



Unitarian Universalist Congregation of York

"There Are Other Worlds Than These: Spirituality and Stephen King"

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One day, when I was nine years old, my life changed forever. I have a brother who is nine years older than me, and I idolized him in that way only a little sister can. On that day, my brother had left his library book sitting on the coffee table in our living room. This book was VERY interesting to me. The cover was mostly black with some blue, and a strange and scary face seeming to loom in the sunset-darkening sky over low hills. It was a paperback but it was HUGE. On the cover, I read the words: THE STAND. STEPHEN KING. I picked it up. It was over 700 pages long. I put it right the heck back down. I was still feeling proud of myself for reading chapter books!

Still, the thought of that book stayed with me. And I knew who [Stephen King](#) was, because my brother read his books, my father read his books, every library and bookstore I went into featured books by Stephen King - although there were a lot fewer of them to keep track of in the early '80s! Not more than a year or so after I chose not to read my brother's library copy of *The Stand*, I found a cut-out paperback copy of *'Salem's Lot* at the local used bookstore - in the four-for-a-dollar basket! For the grand sum of 27 cents (with tax), my relationship with King started...and has never stopped.

Stephen King's first novel, *Carrie*, was published on April 5, 1974 - 50 years ago as of Friday. Whether you have ever read a King novel, short story, poem, article, or essay, you have probably heard of Stephen King, and may even have some impression of him and his work. But even if you have never read Stephen King, I'll ask you to consider other storytellers and artists whose work has been a part of your life for a long time. Can you think of someone whose work

you have enjoyed even as you grew through various stages of life? Maybe your relationship changed with them over time, maybe sometimes they were more a part of your life and sometimes less, but they were always there, had always been there, kind of a grace note to your life.

These kinds of parasocial relationships are special - “parasocial” refers to the kind of relationship we can feel as though we have with artists, creators, celebrities of all types, even when we haven’t met them personally - because they show us a version of ourselves over time. They also show us how the creator changes and shifts, grows and learns (or doesn’t). The nature of our relationship with this person and their work may change over time, but it can be a touchstone, a tool of memory and of inspiration. It can also be quite scary!

On Saturday, June 19, 1999, Stephen King was struck by a minivan while he was walking near his family’s home in Lowell, Maine. By this time, I was 27 years old, living in Laurel, Maryland and working for a broadband internet provider in the early days of that industry. I can picture the apartment where I lived, the office where I worked - but I cannot for the life of me remember exactly where I was when I heard the news of King’s accident. I do remember falling to my knees - quite literally - and breathing a quick prayer: “Please don’t let Stephen King die before he finishes the Dark Tower!”

Now, the entire reason I’m able to laugh about this now is that Stephen King DID live, and did in fact go on to finish his magnum opus, a sprawling 7-book series (plus...a lot more) of fantasy and horror, of speculation and grounding, of regret and redemption, of the danger of addiction and the life-altering, life-saving gift of friendship and connection. But in that moment, when I didn’t know - when no one knew - whether King would live or die, I came to a deeper understanding of the role that King and his stories played in my life.

The people who create things we love - stories, poems, songs - become our companions. When we love their creations, we also come to love them - not in a creepy stalker way! - and that love gives us the courage to follow them down new pathways, gives us the comfort of returning to earlier works that reassure

us. We might even stick around to be challenged, to learn to become critical thinkers about their work as we grow and change. We want to stay with them because over time, we have learned to trust them, too.

“Don’t bother the earth spirit who lives here. She is working on a story. It is the oldest story in the world and it is delicate, changing. If she sees you watching she will invite you in for coffee, give you warm bread, and you will be obligated to stay and listen. But this is no ordinary story. You will have to endure earthquakes, lightning, the deaths of all those you love, the most blinding beauty. It’s a story so compelling you may never want to leave; this is how she traps you. See that stone finger over there? That is the only one who ever escaped.”

Goodness knows I’ve also learned to trust [Joy Harjo](#), though my relationship with her is shorter than my relationship with King. Honestly my relationship with damn near everyone is shorter than my relationship with King! (Fun fact: Stephen King is the person who got me interested in poetry in the first place!) The idea of a story so compelling you don’t want to leave rang true to me immediately. When Harjo describes “the only one who ever escaped,” I find myself asking - how many even tried?

Of course, not everyone would look at a Stephen King story and say it was a place they never wanted to leave. For some it might sound like a place they never wanted to visit in the first place! And that’s all right. Everyone gets to find the stories that resonate the most with them, that most make them want to stay.

