

## What's Your Story?

December 10, 2006  
Rev. Martha Niebanck  
First Parish in Brookline

**Reading:** *"Myths of Time and History"*

Alice Blair Wesley

I think I know, and even respect, the reason some Unitarian Universalist hackles rise as soon as anybody raises the subject of our heritage, or our spiritual inheritance. It is because **the very meaning of our lives is posited, or expressed, in the myths we hold valid**. This is the freight myths carry, a precious freight, indeed, any of us, then whatever our myths, is apt to react angrily if it looks to us like someone is out to de-rail that freight.

Various groups of religious liberals, holding different myths, are especially wary of any claim that validates the Judaic-Christian myths.

Among Unitarian Universalists wary of our Judaic Christian heritage are some we might call our Progressivists. These, holding to the **myth of progress** and invested in the superiority of the newest and the latest, especially the latest science, hear in any defense of the past a kind of assault on all they hold most dear—as though new good cannot be sufficiently valued if old good is also valued.

Others wary of our Judaic Christian heritage we might call our World Religionists. These hold to a story—**or myth—of the world in which it is prophesied that one day there shall be only one religion**, a kind of potpourri of many traditions. These hear in any defense of our Judaic Christian myths a reversion to exclusivism—as through others' traditions cannot be valued generally if our own particular tradition is valued.

Still others, some Women's Liberationists, have become heavily invested in ancient goddess myths of cultures other than Judaic or Christian. These hear in any defense of our heritage an unwitting, or witless, defense of **the mythic roots of female oppression**. These are impatient of hearing that liberals may arguably read our Judaic Christian tradition as witnessing against, and engendering reform of, every sort of oppression including female oppression even female oppression attested in the tradition, itself.

Still others, those I might name our Stoics, hold to a story —or **myth—of an ultimately meaningless universe**. For these the meaningless universe is a kind of negative source of meaning. In the Stoics' story the human vocation is to live with whatever fleeting, temporary meaning we can create despite, or in spite of against a negative background of ultimate absurdity. These hear in any defense of our world-affirming heritage a threat to the ontological basis of their defiant stance.

I see our recent Unitarian Universalist effort to reformulate our Principles and Purposes in this context, as a way to find language for authentic discussion of what is ultimately

real and important. The terms (of our Principles) have been abstracted from concrete, imaginative stories, myths, e.g., from the stories of the Exodus and the Prophets, of the Prodigal son and the Lost sheep, of the Pilgrims and the Puritans, and of Yahweh, .... However, most Unitarian Universalists don't understand our links with these stories, or know from where our abstract "Principles" came.

### **Sermon:**

I bring a question this morning—one inspired by a conversation I had with a new religious educator several years ago. Joan looked troubled as she described her feelings about reading the Golden Book versions of the nativity story to her four-year old daughter.

Joan noticed that all along the way of reading the book she was also explaining that it wasn't factual. She had never given such explanations about Cinderella or the Wizard of Oz.

Joan's face was a mirror of her inner conflict. She challenged herself with the question, "Why does the story of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem need a warning label about 'reality?'" I watched and listened and felt the motions of a parent doing the work of being a Unitarian Universalist. Our principles suggest that we honor the individual's search for truth and meaning. Joan, like all of us in this season of the year, was in the grasp of a good problem.

There was a time in the Unitarian side of our story when we were more settled on this question. In the 1950s it was fashionable among Unitarians to shock others with the facts about Jesus during Advent. Hear this story from Oren Peterson to get the flavor:

"It was the Sunday before Christmas in 1955. I was a brand-new Unitarian, driving home after attending church at the Southeast Fellowship in Washington, D.C. I switched on the car radio and there was the same voice of the minister I had been listening to at the fellowship only a half-hour before... Dr. A. Powell Davies.... When asked his opinion about the Christmas season, Dr. Davies replied: "It's a delightful collection of old myths and practices, and if properly understood, should do us no harm." (Oren adds) I nearly ran off the road when I heard this."

