

To Touch a Story
Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska
UU Church of Minnetonka
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FIRST READING

Thanks, Robert Frost

By David Ray

Do you have hope for the future?
someone asked Robert Frost, toward the end.
Yes, and even for the past, he replied,
that it will turn out to have been all right
for what it was, something we can accept,
mistakes made by the selves we had to be,
not able to be, perhaps, what we wished,
or what looking back half the time it seems
we could so easily have been, or ought...
The future, yes, and even for the past,
that it will become something we can bear.
And I too, and my children, so I hope,
will recall as not too heavy the tug
of those albatrosses I sadly placed
upon their tender necks. Hope for the past,
yes, old Frost, your words provide that courage,
and it brings strange peace that itself passes
into past, easier to bear because
you said it, rather casually, as snow
went on falling in Vermont years ago.

[Go to next page]

SECOND READING

Things You Didn't Put On Your Resumé

By Joyce Sutphen

How often you got up in the middle of the night
when one of your children had a bad dream,

and sometimes you woke because you thought
you heard a cry but they were all sleeping,

so you stood in the moonlight just listening
to their breathing, and you didn't mention

that you were an expert at putting toothpaste
on tiny toothbrushes and bending down to wiggle

the toothbrush ten times on each tooth while
you sang the words to songs from *Annie*, and

who would suspect that you know the fingerings
to the songs in the first four books of the Suzuki

Violin Method and that you can do the voices
of Pooh and Piglet especially well, though

your absolute favorite thing to read out loud is
Bedtime for Frances and that you picked

up your way of reading it from Glynnis Johns,
and it is, now that you think of it, rather impressive

that you read all of Narnia and all of the Ring Trilogy
(and others too many to mention here) to them

before they went to bed and on the way out to
Yellowstone, which is another thing you don't put

on the resumé: how you took them to the ocean
and the mountains and brought them safely home.

THIRD READING

From *The Prophetic Imperative*

By Reverend Dick Gilbert

There are four dimensions of religious life in the church: (1) the church as worshipping community out of spiritual core, (2) the church as caring community in which a mutual ministry operates to meet personal needs, (3) the church as a community of life-span religious education, and (4) the church as a community of moral discourse and social action.

The key is that each of these segments touches every other segment. They are understood not as administrative categories, but as functions of the church occurring at many programmatic places. These aspects of the total program are interdependent. No one succeeds unless all the others succeed. But the core of the total process is worship, indicating the religious underpinning of the whole. In the moral discourse and social action segment we engage in an ongoing conversation about moral values in the Unitarian Universalist tradition. What remains is translating this moral discourse into social action.

The key concepts are involvement and accountability...[People] are involved because there are specific tasks to be done and because they know that the congregation supports their efforts. The social responsibility program is not a special interest group, but an integral part of congregational life. The whole congregation is accountable, just as it is for worship, education, and mutual ministry.

Offertory Music: **Adam Raised a Cain
Bruce Springsteen**

In the summer that I was baptized
my father held me to his side
As they put me to the water
he said how on that day I cried
We were prisoners of love, a love in chains
He was standin' in the door
 I was standin' in the rain
With the same hot blood burning in our veins
Adam raised a Cain

All of the old faces
ask you why you're back
They fit you with position
and the keys to your daddy's Cadillac
In the darkness of your room
your mother calls you by your true name
You remember the faces, the places, the names
You know it's never over
 it's relentless as the rain
Adam raised a Cain

In the Bible Cain slew Abel
and East of Eden he was cast
You're born into this life paying
for the sins of somebody else's past
Daddy worked his whole life
 for nothing but the pain
Now he walks these empty rooms
 looking for something to blame
You inherit the sins, you inherit the flames
Adam raised a Cain

Lost but not forgotten,
from the dark heart of a dream
Adam raised a Cain

SERMON

To Touch a Story

Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska

“You’re born into this life paying for the sins of somebody else’s past.” When I first heard these angry words and hard music from Bruce Springsteen as a young man, this song cut me with raw truth. I easily describe my childhood as happy, but I was also filled with a lot of anger – anger that came from a feeling of being trapped under the weight of someone else’s boulder, and with no escape.

Unlike Bruce Springsteen and his father, my dad and I got along well. My mother and I, however, had a more complicated relationship. We loved each other deeply, but we were also the two in our family who fought the most. When I was in high school and for a few years after my dad died, my mom and I often fought fiercely, sometimes horribly, yelling at each other throughout the house over anything at all: dishes, homework, my direction in life. At the time, the only responses I knew were either to withdraw so far into myself no one could find me, or rage like a cornered bear. For my mom and me, like Bruce Springsteen and his father, the same hot blood did, indeed, burn in our veins.

