

Religion as Chain of Memory

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There is a story of the great Jewish theologian, Martin Buber, whose words grace our Wayside Pulpit today. In the 1930's, Buber was in his study hard at work translating the Hebrew Bible into German, when Nazi troops arrived to search his home. Ordered to turn over any "subversive literature" in his possession, Buber did not even have to get out of his chair. He simply held up his Hebrew bible. "Here", he said, "here is the most subversive book in the house."¹

The bible is also the most widely sold book in the world. And for our culture, in the West, it remains the most "basic religious and spiritual text"² of all time. And yet, as a people in America, we are losing our biblical literacy and experiencing a break in the chain of memory that made us.

Today's sermon is an "auction sermon", purchased by our Board President Jerry Gray last spring. His challenge to me was to prepare a sermon using a book he gave me, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – and Doesn't*, by Stephen Prothero, as the starting text. Prothero is Chair of the religion department at Boston University and a religious scholar who holds degrees from both Harvard and Yale. In this text, he illuminates the declining state of biblical literacy in America today, pointing out that

- ... "nearly two-thirds of Americans believe that the Bible holds answers to all or most of life's basic questions, yet only half of American adults can name even one of the four gospels and most Americans – (and today, this includes many fundamentalist Christians) cannot name the first book of the bible."

Whether you're reading Shakespeare, or listening to "Sacred Classics" on public radio on Sunday mornings, or trying to follow the current public debate on immigration, the bible is an essential and irreplaceable part of our cultural understanding. Especially in the civic arena, we give away our power when we cannot speak with knowledge of our religious heritage. And we don't give our power away to just anyone – we give it often to the bigots and the fanatics of the world – those who use this power to oppress others. Bishop John Spong, a liberal Episcopalian, has written a book about this – aptly called "Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism." The point is that even if we are willing to forsake a deep and true appreciation of art, literature and music, we should not for a moment let go of our right to be part of the public debate and be able to speak of and about the bible with clarity and confidence.

Why has our knowledge of the bible decreased so? Prothero and others with him claim that it is our almost hysterical devotion to a separation of church and state – so that the bible is no longer taught, even as literature, in most of our schools. And with the rise of secularism, and soccer Sundays, most of our children are not learning the stories anymore – not being introduced to the wisdom of the prophets, or the beauty of the psalms, or the inner truth of the parables.

Let's stop for a moment – to be clear that it is one thing to know these stories, to understand the characters and the events – to "get it" when someone speaks of a politician or philosopher as "as wise as Solomon", or about the challenges of financing public education, wishing they could turn "water into wine", or "swords into ploughshares". This is simple

¹ John A. Buehrens, *Understanding the Bible* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003) p. 8.

² *Ibid*, p. 9

literacy – it is understanding the narrative: the people, the times and the places. We are not talking about believing any of it as Truth, with a capital T, but about accepting these stories as an integral part of our religious and cultural heritage.

John Buehrens, UU minister and former President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, tells a story of his friend Debra Haffner. An ardent advocate for the rights of all people, including gays and lesbians, Haffner was serving as Director of the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States when she told John that she had to study the bible. “I must ... ” she told him. “It’s being used against everything I know to be true, just and healthy.”³ He directed her to a liberal seminary, and she is now a UU minister herself, still working hard in the area of human rights and sexual identity, but now fully able to converse with biblical literacy and force in her advocacy and education work.

Buehrens puts it this way: “Those who reject or neglect the bible fail to recognize that to ‘throw the bible out’ because others have turned it into an idol, or because you don’t accept ... the conventional understanding of its teachings, doesn’t mean that it ever goes away. Rather it simply means that it ends up on the hands and on the lips of others – often reactionary others – where it can and will be used against you.”⁴

These are the stories that formed us as a nation, that – at their best - continue to engage our hearts and our dreams. And it is not only the scriptures of Judaism, Islam and Christianity – the bible; but also the sacred texts of all the world religions that now are represented in our increasingly pluralistic country. Prothero makes a strong case that every American needs to know basic information about all of these – about Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and the Earth-Centered traditions. We saw the most compelling reasons for this in the aftermath of 9/11, when to have dark skin or be of Middle Eastern descent was to be at risk for persecution, even death, in this country, whether or not you were Muslim – even if you were Christian or Sikh or nothing at all.

