

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda, December 17th, 2017
“Winter Tales”, Interim Minister the Rev. Fran Dearman

We humans tell stories. We shape our words, and order them, and make through them some meaning. We tell stories to sort the past, to cherish the now, and to imagine new ways.

The long dark nights of winter invite us to linger by a warm hearth and make room for storytelling: old tales, tall tales, new tales, small tales, tales of courage, tales of endurance, tales of hope and forgiveness.

For example, a story of welcome—The Alaska Cabin in the Woods.

When I was in Alaska, there was a story I heard a hundred times, told in a thousand different ways. You’re lost in the woods, following a faint trail or a frozen river. You’re cold and hungry and very tired, the day is drawing to a close, the weather is closing in, the snow is falling thicker and thicker, the wolves are howling from ridge to ridge across the forest. As the waning light of the short day dims, you see the outline of a small cabin, old and weathered, slumped in a little at one corner, no locks—never locks—locks make no sense in the deep dark woods—but sturdy and strong, with shutters on the small windows, to keep the bears out.

There’s a bar on the door, on the outside, and no one at home. You lift the bar and enter and look around you. There’s a fire laid in the hearth and matches beside it, in a tin. You strike the match and light the fire and warm your hands at the steady blaze. There’s a table by the window, and on the table, weighed down by an old oil lamp, there’s a note on a piece of paper, hand written in the style of years long past.

And the notes says, “Welcome, stranger. Rest a while. Be warm, be well. All that is asked is, before you leave, rake out the ashes and lay a fire in the grate for the one who comes after you.”

I invite you into mindfulness of fires laid for you, in times past.

This service was made up of stories, old and new.

One such reading was adapted from JRR Tolkien’s “The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring”, 1954, from the first volume, Book Two, Chapter One, “Many Meetings” (pp 285-310).

Our Hobbits have journeyed out of the Shire, through field and forest to Rivendell and the house of Elrond, the elf lord. There will be many meetings at Rivendell, as late autumn turns towards winter. And feasting, and after feasting, stories to be told by firelight, and songs to be sung.

The house of Elrond is a safe place, the Last Homely House east of the Sea: “a perfect house, whether you like food or sleep or story-telling or singing, or just sitting and thinking best, or a pleasant mixture of them all”. Merely to be there was a cure for weariness, fear, and sadness.” [293].

I suspect that Elrond’s Great Feasting Hall looks a bit like the dining hall where Harry Potter and his friends get their suppers, at Hogwarts, in the movies.

People are summoned to Elrond’s Great Feasting Hall by the ringing of many bells. [295]

As Frodo’s first feast at the house of Elrond comes to an end, he sees the company rise and walk down the hall “into a further hall. In it were no tables, but a bright fire was burning in a great hearth between the carven pillars upon either side. This [was] the Hall of Fire.... “Here you [might] hear many songs and tales—if you can keep awake. But except on high days it usually stands empty and quiet, and people come here who wish for peace, and thought. There is always [the warmth of a hearth fire] here, all the year round.” [299]

Frodo sits with his friends, in the Hall of Fire, amidst a great company, some of whom have fallen asleep, some fallen into silence, “intent upon the music of the voices and the instruments”. Frodo begins to listen. [303-304]

“At first the beauty of the melodies and of the interwoven words...held him in a spell... Almost it seemed that the words took shape, and visions of far lands and bright things that he had never yet imagined opened out before him; and the firelit hall became like a golden mist above seas of foam that sighed upon the margins of the world.” [304]

adapted from JRR Tolkien’s “The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring”, 1954

As the service continued, the Offering was invited with these words, about healing the world, taken from Daniel Silva’s 2011 spy thriller, “Portrait of a Spy”.

“Some of our ancient rabbis believed that when God was creating the universe, He placed His divine light into special celestial containers. But it turns out Creation didn’t go quite according to

God's plan, and an accident occurred. The vessels were broken, and the universe became filled with sparks of divine light and shards of broken vessels. The rabbis believed the task of Creation wouldn't be complete until those sparks were gathered together. We call it Tikkun Olam, or Repair of the World."

from Daniel Silva's "Portrait of a Spy", 2011

The story goes on to align certain charitable endeavours to that repair of the world.

And with our time, talent, treasure, and loving-kindness, may we all find some way to help with the healing of the world.

The Story for All Ages this Sunday morning began with some "Frosty Poems" from Audrey Baird; there is a copy available through the Essex County Library system.

The Story for All Ages continued with an account of the Winter of 1815-1816 in Nova Scotia's Halifax Harbour, taken from "Deadman's: Melville Island & its Burial Ground" (2005), pp 34-37, by Iris Shea and Heather Watts. (Heather Watts also wrote up the history of Universalism in Nova Scotia, and is beloved of the Universalist Unitarian Church of Halifax.)

Because of the War of 1812, almost two thousand Black Refugees from the United States arrived in Halifax. ...Rear-Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane had circulated a proclamation ... promising freedom and resettlement in British North America or the West Indies to escaping slaves. Thousands risked their lives to reach the British ships. As the war ended HMS *Jaseur*, returned to Halifax bringing a large group of escaped slaves from plantations in Virginia.

The new arrivals, like all of Halifax, suffered from the smallpox outbreak over the winter. It was a bitterly cold winter and spring, and the ice stayed in the Northwest Arm until June of 1816.

That was the famous year without a summer—when a series of volcanic eruptions sent so much dust into the air that temperatures dropped all around the Northern Hemisphere.

The fugitives suffered terribly ... until they were issued warm duffel blankets, shirts, jackets, trousers, stockings and 255 pairs of children's shoes.

Surgeon William Anderson vaccinated 500 refugees against smallpox. Records show that 798 refugees came through Melville Island between April and July of 1815 alone. Some of the men were employed to operate the boats to and from the island, paying them seven shillings a day. The refugees ate well, at least while they were on Melville island. The hearty diet included pork on four days of the week with beef on the other three, in addition to bread, potatoes, rice, cornmeal and molasses. A quart of spruce beer was provided daily and sometimes coffee.”

Many of these Black refugees settled near Beechville, and their descendants are part of the diverse fabric of the Halifax Municipal Region.

And if you seek out this book in a library near you, you’ll find the recipe for spruce beer.

*adapted from the work of Iris Shea and Heather Watts,
“Deadman’s: Melville Island & its Burial Ground”, (2005), pp 34-37.*

The longest story we shared this day came from the opening pages of Thomas Wharton’s “Icefields”, 1995. I first heard this story read aloud over CBC Radio. Later, when I was working in Alberta and had visited the Columbia Icefields. I became curious, and read this book, fascinated.

Wharton begins: “At a quarter past three in the afternoon Doctor Edward Byrne slipped on the ice of Arcturus glacier in the Canadian Rockies and slid into a crevasse.”

Highly recommended for reading by the warmth of a fireplace on a chill winter’s night....

May the Winter Holiday and the peace of Christmas bring you time for reading, time for the telling of stories, and time also for listening for the stories that others are telling you.

One of the greatest gifts we can give one another is to hear each other’s stories, to hear ourselves into speech.

May it be so.

Rev. Fran Dearman, December 17th, 2017 at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda, where stories have be told and heard since 1880.

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