

Legacy: Finding the Larger Story
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July 9, 2023

One of the many honors bestowed regularly upon ministers, is the privilege of accompanying families in the preparation and delivery of memorial events. Whether a funeral where the body is present, a memorial service or a celebration of life or a memorial celebration with or without cremains, these events are an opportunity to bring together family, friends, acquaintances, co-workers, perhaps, to remember, to honor, to mourn, to lift up and give thanks for a life now completed. More often than not, the central theme of these services in the Unitarian Universalist memorial tradition, is the naming of the legacy. We use many means to do so – eulogy, remembrances, a collage of voices that reflect something of the individual and collective impact of the life of the dearly departed.

These public events draw together individuals who may have experienced wildly varied experiences, imprinted memories that they wish to share or have confirmed by others who they may not know; to find answers to long held curiosities as well as to offer or receive support and condolence for a shared loss.

Even the most venerable among us seldom have a memorial event that lasts more than a couple of hours including a reception where familiar and sometimes surprising connections generate new stories or trigger old memories that give added value to superficial assumptions.

(I remember an unsettling event at which a previous spouse showed up who no one in family knew about!)

And, as often as not, I will hear people say things like, “Oh, I never knew that he liked sailing or cooking or was in the foreign service,”

Most poignant for me are those, often children or grandchildren, who actually get to know their parents or grandparents for the first time from the short stories they hear from the pulpit that day, or read in the obituary.

When my own father died my daughter was fourteen. Sometimes after his memorial her English teacher assigned a series of autobiographical essays. One of

the topics was "Saying good bye". She wrote about her grandpa's memorial event. "Many people shared stories," she wrote, "funny stories; stories of his kindness and helpfulness to others ; stories about his practical jokes and about his love of books and reading." Then she went on, " As we were leaving, a woman came up to me and, seeing my tear stained face, asked, 'Were you close to your grandpa?' 'I am now,' I said."

It is remarkable how many times I hear friends and family note in passing during the reception "Oh, he/she/they would have loved this."

Sometimes I wonder, how WOULD the dead receive this representation of their own story? Would they be surprised or disappointed or relieved by this picture of a whole life distilled into the most generous portrayal of their being and dispatched in half a column headed by the photo taken at that wedding in Baltimore and an eighteen minute eulogy delivered by a stranger?

Where, I wonder, DOES the rest of the story go?

I have heard from many people who, in later life, or even those who with curiosity and courage are facing their final days, "I don't care about what is said at my memorial. I will be dead and they can say whatever they want."

This certainly goes to the reality that we cannot control what others believe or say about us even when we are alive, but to say this is more than resignation. I think many of us do care.

Where does the REST of the story go? The story not simply of the outcomes, but the process of growth and learning, of damage and repair, of lessons learned and intentions fulfilled? Of disappointments and recoveries, of false starts and the will to begin again and again. The stories of not just the so called successes and failures, but the stories of self-acceptance and compassion for oneself and others that fuel the will to movement toward a legacy worthy of remembrance after we are dead.

Legacy, it is said, focuses on what will endure. It's about passing on things of lasting value to those who will live on after us. Legacy involves living with intention aimed at building success into the next generations.

"Passing on things of lasting value to those who will live on after us".

Would that we could box up our best wisdom with the bone china and the stamp collection with its Elvis Presley Madagascar edition and the Savings Bonds left by Aunt Marjorie with a note to your only grandchild to be opened on his 25th birthday, accepting the possibility that after the china and the stamps are sold on Facebook Market Place and the Savings Bonds cashed in to pay for the deposit on his new condo in a subdivision of Detroit, all that will be left is the box that will carry the video equipment to the new digs.

And in the poetry of time, that grandchild might come to an age when they will, in a moment of wistful remembering, tell the story of a grandparent whose creative generosity made it possible to start a new phase of their journey.

And there it is. Our best wisdom in the box after all. In this case, the recognition of the value, the legacy of creative generosity.

This is one place we see ourselves in the larger story.

The complexity of human life and legacy is embedded in the reality that each of us is on a unique journey whose beginning and end we do not choose but which at the same time impacts and is impacted by the journeys of others. We are born into families of individuals each of whom is somewhere on their own unique journey, jockeying for the lead in their own story.

