

Myths and Meaning – August 14th - Rev. Jay Wolin

When I was young boy, we would sit around the dinner table talking about the events of the world. Being the youngest of three children it was hard to get a word in edge wise. But the thing is at the table you had to support your point of view, so when they asked me why I believed something, or what the source of my opinion was, I would say well so and so told me. And without question the immediate response I would receive from my parents was “believe nothing of what you hear and only half of what you see” As a youth, I thought that wow, this is a cynical approach to life.

Looking back on it as an adult I can see what they were really doing was creating a dialogue with me to deal with the age old question of how do we find truth, truth about ourselves and truth about the world around us. Do we find truth through the stories of the ancestors or must truth come from within, must truth come from direct personal experience.

What does Unitarian Universalism say about this. Our principles call us to make a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. This speaks to the idea which is the cornerstone of what we believe, that we must not believe things just because historically others believed it. We may be searching for universal truths long there but misunderstood or for new truths yet unearthed.

But it is our Unitarian Universalist Sources, that indicates where we find our wisdom from: When our two association consolidated back in 1961 they had a short list of principles and purposes. Our bylaws due to our very specific non creedal nature require us as an association to re-evaluate our principles at least every 15years. In 1985 during one of these re-evaluation, we separated out the principles from the sources

If you will indulge me I think it is always good to name our sources now and then

- 1) Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- 2) Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- 3) Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- 4) Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- 5) Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;

And then the last one that was added in 1995.

- 6) Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

So you can see it is a mixed bag. The first and sixth sources (Direct experience of that transcending mystery and living in harmony with the rythms of nature seem to be speaking to gaining wisdom through direct experience, 3 of the other sources speak to gaining wisdom from historical precedent and the Humanist source asks us to use reason and science as a sort of check on all the information we collect. I think what this shows is that we take a balanced pluralistic approach to how wisdom is obtained.

Now as a simple example when a child is walking towards a hot stove, we tell a child not to touch the stove. That seems like a very natural thing to do. I of course as a child, who felt the need to experience everything directly never listened to this, touched the stove and through direct experience learned about pain. However now this person who told me that I shouldn't touch the stove had a little more stature in my mind. I experienced that the wisdom they had was congruent with my experiences.

Their wisdom had proven true. Often, then we leap to the notion that if they are true about one thing, they are true about all things. And that is where discernment comes in.

As we get older we then start to learn that not everything our wisdom givers have told us agrees with our experiences in the world and we have what is called cognitive dissonance. This is a natural progression. The world has changed since our wisdom keepers lived. Circumstances have changed. So how do we gain wisdom that will help us deal with the challenges we have in the world today. One way is to integrate myths with our experiences in the world.

We do live in an age of science and logic, and there is a belief that all answers of the universe could be unlocked with just a little more knowledge. But knowledge is not wisdom. Wisdom is knowing what to do with knowledge. We now have harnessed the power of the atom, which could conceivably be used to do much good in the world, but also it could destroy us. Wisdom should help show us the difference. We have the technology and ability to feed the entire world yet even today we here of thousands of people dying of famine in East Africa, and I assure you there are children in these Quad Cities that go hungry every night. Wisdom should help guide us on not only how but why we should prevent this. We have knowledge that there are tremendous changes happening in the climate on our planet. Wisdom should help transform how we live our lives to adapt to this reality.

For wisdom to be valid it must be something that can be adapted to changing realities. If we cannot find a way to do this, we will have to experience suffering ourselves over and over again before we realize the need to alleviate the suffering of others and the suffering of our planet. We use myths to help us deal with our suffering that we do experience. But myths can also help us realize what is deep within our beating heart and inspire us to pursue what it is that makes us who we truly are individually and as a community. But we do have to be careful. Myths can also serve a purpose to support injustice. Myths about the superiority of one group over another has led to countless atrocities in the name of supposed truth. So just like with knowledge, Myths can be used for good and bad.

I have found myths to be indispensable in life. We use them to see ourselves as we would like to be. A way to aspire to something or somewhere that is far off in the future. What is it that keeps us going when the path is dark, and the way unclear, when the choice is uncertain. What drives us to achieve. Why search for the unknown, why seek meaning in things. Why not just sit in our rooms alone and close our eyes to the injustice around us. I say we do because we know, somewhere in the deepest parts of our soul that we can reach a higher potential, that we are capable as a species of coming together and shining the light of justice throughout the world.

In fact we have only evolved as a species when we have cooperated with each other. This is true going back to when we were single cell organisms that came together to create multiple cell organisms. Intuitively and scientifically we know this. But sometimes our experiences in the world create some cognitive dissonance for us. We hear of war, of famine, of poverty, and we say what can we do? This is when we need to be reminded, often through myth, to make present to us what we know can be true. We need to be reminded that we as human beings are capable of creating a compassionate and just world., we as human beings need to pursue with good intentions but more important with good actions to do the good that needs to be done.