However, still true is that here in America the religion most important as chain of memory is the bible. In it are the stories that made this county – and today, as an example, I will follow just one – to suggest some of the ways its power has infused our land, our people, and our dreams. Let’s look at Exodus, in the Hebrew Bible. Let’s remember that story.

For this, we return to Egypt, where Joseph (remember, of the *Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*) had brought the Israelites to safety some 400 years ago. Many years have passed, and Moses has been asked by god to free his people who are now living as slaves in Egypt. Moses does not want to do this. Who would want such a task? Moses was basically happy tending sheep, and not interested in leading an enslaved people to freedom.

But the story shows how convincing doing the right thing can be – as Moses is faced with a bush that burns but is not consumed, and is then humbled by a voice of such power that he cannot turn away. So Moses goes back to Egypt – and with the help of all the forces of good – and a lot of plagues, finally gets Pharaoh’s attention, who lets the people go. They celebrate the first Passover, in a bit of a hurry. And they leave Egypt.

But, freedom, it turns out, is no stroll out of an Egyptian park, but involves some really tricky business with a large body of water, and ends them up in a desert, a vast wilderness. The Israelites, who have longed for freedom, finally have it – but it doesn’t look at all like they’d dreamed. They are thirsty and hungry and uncomfortable. They fear their journey will never end. The Promised Land seems farther away than hope, and even that is fading.

³ Ibid, 5

⁴ Ibid, 4

The people have a hard time trusting Moses, who is supposed to be their leader. They don't like some of the things that happen to him, the smoke, the fire, the clouds that explode with sound. Moses isn't having it so easy either, and this says something about what it is to be a parent or a teacher or a leader, trying to help others see that there is another way, a better way, and to take them there.

Also true is that neither Moses, nor most of the people who left Egypt with him would live to see the Promised Land. It would take a whole generation, some forty years, before anyone would cross the Jordan River. This, too, says something about what such a change requires.

Because this kind of journey, an Exodus journey, away from who we have been, perhaps for a long time, perhaps for always, toward who we will be or who are meant to be – is the most difficult journey of all.

Yet none will grant us more.

The Exodus story is the story of America. It is almost Thanksgiving, and I am reminded of the first round of pilgrims who set sail from England, who headed to the Promised Land of religious freedom. They left in September of 1620. By March, despite having made it to shore, most of the Pilgrims had died. Out of 17 families 10 men, 14 women and too many children to speak of, were gone. And yet more came, crossing the ocean after them and more and more – all seeking the milk and honey they believed were on the other side. The Exodus story later gave African Americans the strength to endure the horrors of slavery. And it shaped the making of our state – of the open fields, the Pacific ocean, and the oil and gold of the Promised Land of California.

We cannot be true to who we are as a people, as Americans, if we do not pass on this knowledge to our children. There is much in the bible we need to know – Prothero suggests, at a minimum: the main characters, images and narratives; also the rites and history of the church itself.

Because in the bible, in the Exodus story, we learn about grace. We learn how there, in the wilderness, as in our own lives, there are times when we are starved for nourishment, for hope or food for body or spirit, and we are given it, like manna from heaven; there are times when we are sure all is lost, and we will die from a thirst of despair or fear or not knowing, and somehow, somehow water or perhaps it is honey springs from the rock.

Human fallibility is also part of the story, as the Israelites ask Moses to take them back to Egypt, back to slavery. Because though that was awful, at least they understood it – it was familiar, and better than wandering, better than uncertainty, better than the discomfort of the dry, wide desert. Don't we all know that feeling, standing on the sharp edge of change, and it all seems just too much. But like the Israelites, we keep going. Moses helps. Or God, or faith, or the power of the human community, or the pursuit of the dream.

Remember, in Exodus these people aren't leaving just to leave. They are going because they believe, because Moses believes, that this is what god wants for them – that freedom and happiness and a good life are their birthright, no matter how they were born or raised or what has happened to them along the way. As people of this liberal religious community, today, I hope we still believe that this is the birthright of all God's people.