What draws us into any story, any narrative? I believe it’s a sense of curiosity, a kind of seeking that I think Unitarian Universalists would call very familiar! What’s all this about? Where might we go? What might we learn? Who might we fall in love with, cheer on, mourn? When we get curious about any text, when we choose to enter it and to examine it and live within it with care and curiosity, with respect and responsibility, we can choose to read that text as

sacred. Slowly, over time, I have seen in my own life the way that has played out for me with the works - the worlds - of Stephen King.

In 1999, when I heard about King's devastating accident and fell to my knees - I'll tell you, I was a hard atheist at the time. I thought I had left the concept of God far behind, and good riddance. But when I was faced with this news, with this potential loss, my immediate physical response was one learned in the Catholic church of my childhood - it was a posture of supplication, of pleading, of giving voice to a desire so important, so central to my being that I wasn't sure I had words enough.

"Best to believe there will be happily ever afters all the way around - and so there may be; who is to say there will not be such endings? Not all boats which sail away into darkness never find the sun again, or the hand of another child; if life teaches anything at all, it teaches that there are so many happy endings that the man who believes there is no God needs his rationality called into serious question."

Our reading today (thanks, Lisa!) was from Stephen King's gargantuan novel [*IT*](#), first published in the fall of 1986. The reading comes from near the end of a very long and painful journey for a group of children on the verge of adolescence, and a parallel journey for those same children all grown up and returned to their childhood home 27 years after they thought they had faced and defeated a being of unimaginable power and evil. It is a book that, yes, is about a literal monster living under a small city in Maine - but it is also about the horrors of growing up, the terror of not knowing or understanding the forces in the world arrayed against you, the dangers and the comforts of forgetting, and also about the eternal value, magic, and power of friendship - of love.

When I read it, in high school, I wasn't yet an atheist. I was still living in that Catholic faith where I was raised. But I saw the cracks in it, I pushed against it. And the worlds that I entered with Stephen King helped to give me the expansiveness of mind and spirit to imagine another way to be. I have no idea

what King's thoughts were on the existence of God when he wrote *IT*, or what they are now for that matter. I could hazard some educated guesses based on the time I've spent in his company, traveling in his worlds - but guesses are all they would be. Because the freedom that I found within King's worlds was a freedom to imagine myself there: What would I do if faced with a monster? Literal or otherwise?

Well. Don't we face monsters everyday - literal or otherwise?

My answers, of course, have changed over time. I first read *IT* when I was not too much older than the children who were the main characters, who faced much more challenging circumstances than I had faced in my young life. To be clear - I had faced challenges, some very hard ones. But they seemed to pale in comparison to the literal fighting-of-evil that happened for the young people - and their grown-up selves - in *IT*. To me this is part of the magic of horror stories, a chance to imagine what you would do when faced with the unimaginable! A chance to try out your responses and examine your emotions with a fictional foe, ideally before life presents you with a real one - a position of great privilege. It is a chance to play with your reactions in a safe space, even though when you are hiding under the covers at night you might not feel all that safe!

This, I think, is why I - and so many of us - have joined in on these journeys with Stephen King. My generation - Generation X - in particular were born into a world where King was still very much at the start of his own journey, which is why I think so many of us have a shared narrative of some kind around King's work. We read it too early! We picked up the copy of a parent or an older sibling! Our parents didn't care what we read as long as we were reading! And for many of us, we started that relationship at such an impressionable age, and it felt so *personal*. King has long had a practice of writing introductions, forewords, afterwards, and other extra-narrative communications with his readers - they are chatty, almost epistolary in nature. I have been reading this man's letters addressed to "Constant Reader" since, well, I was still pretty new to chapter books. And even though his books now

number - what did we decide, right around EIGHTY? - new generations are picking up those old books, and they're not just reading the stories, they're reading the letters. The ranks of Constant Readers are still growing.

Everyone's experience is different but also similar. We know each other when we meet in bookstores and libraries and now on the internet, and we have that AHA moment of discovering someone who has been to those same worlds, faced those same monsters - and who has come back to tell the tale. Even to press the old beloved books into the hands of younger readers, inviting them into the darkness, promising it will get scary, but you will have company along the way. Your community of Constant Readers are with you. The world is scary, but we are not alone.

"Drive away and try to keep smiling. Get a little rock and roll on the radio and go toward all the life there is with all the courage you can find and all the belief you can muster. Be true, be brave, stand.

All the rest is darkness."

May we find the courage, may we find the belief, and may we find our people, the people who will be with us, the people who will hold our hands when things get rough, the people who will leave none of us behind. The people who will face the monsters with us, and the people who will keep telling the tales - the tales of how we survived. The tales of how love won.

So may it be.