If we are lucky, we show up in families who have already accumulated and integrated enough of the physical, emotional, spiritual, vocational, relational resources to create an environment that makes space for someone else's unique unfolding. Healthy stories need space and support to unfold. But hardly any of us grow up in a controlled environment that offers that kind of space. Adrienne Rich captures this reality exquisitely in her poem, "Transcendental Etude: :

No one ever told us we had to study our lives,
make of our lives a study, as if learning natural history
or music, that we should begin
with the simple exercises first
and slowly go on trying
the hard ones, practicing till strength
and accuracy became one with the daring
to leap into transcendence, take the chance
of breaking down the wild arpeggio

or faulting the full sentence of the fugue.
–And in fact we can't live like that: we take on everything at once before we've even begun to read or mark time, we're forced to begin in the midst of the hard movement, the one already sounding as we are born.

And the movements sounding when our parents were born and their parents and the children of today.

The stories that shape us, the stories we shape with others are not simply of the outcomes acknowledged in our living and after we are dead, but by the processes we witness and share, of growth and learning, of damage and repair, of lessons learned and intentions fulfilled; Of disappointments and recoveries, of false starts and the will to begin again and again. The stories of not just the so called successes and failures, but the stories of self-acceptance, forgiveness and compassion for oneself and others that fuel the will to movement toward a legacy worthy of remembrance, created in our living.

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This is not a theology of perfectibility. This is a theology of faith in human growth potential. It asks that we live with an awareness of the value we receive from the examples and support of others and the value of the examples and support we make available to others who are in different places in their journey.

For better and for worse. How many of us have been motivated by the examples of others who are in a different place in their journey. One might call them gifts of negative legacy.

At one point in my life, I got a degree in school administration, motivated by the thought that I could make a different kind of impact in the lives of the teachers and students than the administrators I observed who seemed stuck in another century.

I have wept in my office with a man committed to being a better father than his own, a man plagued by generations of parental neglect.

I have rejoiced with a woman celebrating five years of sobriety, declaring herself free from three generations of alcohol abuse.

You all have your own examples of breaking away from histories that do not serve you. You all have examples of people whose accomplishments and ways of showing up in the world inspire you. Remember in all cases that it not the accomplishments that most fully embody any legacy. It is the larger story, the one that includes elements of your own struggle that carry the legacies you can claim, spirits you can allow to infuse your own future and the gift you leave to the next generation.

More and more I am convinced that we ought not to leave this to chance. We may not find a ready audience at any point in our journeys to tell the larger story. We can try. But at least, we can make a written or recorded accounting of the parts of our stories that might most powerfully touch those who will follow.

Resources abound for doing just this. Google “Legacy”. Contact me. Form a group. Feel the love and acceptance for the complexity, the uniqueness and the commonalities of your fellow travelers.

“As much as we’ve tried to rewrite history or forget some aspects of it, humans also have always desired to mark the passing of time. In the midst of what may seem like the unpredictability of life, we have sought to mark the natural rhythms of life, the rising sun and its setting, the changing seasons, births, and deaths. All of these commemorations have provided us with roots; they have shaped our sense of who we are, our identity. In turn, our identity has helped us build relationships with others and relate to the outside world. So we write history books, hold commemorative events, and tell stories so we don’t forget, because in forgetting we lose something of ourselves and the lessons from generations past.”

Memorial events of all kinds have held their value over centuries and will continue to do so long after all of us have been remembered. It will be a privilege for likes of me to preside and to support the grieving and encourage the living. The way I continue to do that is to offer at the end of each memorial service, a charge to the congregation, an invitation to carry forth the best of what has been offered of the completed story of this individual life. Plant a tree; sing a song; love a child; listen deeply; forgive a slight; repair a rift; drink a toast and give thanks for the beloved. And I might now add, make those part of your own story and claim the struggle to make them real and part of the larger story of us all. In the words of the poet Rumi:

Welcome and entertain the strangers
“if they’re a crowd of sorrows,
Who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
Still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
For some new delight.

The dark thoughts, the shame, the malice,
Meet them at the door laughing,
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,
Because each has been sent
As a guide from beyond.”