The myths of yesterday may not have meaning to us today, or maybe we have to give them a different context. The question is do they help to point us in the right direction. Do they remind us where not to touch the hot stove, or what mountain to climb or what path to choose or even that we need to choose a path. And do not let us think that Unitarian Universalists are beyond myth. We have our myths. On the universalist side, we love to point to the myth of John Murray, how his ship was blown ashore by a storm and landed near the farm of Thomas Potter. And as it turns out Potter had built a chapel and was

waiting for a minister who would come to preach Universalism. Coincidence, Synchronicity of the Universe, Myth? You decide and does it matter?

On our Unitarian side, we often point to Emerson, Thoreau, Theodore Parker and the other Transcendentalist as our forebearers, but when we shine the light of truth, we realize that we as a religion pushed these people out of our religion. I love Parker who said when he was asked to leave the UU Ministry by the association of ministers, “I will leave only if you admit that you have no right to throw me out.” But we look to these transcendentalists and include them as our history because we now realize that their wisdom, their search for truth, bringing in new knowledge and wisdom from other world religions and new scientific ideas are part of how we want to be today, so we look for stories that help point us towards what we want to raise up within us

I think often what troubles us is that we confuse myth with facts and knowledge. Myths are the stories we tell to translate facts and knowledge into wisdom for our current time. And rituals are a way to remind us of this wisdom and to make it always present in our lives. We have many rituals here, although we may not think of them as such. Lighting and extinguishing the chalice, offerings, coffee hour. All of these serve the purpose to keep present in our mind important aspects of our life, religion and our time together.

Today I would argue many of myths come from the arts. I would say it should be our seventh source. We know movies and books we read aren't factually true, but they can bring us insight into how we came to be who and where we are, they can give us a picture of what type of future we can imagine for ourselves and , give us inspiration and hope that even in a time of great struggle, we can see a better future

For me when I thought about what myths, what stories, what sacred texts provided me with wisdom to use in my life, I was kind of shocked by what I came up with. Having graduated with a masters of divinity one might imagine my inclination would be certain scriptural passages. Or maybe because of my fascination with eastern philosophical thought, perhaps the sacred texts of Taoism, or the Gitas, or Upanishads might qualify. All of those, I do find meaningful, but No, my answer was none of those. My sacred texts, my myths growing up were comic books and movies. When I read these books when I was young they sparked my imagination to search for something more. I still to this day remember them vividly.

I will give you a few examples...I remember one particular comic – Ghost Rider – He was the Son of Satan – I know that doesn't sound particularly sacred but really it gets better...finally after years of torment, Ghost Rider finally met his father, Satan, upon meeting Satan, he realizes that Satan and God were one and same being. Wow, they never taught me that in Hebrew School!! Thus the concept of non duality in life was first introduced to me in this way. So whenever I get too sure of myself about anything, I try to raise this myth up to remind me that there is another side along the continuum of life I may not have considered

Another memorable character was known as the “ancient one” He was the sorcerer supreme and a mystic. Finally when his physical body died, he became “one with the universe” and could be seen in the trees and grass and the clouds. This was my first introduction to the inter-dependence of all things in life. As I got older I read a great book by Thict Nhat Hanh inter-being, that basically speaks to this very principle, but it is this comic that helps me visualize and imagine this concept.

Another favorite character and comic was Wolverine of the XMEN. First he was 5 ft 4 inches tall, since I was short of course I liked those short super heroes. Secondly he was a mutant. As a youth, I certainly at times felt like a mutant, so I could relate to that. In one particular comic his young protégé had been utterly defeated by their enemy both physically and mentally. She laid there in the snow begging for help. He looked at her and said – “you have to decide, do you want to live or die, its your choice. If you want to live get up and then he walked away” Looking back on this, I know this does not seem very

compassionate or in line with our UU principles, but what this one page seered into my consciousness, what it raised from the depth of my soul was that how I live my life is my choice, how I deal with the world is my choice, when I encounter hard times whether I give up or fight on is my choice.

And lastly the one character/myth that has probably had the greatest impact on my life has been Yoda and the Star Wars trilogy. Star Wars despite its poor acting, very clearly re-tells the myth that has been told for millennium the myth of the hero journey, including leaving home, adventure, seeking wisdom, sacrifice and finally redemption. Yoda encapsulated the wise old mentor archetype with an eastern philosophical mindfulness and calmness, encouraging his pupil to face and integrate his shadow self in order to find wholeness.

Those are just some the myths that have carried me to this point that opened my mind, and allowed me open doors that I might not have otherwise opened. These were the stories I looked to in times of need because these were the stories that spoke to my inner consciousness.

We each have to find our own myths that can give us meaning to live in this crazy world. The question we have to ask ourselves is are these myths leading us to more wisdom about a way to live a better life, in a better world for all people. Do they add meaning to our life to allow us to deal with our suffering. Do they help create wholeness within us that allows our inner selves and our actions to be congruent with what we know our best potential can be. Do they open up the doors within our souls for us to realize our oneness with and connection with each other and the universe. Do they open up the door that helps us answer the questions that gnaw at us. Do they open up the door that leads to our fulfillment.

We must not confuse myth with fact but we can use myth, we can use wisdom of ages to release that which is deep within our DNA, that can be released to help us navigate our way in this world, Our myths may need to change over time as our circumstances and the world around us changes, but lets use them not as stories written in stone, but as a doorway to a deeper journey of exploration.

May it be so