

*The Power of Our Stories*  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo  
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Rev. Margret A. O’Neill

There is an African teaching story that tells of a young woman who worked hard all day to build a fire for her family. She went into the woods to cut fuel for her fire, carried it back on her head, swung a heavy ax to split the logs, created a spark that dropped into the tinder, fanned it into life as a flame. She fed small pieces of fuel to the tiny flame, carefully so she would not smother it, until it began to burn bright and hot, becoming a steady fire that would give light, warm the home, and nourish the family by cooking their food. When the fire had burned for a time, the coals began to glow white hot. As the fire grew over the hours, a glowing coal in its center became its deeply embedded source of heat and power. The burning coal kept the fire strong, generating the flames that consumed the fuel, using the resources of wood and air to create light and warmth. Neighbors came by to pick up a burning coal from the fire, spreading the light and warmth through the community, creating many hearths where fires burn brightly so that many families may have a good life.

That is the power of the glowing coal, and the power central to our lives, the power central to our stories. That coal is the deeply embedded source that generates the warmth and light of our own hearth, and from which the flame is shared with many hearths, creating many new stories, many new hearths with their own glowing coals. At the center of every hearth, at the heart of every life, in the core of every community, there is a burning coal that gives power and life to our story.

As performance consultant Jim Loehr writes in his book, *The Power of Story*, “Your life is your story. Your story is your life.” Understanding our lives as story, telling ourselves our own stories, helps us navigate our way through life because our stories provide structure and direction to our lives. “If you are human,” Loehr continues, “then you tell yourself stories - positive ones and negative, consciously and, far more than not, subconsciously.” . . . Stories impose meaning on the chaos of our lives, bringing a sense of order to the rough and tumble of events that can feel random, that can feel outside our control.

The story line we generate, and the burning coal we identify at the source of our own story, becomes like the compass for our lives, a navigational device that can show us where true north lies even when we are in strange lands, when the clouds cover the stars and we have no fixed reference point to steer our way. When our stories are true, they emanate from the burning coal at our center, and they transmit and magnify the light and warmth of our positive core.

Story is also life-affirming, healing and sustaining. Acclaimed author Bonnie Collins, who is sitting right over here where we almost always find her on a Sunday morning, co-authored a book also called *The Power of Story*, recounting stories of resilient healing and hopeful new beginnings, stories about ways in which people are loving and powerful. She helps therapists learn to use their own stories, stories of healing and love, to reconnect with their own glowing coal of mission and purpose, to heal from the vicarious trauma they themselves experience in working with trauma victims.

At the heart of our story lies that burning coal, the deeply embedded source generating our warmth and light. When we are in touch with that burning coal, we find the power in our stories, weaving the truth of our lives. We might call it purpose, or mission, or core commitment – but whatever we call it, that core element is what gives power and direction to our lives. As Loehr writes, “The only way a story can achieve a level of transformative power is when it supports an unassailable purpose. An ultimate purpose is never small. It is never minor. It is grand, heroic, epic.”

Our life purpose must above all be true. Each person has his or her own truth, and one person's true purpose is not like anyone else's. You cannot get your life story right, unless you get your purpose right. In his work to bring out the best in high-performing athletes and corporate executives, Loehr coaches them to move through their false purposes toward their deepest, most simple and truest reasons for living. False purposes might include vague or superficial goals, "flimsy or undercooked goals" as he calls them, such as financial security, or being famous, a nice place to live or a fancy car, to set a world record, or be on a magazine cover. Those are not bad goals or purposes, just insufficient, lacking in power to be the burning coal of a story, the core motivation of a life. And a flawed purpose, a purpose that is superficial or not well focused, that lacks the power of that glowing central element, always results in a flawed ending. "So long as we rely on false purposes to navigate through life, we can be certain that our life story will never bring true fulfillment. We may well catch what we've been chasing, but what we've been chasing will turn out to be a prize not really worth having . . . If you're unconnected to your true purpose, if you're chasing after the wrong thing, you miss the most exciting part of living."

Loehr goes on to state that the same goes for a company's purpose. "To thrive in all the ways a company ideally should . . . requires a purpose that goes deep and wide. . . . In the same way that personal stories must move us if they are to work, so, too, a company's story must move people—management, employees, customers, investors." And so also for a congregation: a congregation's story, its purpose, must move people – members, ministers and staff, and the wider communities the congregation serves in its reason for being. For a congregation, as for a person, a true and authentic ultimate purpose is never small. It is never minor. It is grand, heroic, epic.

The life of a congregation -- its history, its present, and its unfolding future -- are created by the lives and connections of its members, and by their connection to the burning coal the lies at the heart of the organization, its purpose and its story. We have been gathering stories here lately, and with those stories we are building the history wall, the storyboard you see before you. We began with the events of the church's history, then you added in your names, showing the times when you joined the church, reconnecting with what was happening in those years, the events and the leaders and the ministers that were the essence of the church you joined.