Most people who have heard and believed the story of Jesus' birth as history face this moment at one time or another. It is shocking to wake up.

That moment can come simply by reading the Bible and discovering that the story is only found in two of the four accounts of Jesus' life and they don't agree with each other or the Christmas pageant or the crèche on the town green. Or the moment can come when encountering the stories of other religious groups. We learn then that the idea of a savior is one of the most ancient of human yearnings -- the hope that a divine deliverer from heaven will save the world from its sins and sorrows." (Oren Peterson)

Zoroaster, Persian founder of Zoroastrianism some 700 years before Jesus, was believed a human being before he became God. Zoroaster was born of a virgin and that his birth had been foretold by prophets who called him "savior." The story also claimed that Zoroaster had been rescued in infancy from a jealous ruler and that he later performed miracles and impressed his elders with his wisdom.

And if one story isn't enough to shock us to there are many more. Hercules' birth also was celebrated on December 25th and he also was believed born of a virgin. Krishna, the incarnate Hindu God, was believed born in a cave of a virgin mother while shepherds watched their flocks. Krishna also had to flee from a wicked king.

The God Dionysus was born of a virgin and of the god Zeus. The Assyrian god Tammuz was virgin-born, as was the Phrygian sun god, Attis.

Which brings me back to Joan's question. Should Unitarian Universalist parents share the birth story of Jesus with their children? If we do share the story, how shall we share it? Should we teach our children to be skeptics as soon as possible or, as one of my colleagues put it, "Keep the dogma out of the manger?" Or should we share the nativity story on its own with real reverence and with the intentionality that parents bring to telling about other mythic stories like Saint Nick and Santa? Science writer Chet Raymo writes:

*Like most children, I was raised on miracles. Cows that jump over the moon; a jolly fat man that visits every house in the world in a single night; mice and ducks that talk; little engines that huff and puff and say "I think I can"; geese that lay golden eggs. This lively exercise of credulity on the part of children is good practice for what follows—for believing the miracle stories of traditional religion, yes, but also for the practice of poetry or science.*

*Science is based upon our ability to imagine what we cannot see; nuclear reactions in the cores of stars, the spinning of galaxies, the dervish dance of DNA. Science, like the imaginative landscapes of childhood, is a world of make-believe....*

(Skeptics and True Believers, pp. 10-11)

Chet Raymo, though not trained as a theologian, is a religious educator. His words are resonant with the post modern, post liberal, *narrative* understanding of how to engage with the Bible as a living text. Narrative theologians suggest that the propositions of systematic theology, the stuff of creeds and dogma, are the dead letters of religion. Living communities tell the stories and ask, "How is the text an event in my life?" "How are we making real the wisdom of this story?" Narrative theologians use traditional stories, not as a way of passing on specific propositions of faith, but rather, as a practice of critical rationality through community that builds community.

More than 20 years ago I was learning to be a Sunday School teacher. I agreed to teach as long as I could be partnered with a lifelong Unitarian Universalist. Every week our class of third graders acted out stories from world religions. We did the same play over and over again until each child had played every part in that particular play that interested him or her. My teaching

partner, Alice, knew how to be sure that every child got to experience each character's place in the story -- even if that meant that Alice and I would miss coffee hour to make it work for everyone.

As a new Unitarian Universalist I had seen the seven Principles to which our congregations covenant. And I certainly preferred them over the Apostle's Creed of my birthright family of faith, but they didn't have legs until I taught this class with Alice. Everyone has dignity; Everyone gets a turn; Everyone matters because you can't play your part unless everyone plays their part -- the story needs everybody.

The next year I partnered with a newcomer to the congregation, Sheila. We were using different stories with the same group of children, one year older. I tried to be as much like Alice as I could muster. Some weeks were harder than others. One week, close to Christmas, we were acting out the story of Mary and Joseph looking for a place to sleep in Bethlehem. My teaching partner's daughter, Melissa, began to act up. No matter how we tried to encourage her, she became more difficult to include. I can't remember exactly what happened in the classroom, but I do remember feeling like a failure as a UU teacher.

