

Listening As an Act of Love, Speaking as an Act of Faith

*A Homily by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon
Delivered at the UU Church of Columbia
August 19, 2012*

In the beginning, there was fire, and the people gathered around the fire to hear each other's stories and to tell their own. And the people lived with their heads held high, for in their stories they found wisdom, and in wisdom they found strength, comfort and hope.

And so it is each Sunday that we set aside this precious hour to gather around the fire, our chalice flame, drawn to its glow in a never-ending search for wisdom. We gather to share strength, to find comfort and hope. We gather to be lit by the flame and to carry it with us into the world as living wisdom – which is compassion and justice.

We gather around the fire, that our hearts might learn and our faith might grow. And that is why we need to tell more stories.

When I first arrived at Harvard Divinity School, I was invited to join a group called WomenChurch. Hmmmmm, I wondered. What could this be? Women. Church. Would it be too Christian? Too Pagan? Too gender-binary? Too touchy-feely? I arrived at my first meeting with some skepticism.

There we gathered together around a central flame, and my doubts flew away as something magical began to happen. WomenChurch, it turned out, was a place to speak and be heard, to listen and be known.

We sat around the fire and told stories. They were stories of God and Jesus. They were stories of Goddess and human spirit. And all of them were stories about us. Stories that told of our deep fears and secret hopes. Stories of spiritual ecstasy, dark nights of the soul, and simple moments where wisdom grew.

We told stories and then we prayed. And praying was like beginning a tale, only to let it unfold in the silence beyond words.

For aunt Jackie diagnosed with cancer, one would say. And we would know the plot. Fear. Change. Chemo therapy.

We would respond in chorus. We hear your prayer

For my brother and his new baby, another would say. And we could fill in the rest.

Excitement. Love. Sleepless nights.

We all responded, together. We hear your prayer.

That phrase, repeated over and over, opened up a new path for me. In being truly heard, I felt valued and loved. In that security I found the courage to speak bigger truths and tell deeper stories.

We said it together again and again: We hear your prayer. We hear your prayer. And I came to know listening as a stunning act of love, and speaking as an awesome act of faith.

Because hearing and sharing stories takes us to that impossible place where head meets heart, belief meets life, and we most authentically meet each other – stripped of every barrier that divides us. We are vulnerable and brave. Loving and faithful.

My religious experience up to that point had been mostly about head and belief and barriers. With the help of WomenChurch, I found myself experiencing a heart-felt and connected spiritual life that I had never before imagined.

By listening, I was learning spiritual lessons for my own journey. By speaking, I was opening myself to greater kinship and deeper experience.

Why had I not found this before?

As Unitarian Universalists we believe that revelation is not sealed. In other words, no single sacred story or text fully captures the entirety of life's mysteries once and for all. The Bible, the Qur'an, the Vedas, the Sutras, and more – all contain deep wisdom, but none are exhaustive or supreme.

Indeed, we also believe life itself to be a sacred text, ripe with meaning and available to our understanding. You would think, then, that we would make it a central act to share that text, and lift it up continually in the form of stories from our spiritual lives.

And certainly that happens in conversations between us, in small groups and at coffee hour.

But I can't shake a confession from a church visitor in a previous congregation, as she left after several months, having decided we weren't for her.

She said, "People were so warm and welcoming, and it was great for social stuff. But when it came to spiritual stuff, I was pretty much on my own."

Ouch.

And yes.

We need to tell more stories.

Our society generally, and UUs specifically, are naturally more comfortable talking about

our ideas, thoughts, and beliefs. And those are important conversations to have.

They are also much safer than the personal stories that lay bare who we are at our core and what we value most deeply.

Those safe conversations are not enough. And here, of all places, we can go deeper.

We need to tell more stories... To build a bridge between the airy world of abstract concepts and the solid learnings of the heart, which are lived, and embodied.

Concepts never changed the world or transformed a human life without a connection to our emotional imagination.

Recent neuroscience has come to support this – showing that the decision-making parts of the brain have a more immediate neural connection to emotional processes than to rational ones. Studies have found that people with damage to the emotional centers in the brain are unable to make even the simplest decision, suggesting that mind separated from heart is not an altogether useful thing; Suggesting that if we wish to be transformed, and thus to be transformational actors in the world, we must teach the heart, and accept its learning.

Organizer Marshall Ganz continues from there, showing in his work with political campaigns and grassroots organizing, that the same is true of social transformation – the compulsion and urgency to actually change collective behavior comes most powerfully from the emotional connection of sharing stories. He has shown this most powerfully through the 2008 Obama campaign and the 2011-12 Occupy movement.

Ganz believes that we can use storytelling as a potent tool for social change when we can tell the story of self, the story of us, and the story of now. He trains people to create these stories. It begins with accessing our own values and experiences and sharing them. How are we called, and why? Then, the move toward change grows deeper when we can link our stories together to tell a story of us. Who are we as a community? Why are we in this together? Lastly, the impetus to act can only come with the urgent story of now. What are the stakes? Why is this change imperative here and now?

The story of self, the story of us, and the story of now.

Here at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Columbia, we want to create personal and social transformation.

It seems to me, we must tell more stories.

And so I propose that we do just that.

This year in worship we will be adding a new element, which I am calling Stories of Faith. Each Sunday, a member of the congregation will be invited to share a four to five minute story from their own spiritual journey. You can contact me or a worship associate

if you'd like to volunteer.

Storytellers will be given prompting questions to use if they wish, and they will share diverse view points and life experiences through the power of story. They will be young and old, Buddhist, Christian, just UU. They will have different identities, philosophies, and politics.

Some stories might be light hearted, some might be dark. But each will be faithfully told and lovingly heard. Each will be honest, and human, and brave.

Every month, worship will reflect a particular spiritual theme, to help give focus to our journey together and a jumping off point for choosing the stories we share.

Our theme for September is vocation and calling, and I hope that hearing our individual stories of calling will help us think about our congregation's story of us and its future unfolding.

Most of all I hope that we will find in our stories a renewed sense of love and faith among us. Together we will listen, so that each may speak. We will speak and listen, so that all may grow. We will sit around our chalice fire and tell stories. And in our stories will be wisdom; and in wisdom, strength and comfort, passion and hope.

May it be so.