- The Kurdish people, who called their singing storytellers Dengbejs (deng-beige),
- The Scottish and Irish Seanachaidh (shan-a-chree) bards who carried the traditions and history of their clans
- The people of Turkey, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia and Iran, who called their wandering singers and storytellers Ashiks (ah-shick)

Marshall Ganz, Senior Lecturer in Leadership, Organizing, and Civil Society at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, writes:

“Stories are how we learn to make choices. Stories are how we learn to access the moral and emotional resources we need to face the uncertain, the unknown, and the unexpected mindfully.”

Stories Connect Us to Others, Helping to Bring Us Together

We know that Unitarian Universalists continue their commitment to affirming every person's inherent worth and dignity and to expressing Love as a shared and centered value. In a world where stories are what bring people together, we find our shared

humanity. Through storytelling, we can see how connected we are, even to those who seem different.

When we share a child's innocent story of eating something unexpected—whether it's an insect or food from a pet's bowl—we laugh together. In sharing the laughter and humor of the story, we spread the love we've all felt when we see children exploring the world around them – even if we'd rather they DIDN'T explore by eating things we didn't give them or approve of.

We can use their experience to help them understand that people across our vast and beautiful world eat different things than we do, and that's okay. We can also use their experiences to teach them about Generosity and how what we do and give can help others ensure they have enough to eat.

Taking care of our planet and our local communities allows us to continue growing our food and enjoy the bounty of areas of our country where growing food is an everyday task.

We can discuss Equity—or lack thereof—in that some cities have what are known as “food deserts” where it's tough to find fresh fruits, vegetables, and other healthy food options because there are no supermarkets nearby.

Telling those stories also helps us develop greater empathy – considering how WE might feel if we lived in the same situation and seeking innovative solutions that help solve the challenge for the entire community.

We can tell Transformation stories when we talk about the movements that turn vacant city lots into urban gardens, where people in the neighborhood share in the work of planting and

caring for crops and also share in the bounty when it's time for the harvest, further elevating Generosity as a shared value. We learn that no one person can manifest the change alone, but when others join them in their efforts, a seemingly far-off result can be closer than we think.

Storytelling moves us beyond the polarized black-and-white data we often encounter in our day-to-day lives. How can we speak to one another in ways that encourage more understanding and lean deeper into Pluralism, which expresses respect for different traditions and interests?

When framed as human experiences rather than mere facts, how much more effective are our conversations? This, my friends, is the search for truth and meaning that we hold dear.

Stories are Pathways to Transformation.

They help us imagine new possibilities and work for change.

In a world that often asks us to look away, we can bear witness not only to the struggles of others but also to our own capacity for empathy and action through the lens of a story.

Stories can help remind us of our commitment to justice and equity, manifesting in multiple areas of our society and our lives.

How we see the past, how we envision and dream about our future—these are stories. Why we left a path that no longer served us and found our way to a new one that encourages and uplifts us—those are also stories.

Why the principle that it's essential to move toward spiritual wholeness, working to build a diverse and multicultural Beloved Community with our actions, and to dismantle racism and other oppressions accountably is vital to us as a movement, and why increasing numbers of congregations within our UU faith committed with their votes to adopt the new language describing who we are.

As a faith, we planned for and had challenging discussions to change how we define ourselves and added specific language to our bylaws. The courage to update our foundational principles and to not just allow but encourage input from many different congregations and members is an inspirational story that can and should be shared.

Specific examples of stories that can and should be shared abound in our world – we can each be a light in the dark places by committing to sharing our own stories of overcoming, of uncertainty that changed to certainty after heartfelt discussions and questioning, of being a guide and the willingness to be guided, and of how we succeed in our striving.

We can be proud to share how, during our individual and collective journeys, we pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and try again after experiencing challenges or failure.

Spread your wings and your stories – share the value you've found, the stories you've heard and lived, and as paraphrased from Audette Fulbright Fulson,

“...be worthy inheritors of this faith, and through our good works and our stories, pass it boldly to a new generation.”

Getting Out of Your Comfort Zone

Right about now, you may be thinking, “Okay, Dianne – this storytelling stuff sounds cool, but how do I get started using stories to connect with people? How do I get past my uncertainties – dare I say fears - about telling MY story?”

For most of you, telling a story to others – whether it’s your personal story or one you’re using to develop a friendly relationship or a deeper level of communication with another person – is about getting out of your comfort zone.

Your comfort zone is known, safe... and where you like to hang out with the people and behaviors that cause you little to no stress. We all want to be comfortable.

It’s human nature to spend much of our lives, whether consciously recognizing it or not, avoiding situations that make us uncomfortable. While we are nestled in our comfort zone, we’re also stuck. Life can get old and stale when nothing ever changes, and because we’re avoiding the scariness of change, growth and adventures also pass us by.

Thinking about the values I mentioned earlier, the process of adopting those values denomination-wide involved many people getting out of their comfort zone concerning how they defined Unitarian Universalism and our principles.

Leaving behind the foundational principles that brought many of those same people **into** the faith was very uncomfortable for them. The question was asked in many different ways, but it seemed to boil down to, “If we’re going to do away with the

seven principles, how are we going to tell the story of who we are as UUs?”

Just because your story is comfortable, has been told many times over many years, and you know it forwards and backward doesn't mean it can't change or that changing means leaving behind all that you used to be.

It also doesn't mean that your original story was a bad or negative one – definitely not in the beginning.

Sticking with a story that no longer resonates with you, that's not authentic to who you are now, and who you are becoming doesn't honor you or the growth you've experienced.

Your story is ONE definition of you – one way to let others know who you are, what makes you tick, what you have to offer, and what you need help or reinforcement with.

We construct internal stories to help us make sense of the world around us. When we share our stories with others, they help us to create emotional connections, helping us understand the information they represent, and making the information memorable.

Our stories give us meaning and a sense of purpose in the world. They help fill in the missing pieces of our lives, help us deal with challenging circumstances, and bring us closer to each other.

Have an amazing week ahead. Get out of your comfort zone and tell your stories in a way that makes sense to you. Use your

stories to entertain, inform, make others laugh, or even make them cry.

When done well, the power of your story can have a massive effect on your audience and you as a storyteller. Stories can inspire, enliven, and create instant rapport and connection. They can move your audience to act, and they can change lives.

Stories can help individuals adopt new ideas, help them overcome personal barriers to change, and act as a social “contagion” by allowing ideas to spread rapidly between individuals and, ideally, between all people.

Closing Words – In Reverence of Stories

Let us join our hearts and spirits in gratitude on this beautiful day, on which we have the stories of our past and present before us, and realize the power of the stories we will write and tell in the future.

On this day, we remember all those whose personal stories have ended – may their good works live on in their names. May we encourage those whose stories are still being written to understand that their past is not a millstone holding them down, but instead a foundation for the stories they build from this moment forward.

Let us wish that the stories shared will travel abundantly so that many can listen and learn from the experiences of others and therein find more in common than that which is different.

We offer gratitude for all that is in our lives, especially for the excellent and challenging stories we hear. May the stories we hear move us to act with power and compassion and live our own stories to the fullest.

Have a beautiful week ahead. Choose how you're going to live and perhaps share your stories.

Thank you for your time and attention.