And as we noted then, a church is part of an ongoing evolutionary process, a process of constant change, so that just as you can never step in the same river twice, the church you are part of is never the church you joined – in fact, simply by joining it you have changed it, and it will never be the same. Change occurs internally, when new members enter and start to voice their opinions or bring their skills forward. Change occurs in the external environment as well, as when the culture and technology, the resources and problems and expectations of the society outside the church, evolve and make their influence felt on the evolutionary organism that is the church.

Then the following week, I invited you to share your stories of joining the congregation, to remember what it was that drew you in and made you to know that this was your church, made you to know that you wanted to be part of its unfolding history. The stories are here before us, there is still time for you to add your story in to become part of this history wall – and the stories are varied and beautiful, a garden of stories, a patchwork quilt of connections. I have read these stories of joining this church, and they range widely, from the grand sweep of history to the sweet sense of welcoming; from the inspiration of music to the deep fulfillment of being accepted for who you are. I will share some of those stories now, so you can hear them as I experienced them, coming to hear your voices in a deeper way.

One long-time member was drawn in to the church by the passion for justice they found here, with a story that reads, “During the Vietnam War this church offered sanctuary to several individuals. The passion and commitment of this congregation was my “aha!” moment.”

Another story of connection was about music, “The first time I sang Noel and Silent Night by candlelight on Christmas Eve in December of 1997 with the choir.” And yet another member was drawn in by the healing power of spoken words, “I was struggling with addiction, and the minister’s sermon brought peace and wellness to me.”

In some cases the welcoming was very explicit, as in the way the choir brings in newcomers, “I went to a choir rehearsal, introduced myself as a bass, and was immediately accepted.” Just think would have happened if he had been a tenor!!

Other stories told of being accepted here in a way that was different from other places in this world – as in the story of a family: “Our daughter’s school friends talked about their churches – we thought maybe the UU would accept a family of two moms and bi-racial kids – we VISITED & STAYED!”

Sometimes the message was from the minister, as another member said, “The day I attended my first service, Rev. Joel told everyone this is a place where we scoot over and make room for others. If I was looking for a sign, this was it!”

There were stories that put into words the feeling that ran through many of the pages, like these:

“I had found a place of safety, belonging and intellectual stimulation – a home for the first time.”

And

“I was especially welcomed with open arms and began making friends and I am accepted just as I am. I find comfort and joy here, love, compassion, friendship, thoughtfulness, many wonderful things.”

And yet another,

“I knew I belonged here when I saw the diversity of the people and felt the warmth of inclusion that filled the congregation.”

Welcoming, accepting connections were made in many different ways. Here are some samples:

“One sermon in particular evoked tears that I desperately tried to hide – someone offered me a Kleenex when another person placed a hand on my shoulder – I knew I was home.”

and another:

“When I was in the kitchen helping to clean up after an event, I connected with Sara and other volunteers. Learning where things are kept made me feel at home.”

And yet another:

It was during Building Your Own Theology when I knew that I was not going to be judged in any way for what I believe or who I am. I needed that more than I even knew at the time.

And one more:

I recognized that I belonged to the UU church when after a year it became evident that this is an authentic church. The basic principles that it espouses are actually lived. They are open to all – no hypocrisy. They love all coming together as one – not like in some churches that are exclusive.

Wow. As we gather the stories of this congregation, the stories of your experiences, what you love, how you commit yourselves to this community and find here welcome and fulfillment, we begin to discover the sources of warmth and light from which the power is generated. We begin to hear about a

passion for justice, a love of beauty, a warmth of welcome, the authenticity of values truly and faithfully lived. We begin to uncover the glowing coal that fuels the heart of this congregation.

One more lesson from performance coach Jim Loehr, “For an organization’s story ultimately to succeed, it has to be true and lead to real action, anchored in real accountability and verifiable commitments.” To be successful, to live into its heroic and loving potential, a congregation must know its story, articulate the glowing coal at its center, and be real about living its purpose, living its true and authentic mission. In her sermon last Sunday, our Director of Religious Education Sonja Jensen talked about the mission of her family, and the mission of a church: “Having a mission helps us to focus on the things that really matter to us, and use our resources and energy to effect its strongest impact on our community.”

It is in hearing each other’s stories that we begin to discover and bring forth the light of the burning coal of commitment that lies at the center of this loving and historic congregation. It is in articulating a true and authentic story about who you are, a clear and compelling statement of purpose and direction, the grand, heroic and compelling purpose of this congregation, that the fire will burn brightly to bring light and warmth to the life of this church. It is in living out that purpose, in real accountability and verifiable commitments, that the congregation will step into its power and potential, bringing its transformational power to the world.

And so we begin with our individual stories and begin to notice the common ground, the shared themes, the core commitments. We find the power in our stories, deepening the discovery of who we are, how we are connected, and the source of our fire. In this moment and in this place, I invite you to be in your story, and in loving the common shared stories that link us all to the glowing coal of this amazing congregation. In that love, I invite you to rise in body or spirit to sing our closing hymn, #354 We Laugh, We Cry.

Sources:

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Rev. David Pyle, *Glowing Coal*, (blog) retrieved 3-9-12 from <http://celestiallands.org/wayside/?p=398>