My mother’s story is a hard one. She grew up on an Indiana farm with a father who regularly beat her with a leather belt and told her things like “You ain’t worth the powder and shot it’d take to kill you.” I can only imagine life in that house, and I am grateful my mother found sources of strength and compassion to not repeat the cycle of physical abuse with me that she lived through. But her emotional scars ran deep. Her pain seeped into her parenting and our interactions often left me feeling confused, incompetent and angry.

My mom was determined that I would understand her story. I felt trapped between feeling compassion for her story and a desire to find and value my own story. But rather than honoring our unique stories, our struggle became a competition between who had the most valid experience or the most pain. Since she was bigger and older and had more life experience, my mom most often won...which added to my anger. The older I grew, the more I began to claim the value of my own story – and the worse our arguments became. As Springsteen sings, “You inherit the sins, you inherit the flames/ Adam raised a Cain.”

For many years of my life I felt trapped in those flames I had inherited, and felt as though I had only those two options – withdrawal or rage. Over the years I learned more about finding other options and setting boundaries, but things did not crystallize for me until a few years ago when I served as a resident chaplain at Methodist Hospital. While there, I learned a new way to tell my story.

As a chaplain resident, I discovered the power of Narrative Therapy. I know I’ve shared some of this before, but it is good learning, and I think it relates well to the social justice work we are engaging this weekend. Narrative work, originated by Michael White and David Epston, holds that since we cannot know objective reality, all knowing requires interpretation. This approach does not look for underlying family dysfunction or a scapegoat. Rather, Narrative work proposes that it is the *meaning* family members attribute to events that determine behavior.

We each have what Narrative work calls a “Dominant Story.” Typical Dominant Stories are a one-sentence description intended to define an entire life: “I am a failure” or “bad things always happen to me.” We create these stories by stringing together a few life events and external messages into a narrative. Over time, we come to believe this Dominant Story

encompasses our entire existence. One of the most beautiful aspects of Narrative Therapy, though, is the spiritual mining that unearths millions of events in our lives – real, genuine events – we do not tell as part of our Dominant Story.

Someone who believes “bad things always happen” to them may honor the fact they have a job they love or nurtured a deep 20-year friendship. A person who believes they are a failure may remember a time they followed through on a job and did that job well. Narrative work calls these life events “Unique Outcomes.” When Unique Outcomes are identified, people are invited to give meaning to them, and then to place those outcomes into an alternative life story, or narrative. Inviting people to be an audience to their own performance of these alternate stories enhances the survival of the stories. It also opens up space for a sense of personal agency – that is, rather than be a victim of circumstance, we understand the control we have over our reactions.

I am a huge fan of Bruce Springsteen and his music, but I recognize now that the song “Adam Raised a Cain” only describes a painful family experience, one I resonate with deeply. Music and art help us identify and relate with particular life experience. But this song does not offer options for a new vision.

People often say we can’t change our past, but we can change our future. Through narrative work, I believe it *is* possible to change our past. Instead of seeing only our failures, Narrative work attempts to see a larger picture, to see our historic actions in the context of larger dynamics and world events. Part of the power of Narrative work exists in the realization that while we have no control over the universe that created us, we do have power over our response. Ultimately, Narrative work provides a space for forgiveness, and a generosity of spirit towards our own selves to become the people we want to be. Through Narrative work we continually examine our own motives and sources of our behaviors – to re-imagine and re-tell our stories over and over again. David Ray writes:

Do you have hope for the future?
 someone asked Robert Frost, toward the end.
 Yes, and even for the past, he replied,
 that it will turn out to have been all right
 for what it was, something we can accept,
 mistakes made by the selves we had to be,
 not able to be, perhaps, what we wished [and]
 ...that it will become something we can bear.
 And I too, and my children, so I hope,
 will recall as not too heavy the tug
 of those albatrosses I sadly placed
 upon their tender necks.

A new part of my story is that I now have my own children, Parker and Mirek. Though for years I wanted children, I was afraid to because I feared that the emotional scar from my grandfather to my mother to me would spill into my parenting and I would end up raising a little Cain of my own. But through intense Narrative work of my own, I’ve discovered a larger context.

