



# Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

“Naming Loss and Shaping Change”

Delivered 9 October 2022

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How many of you here are collectors? Maybe not exactly the kind of collector that Hector was, in our story, but how many of you have special sets or types of items that you cherish, that you display, that you keep an eye out for in the wider world to see if you might find an addition or two?

When I was a kid I wanted to be a collector. I have always loved cats, and I had stuffed cats, and when my grandmother gave me a gift of a small ceramic cat, I started collecting those too.

One definition I’ve heard of to distinguish between “a collection” and “a bunch of related stuff” is having an organizational method, and/or a method of display. My little group of cat figurines had neither. Eventually I realized I was just packing them into boxes and leaving them unopened for years - and moves - at a time, and I made the choice to let them go.

Today’s story was one particular example of the old saying “One person’s trash is another person’s treasure.” When we realize we have gathered items together, it matters what we call it. Is it our collection, that we will lovingly curate and clean and store and display and explain? Or is it just stuff that we have because it struck our fancy at a certain place or time?

In today’s reading we hear these words from Rev. Victoria Safford:

“The place of truth-telling,

About your own soul first of all and its condition.

The place of resistance and defiance,

The piece of ground from which you see the world

Both as it is and as it could be  
As it will be;  
The place from which you glimpse not only struggle,  
But the joy of the struggle.  
And we stand there, beckoning and calling,  
Telling people what we are seeing  
Asking people what they see.”

Truth-telling. It's a kind of storytelling, a kind of truth we tell ourselves, when we decide that our stuff is actually a collection, or that our collection is actually just stuff. In point of fact the objects are always objects; it is the name we give them that helps us define them both for ourselves and for others.

What are the stories we tell about ourselves?  
What are the stories we tell about our world, our society?  
What are the stories that others in our society are telling?  
How often do we choose to listen to stories that are different from our own?

Tomorrow marks the federal holiday of Columbus Day. It also marks Indigenous Peoples Day. Last year President Biden officially declared the 11th of October as Indigenous Peoples Day, but it was just for 2021, it was not an establishment of a new federal holiday. On the website for the 2022 Farmer's Almanac I read this very clarifying sentence: “While Indigenous Peoples' Day remains a nonfederal holiday, it is federally recognized as a national holiday.”

Talk about naming! “Nonfederal but federally recognized” is a mouthful to say “this is complicated.” It IS complicated. And when we think about the stories we tell and the stories we hear from others, complication will always be present. Because there is never just a single story.

Tonight, at sundown, our Jewish siblings and selves will begin the celebration of Sukkot, an agricultural festival that originally was considered a thanksgiving for the fruit harvest. Sukkot are hut-like structures that the Jews lived in during the 40 years of travel through the wilderness after the exodus from

Egypt. As a temporary dwelling, the sukkah also represents the fact that all existence is fragile, and therefore Sukkot is a time to appreciate the shelter of our homes and our bodies. At many temples and synagogues and at the homes of faithful Jewish people, you may see outdoor temporary structures built in yards or community spaces. For the next seven nights, the expectation is that all meals will be taken in the sukkah, that reminder of our fragile existence. (<https://toriavey.com/what-is-sukkot/>)

So here are three narratives all alive this weekend. A narrative of exploration and colonization, in Columbus Day. A narrative of truth-telling and acknowledgement of past harms done in the name of that exploration and colonization, a narrative to honor those who have called this land home and called this land sacred before European explorers arrived. And an ancient narrative of celebration and thankfulness, to acknowledge the riches we have not just in the harvest, but also in our homes, in ourselves, and in our communities. And I'm certain there are other holidays happening this weekend - for instance, tomorrow is also Thanksgiving Day in Canada, which has its own set of traditions and narratives AND counter-narratives that are similar, but not identical, to those of Thanksgiving in the United States. And all these larger narratives do not preclude the significant things happening tomorrow for people all over the world: tomorrow will be someone's birthday, someone's death-day. Tomorrow is an anniversary, a reunion, a party, a first sober day. This is not to equivocate us out of the importance of the vital story told by the holidays we have mentioned. This is to remind us that none of us know all the answers. None of us have heard all the stories. To remind us to approach each story with curiosity, not certainty.

In our chalice lighting today we heard but a small portion - the very end, in fact - of Joy Harjo's long poem "Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings," from the book of the same name. Joy Harjo is a well-loved and well-respected poet who served three terms as the Poet Laureate of the United States, and who is a member of the Muskogee (Creek) Nation. Harjo's work often engages beautifully with the multiple narratives, the multiple truths, which are contained within the complicated container we name the United States of

America. The holy beings in Harjo's poem are humans - all of us - and in fact all beings we encounter, as well. The conflict is the deepest in the soil of our nation: "Who are we?" If we cannot be honest about ALL the stories of who we are, then our answer is not complete. At the very end of her long poem, she asks us not just to make space but to give thanks:

"We gave thanks for the story, for all parts of the story  
because it was by the light of those challenges we knew  
ourselves—  
We asked for forgiveness.  
We laid down our burdens next to each other."

When we approach the stories we tell and the stories we hear with curiosity, then we can think more deeply even about the challenging parts of the story. We can think of them without defensiveness, without judgment for ourselves or others, we can think of them with hope.

In her book *After the Good News: Progressive Faith Beyond Optimism*, Rev. Nancy McDonald Ladd invites us to consider a world where we cultivate hope without certainty, where we consider hope even as we learn more and more complicated stories about the reality of the world. She writes, "Just because we are honest does not mean we cannot be hopeful. As Václav Havel famously articulated, hope is not just another version of optimism. Optimism tells a preordained narrative. It is an assertion that the scales have already been tipped toward triumph. [...]"

"Hope is different. Like faith, hope is the exact opposite of certainty. It does not presume an outcome for good or for ill. It lies in the waiting moment when the tug from both directions is not yet fully resolved and when a great many things are still possible.[...] It is the possibility, though not the inevitability, of a better way."

In the introduction to her book, Rev. Ladd shares that she writes her sermons in view of a Peanuts cartoon that she pasted on the wall years before. It's a Peanuts cartoon I remember fondly, as well, and I may well have printed out a copy to display in my own office. In it, Charlie Brown walks up to Snoopy who is sitting on his doghouse working diligently at his typewriter. "I hear you're writing a book on theology," Charlie Brown says, "I hope you have a good title." Snoopy's reply, in his perpetual thought-bubble, is "I have the perfect title" and in the final frame, we see that he has typed "Has It Ever Occurred To You That You Might Be Wrong?"

"Has it ever occurred to you that you might be wrong?"

We are, you know. We're wrong. Every day. And when we embrace that with hope - the possibility, not the certainty, of better things to come - and when we embrace it with curiosity, we may be gifted with treasure beyond compare.

The possibility, not the inevitability, of a better way.  
Gratitude for all parts of the story, especially the hard ones.  
A sense that we are indeed holy beings.

Today's responsive hymn is a reminder that we are all beautiful, whole, and holy beings: Please rise in body or in spirit to join in hymn #1053 "How Could Anyone."