We cannot break this chain of memory, and lose these stories of our religious heritage. Even if we are atheists, we need them, even if we are Buddhist or Pagan or Unitarian Universalist. The stories live and breathe in us, whether we claim them or not. And they live to help us. Perhaps even to save us ... to lead us through the wilderness, and help us on that hard journey. Listen:

Pack nothing. Bring only your determination to serve and your willingness to be free. Don't wait for the bread to rise. Take nourishment ..., but eat standing, be ready to move at a moment's notice.

Do not hesitate to leave your old ways behind – fear, silence, submission...

Begin quickly, before you have time to sink back into old slavery. Set out in the dark. I will send fire to warm and encourage you. I will be with you in the fire and I will be with you in the cloud...

I will give you dreams in the desert to guide you safely home to that place you have not yet seen...I am sending you into the wilderness to make a new way ...

Some of you will be so changed by weathers and wanderings that even your closest friends will have to learn your features as though for the first time. Some of you will not change at all.

Some will be abandoned by your dearest loves and misunderstood by those who have known you since birth and feel abandoned by you. Some will find new friendship in unlikely faces, and old friends as faithful and true as the pillar of God's flame...

Sing songs as you go, and hold close together. you may at times grow confused and lose your way...Touch each other and keep telling the stories...Make maps as you go, remembering the way back from before you were born... - Alla Renée Bozarth (adapted)

If we lose those stories, we betray those who died, trusting us to pass them on.

And while it is the narratives of our forebears - of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament that we inherit, today we need also learn and be able to teach our children the stories of our newer neighbors – the story of Buddha's life and learnings, the ways of Islam, the truth of the Native Peoples of this Earth.

Sometimes I cannot believe I was fortunate enough to find Unitarian Universalism, to find a religion where, thanks to those who have gone before, including Emerson and the Transcendentalists, and a later group of Universalists called the Humiliati, the stories of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament will not only not be forgotten, but they will be told along with the wisdom stories of all the world's religions. Our Sunday schools were the first in the land to teach about other religions – and in 1984 at the General Assembly our congregations voted to covenant and affirm as sources of our faith all the stories of all the significant traditions across the land.

This is why, often, during the morning "Time for All Ages" the children will hear a story from another religion, or a biblical narrative. We do this to pass on to them the chain of memory they need to grow into people of knowledge and good will, to take their places in the long covenantal journey of this church – to build healthy lives for themselves and to help build the common good.

The words of Antoine de St. Exupery are the motto of many of our best religious educators in Unitarian Universalism. May we seek here to follow them:

Let us build memories in our children, lest they live joyless lives,
lest they allow treasures to be lost because they have not been given the keys.
We live, not by things, but by the meanings of things.
It is needful to transmit the passwords from generation
to generation.

This is the message of today's sermon – that it is needful, that we must transmit the passwords from generation to generation. For we are the ones who hold the keys now, who know the words, and who can pass them on. We are the ones who must tell the stories now, tell and re-tell them so they are never forgotten. We do this in memory of what has gone before, and in hope for what is yet to come. For, as the Unitarian Horace Greeley reminds us: *It is impossible to mentally or socially enslave a bible reading people. The principles of the Bible are the groundwork of human freedom.*

And if we do not know those stories – and know how to use them in the name of freedom - I suggest to you that we need to learn them or to re-learn them.
As Unitarian Universalists, we do not need to believe the doctrines that humankind has attached to these stories; but we do need to hold them and tell them and refuse to give their power away. For they are ours to remember. They are ours to use to nurture our spirits and to help heal our world.

Remember: we can sing songs as we go, and hold close together.
If we grow confused and lose our way... we can touch one other and keep telling the stories... we can make maps as we go,
remembering the way back from before we were born...

It is not just about literacy – about knowing the stories and the words and the songs. It is about knowing how to tell them, how to sing them, and how to hold faith in the journey. It is about knowing, and never forgetting, why those stories matter – how they nourish us and why we have been entrusted with them. They are the passwords we need to cross the desert, abide in the wilderness, and together, build a better land.