My story begins in the context of my mother’s story, and while I may honor her journey, I do not need to carry her story as my own. I live in a new story. After all my work to

differentiate myself, I now know that I am not like my mother, I am not like my father, I am not like my brother; I have my own gifts and talents and abilities, and I will screw up my children in my own particular way!

I have learned so much since my children were born. In the six months since Mirek was born, it is amazing to see the changes she makes each day. Two months ago she would study dangling toys, and when we talked in our cutest high-pitched baby talk, she would stare at us intently, studying our mouths with great seriousness. Now Mirek stuffs toys in her mouth, she can roll over, and she is learning to crawl. Now when Heidi and I talk to her, Mirek regularly reaches out and grabs our lips, and often giggles while doing it. It seems as though she is attempting to touch our very words, to touch a story that comes flowing over her, to learn it, to be part of it, and discover a way to respond.

To touch a story. I can hardly think of a better description of religion and religious community. We gather as a religious community to reach out and touch a story larger than ourselves, a story that flows over us, to learn it, to be part of it, and discover healthier ways to respond.

I believe that the ways we examine and tell our stories are at the heart of both parenting and liberal religion. In parenting, if we take children's lives and questions seriously, then we are compelled to be open to the truths of a new life, and so examine our own motives, behaviors and reactions, and our own questions about life, faith and death. In liberal religion, we believe revelation was not sealed 2000 years ago; rather, we discover new truths, and re-examine old truths in light of new experiences to find meaning and make sense of our place in the universe.

In our efforts to find a new communal path together in our social justice work, we in this congregation are also writing a new chapter in our story, or perhaps we are even rewriting our story completely. New truths are being discovered and old truths are being re-examined in light of new experiences.

This weekend at our Social Justice Empowerment workshop we began to engage in a process of deep soul exploration, searching for and articulating a communal identity. Who are we and who do we want to be? How will we align our actions with our beliefs? What story do we want to tell about ourselves? Will we live as victims, in the words of Bruce Springsteen, "paying for the sins of someone else's past"? Or will we behave with graciousness and a generosity of spirit that springs from a belief, as articulated in our closing song, that "we are born to shimmer, born to shine"?

This congregation has quite a mixed history, and wide variety of life events from which to choose about how we may tell our story. One Dominant Story in this congregation of not just struggle, but of failure in that struggle: with social justice that split this congregation during the Vietnam war, with programming, with ministers, and with our physical relocation about how we "always" step to the edge, but then for some deeply engrained, faulty genetic reason, we then step back and don't follow through.

But there is another story this congregation can tell, too. It is an alternate story that is equally as valid, and possibly more inspiring, more affirming, and more empowering. In just the two years that I have been here, I've witnessed a transformation in the congregation's energy. Rather than being reactive, the Board is being much more visionary and looking to transform their leadership into policy governance; the Church Council has transformed from a small group of people who gathered once a month to give each other their reports, into a large group focused on decision-making and problem-solving.

Deanna Johnson on the Community Ministry is now arranging all manner of activities; a Spiritual Care team of six people was created and trained to respond to individual needs; Jodi Holden took this congregation from no adult education programs two years ago to a semester system of adult education classes with a printed booklet; Jon Bidler and the Worship Arts Ministry purchased and installed a new sound system that not only helps our music sound better, but we can digitally record our services...which we will soon be able to upload on to our revised church website that is being worked on by Jim Coleman and Stephanie Wallingford of the Communications Ministry. Last year John Crosson stepped in as Facilitator of the Social Justice Ministry, and for the past year we have been reading Richard Gilbert's book, "The Prophetic Imperative," in preparation for the Social Justice Empowerment Workshop that occurred this weekend.

One of our Dominant Stories is changing from one of failure to one of energy and communication, creativity and vision. At the beginning of the workshop this weekend, many of the 40 people in attendance felt that we, as a congregation, haven't done much social justice – or that we *had*, but that it was part of our glory days of the past. So one of the exercises our facilitators led was to separate people by the decade they joined this church, and for each group to list every social justice event they remembered happening that decade. I think everyone was surprised, and quite pleased, to discover something that I'd like you to take a look at now. Turn around and look at the sheets of paper hanging on the wall, which list by decade all the social justice work we could remember that this congregation has done in the past 50 years. It's amazing, isn't it? Amazing. And after the service, we invite you to go back there and add more items to this list if you remember any more.