I happened to be having lunch with the minister and shared my feelings of shame for not being able to find a way to include this rambunctious little girl. My minister, Anita Farber Robertson, did not leap to my defense -- but rather, asked a question: "What do you know about Sheila and Melissa's situation?" When I answered, "almost nothing," Anita suggested that she could only tell me that the story of a mother and father, a complete family, in danger might be troubling to the little Melissa. I felt encouraged to get to know my teaching partner some more. I learned that Sheila was a single mother about to be evicted from her apartment in a project in Brockton. She and I had been teaching for weeks and I hadn't known that and here we were enacting the pain of a homeless mother to be. No wonder why her daughter couldn't play a part in the story. She was living the story.

Sheila and I became real friends that year. We cried together several years later when her incredibly talented son had a schizophrenic break on the night before he was to leave for college. Ten years later, I attended Melissa's graduation from Wellesley College and was proud when she was sent to Oxford on full scholarship. Three years after the triumphal graduation I offered the prayer at Melissa's brother's funeral in Washington, DC. He had died suddenly as a result of the medication that kept his paranoia under control. When we stood toe to toe more than 20 years ago when Melissa was a spitball throwing defiant child and I was an adult who lived in the dark about her real condition, neither of us knew how our story would turn out. In a sense, we still don't, but we know that we belong to each other, and that fact will never change despite arising conditions.

So if you are wondering what narrative theology looks like in practice, my story is an example. The biblical narrative triggered a communal discussion, a conversation that transformed my behavior, that transformed the shape of the community and made it inclusive, not just in name, but also in practice, not just once but as a sustained habit over time. Our belonging to each other is part of who we are as Unitarian Universalists. This is not about sharing an idea, but rather, sharing an identity.

My colleague, Alice Blair Wesley, whose words were read by our intern, Leslie Becknell, suggests that we live in a time of mythic confusion when identities are under threat because our myths are no longer viable. The myth of human progress in a linear, upward movement is dead. The myth of a perfect past to which we can return cannot withstand the test of reason.

But confusion is not always a bad thing. Learning anything new is always preceded by confusion. We live in a time when we need to be attentive to our own and each other's story. This is the way we will learn a new way forward. This is the only way humans have learned and survived as a species, learning by listening in community.

Theologian John Cobb writes:

*It is all a question of story, we are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story. We are in between stories. The old story, the account of how the world came to be and how we fit into it, is no longer effective. Yet we have not yet learned the new story. Our traditional story of the Universe sustained us for a long period of time. It shaped our emotional attitudes, provided us with life purpose and energized action. It consecrated suffering and integrated knowledge. We awoke in the morning and knew where we were. We could answer the questions of our children. We could identify crime, punish transgressors. Everything was taken care of because the story was there. ... It [provided] a context in which life could function in a meaningful manner."*

And perhaps, though we might never agree on the same grounding mythic stories, perhaps we might agree on a common creation story—the story of the big bang: the story that tells us that we are all made of the same stardust enlivened by the energy of the same sun. We are enveloped by an intelligent, self-organizing, living universe.

Can you imagine a creation day pageant in which we all might play a part, year after year, and over time getting to play all the parts in the Universe's Birth Story, all of us covered in star dust, knowing that we are not alone but traveling in wonderful company?

I finish with the words of Chet Raymo:

*... If the prodigious energy of the new scientific story of creation is to flow into religion the story will need to be translated from the language of scientific discovery into the language of celebration. This is the work of poets and artists. Only when we are at home in the universe of galaxies and the DNA will the new story invigorate our spiritual lives and be cause for authentic celebration. Knowing and believing will come together again at last. (p. 234)*

May knowing and believing come together for us in our singing: My Life Flows On in Endless Song.