I am 100% in support of this congregation finding, buying, constructing or moving into a new physical church structure that will help us meet our wants and needs more fully. But I also feel compelled to let you know that we do not need to allow the lament of not having a new building be one more excuse for us not to carry out work that is meaningful to us, important, and transforming. We are a vibrant congregation. We have vision, we have energy, we have the power and the resources and the opportunity to do the work we want and need to do in order to be the people we say we want to be. In fact, I will go so far as to say we have a calling, based on our Unitarian Universalist principles and sources of wisdom, a calling, based on our UU history and tradition, and a calling, based on our faith in the goodness of humanity and creation, to engage as a corporate liberal religious body in the work of social justice, equity and compassion to help transform ourselves, our communities, and the world.

I believe that the church – at it's best – is a place that helps renew awe and wonder at the universe, and where people are inspired to align action with belief. So if we are going to engage in effective and transformative social justice, then we must do it as a community rallying together behind three or four specific efforts – and we will also need to join our efforts with those of interfaith groups who are engaged in the same work.

The difficult, meaningful, and joyful task before us is to live and grow more deeply in practice the intertwined nature of congregational life, as we identify social action issues, define problems, state goals, take action, reflect on our action, and then plan together once again. In his book, Richard Gilbert writes that there are four primary dimensions of church life – the church as worshipping community (which is the core), the church as caring community, the church as a community of life-span religious education, and the church as a community of moral discourse and social action – and that the four dimensions are interdependent. None of them succeed individually unless all of them succeed together.

My relationship with my children has been incredibly transforming for me. The birth of my son, Parker, coincided a few years ago with my search for a settled ministry – which, with great joy and gratitude, led me here to you! As part of that search, I was submerged in the task of articulating my theological identity, as well as investigating various congregational identities. So as part of my packet, I included the poem we heard earlier, “Things You Didn’t Put on Your Resume.” In that poem, Joyce Sutphen list some of those things:

How often you got up in the middle of the night
 when one of your children had a bad dream,
 and sometimes you woke because you thought
 you heard a cry but they were all sleeping,
 so you stood in the moonlight just listening
 to their breathing...
 ...and it is, now that you think of it, rather impressive
 that you read all of Narnia and all of the Ring Trilogy
 (and others too many to mention here) to them
 before they went to bed and on the way out to
 Yellowstone, which is another thing you don't put
 on the resumé: how you took them to the ocean
 and the mountains and brought them safely home.

I believe that the way we raise our children is a direct reflection on how we engage the world. From birth to old age we constantly explore and discover what it means to be who we are in relationship with the world beyond our own skin. Many people come to Unitarian Universalism from other faiths and may feel they don’t know much about what it means to be a UU. But we are all part of this tradition. We are not just descendants, we are also ancestors and agents in our own story; we help create and tell the story about the future of this tradition. We continually challenge each other to learn what it means to discover our identity and our faith; to read and tell each other great stories; to reach out and touch a story that fascinates and moves and transforms us; to listen for and pay attention to the breathing and heartbeats and cries of pain or need in the world around us; and finally, to experience challenge, struggle, and beauty on our spiritual journey, and return safely home.

Postlude Music: **Shimmer**
 Shawn Mullins

Sharing with us what he knows
 His shining eyes are big and blue
 And all around him water flows
 This world to him is new
 This world to him is new
 To touch a face
 To kiss a smile
 New eyes see no race
 The essence of a child
 The essence

He's born to shimmer, he's born to shine
 He's born to radiate
 He's born to live, he's born to love
 But we'll teach him not to hate

True love it is a rock
 smoothed over by a stream
 No ticking of a clock
 truly measures what that means
 truly measures what that means
 And this thing they call our time
 I heard a brilliant woman say
 She said you know it's crazy
 how I want to try to capture mine
 I think I love this woman's way
 I think I love this woman's

Way she shimmers, the way she shines
 the way she radiates
 the way she lives, the way she loves
 the way she never hates

sometimes I think of all of this that can surround me
 I know it all as being mine
 but she kisses me and wraps herself around me
 she gives me love, she gives me time
 and I feel fine
 I feel fine

But time I cannot change
 so here's to looking back
 you know I drink a whole bottle of my pride
 and I toast to change
 to keep these demons off my back
 just get these demons off my back

'Cause I want to shimmer, I want to shine
 I want to radiate
 I want to live, I want to love
 I want to try to learn not to hate
 try not to hate
 we're born to shimmer, we're born to shine
 we're born to radiate
 we're born to live, we're born to love
 we're born to never hate