

# *I Could've Sworn!*

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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*Aquarium Memories © 2023 Rod E.S.Q.*

Early on in our time in Canada, my dad and stepmother needed to attend a conference in British Columbia. My dad often took me along for those work trips, and he usually liked to tag on his vacation time to those voyages, to get to know the places we were visiting a bit better.

We did all the rides. Victoria, Vancouver, Capilano, Butchart Gardens, Blackcomb/Whistler. We visited as many museums as we could. Somewhere in there, we got to the Vancouver Aquarium.

Our favourite part of the aquarium was learning about the whales, particularly belugas. Bear in mind that none of us had grown up with the music of Raffi, so belugas were unfamiliar to us, and it was exciting to delve into the story of belugas.

Except, we didn't call them belugas...

Somewhere along the way, as we looked at the information plaques, one of us read their name as "belungas". None of us picked up on the misread, and for the entire journey, we all enthusiastically learned the details about *belungas*.

Belungas, we learned, don't have a dorsal fin, which allows them to swim under the ice more easily; belungas have a bump on their head, which is officially called the *melon*, and which helps them in echolocation, allowing them to essentially "see" with sounds, which is particularly helpful in finding breathing holes under sheet ice; belungas have a significant layer of subcutaneous fat, which allows them to stay at a healthy temperature range in arctic waters.

Belungas this; belungas that. Belungas, belungas, belungas.

The whole way home, we talked about our fascination with belungas. We found it hilarious that the bump on their heads really was formally called a melon, and how 747 jumbo jets also looked like they had a melon that made those airplanes resemble belungas.

Belungas this; belungas that. Belungas, belungas, belungas.

Some time after our trip to BC, we looked at the pamphlets and brochures we had collected as keepsakes. And we found a very silly mistake on one them... some careless copywriter or editor had misspelled belungas on a brochure, amusingly calling them belugas.

Then we found another info packet making the same mistake. There was a lot of information about belugas, but nothing about belungas.

As we saw more of the literature making the same mistake, we slowly came to the realization that it wasn't the entire universe that was wrong – it was our family that had collectively misspelled the name of belungas in our mind... or, if you must, belugas.

This was rather disorienting... we could've sworn that we'd been saying the correct name all along – after all, none of us had corrected each other, and the name *belungas* sounded right the whole time. But, as far as we could tell, no one else had ever called belugas “belungas”.

Maybe the construction of the word “belunga” just sounded more natural to our Spanish-speaking ears. Maybe it was a simple mistake from our part, quickly reading the source material during a very full aquarium expedition. Maybe we just got caught up in the excitement of our visit and didn't bother noticing the evidence to the contrary. None of us thought we had come from some alternate universe, where “belunga” was the norm, though it kind of felt like that, for a moment.

That odd experience was, in a way, a small-scale illustration of the so-called Mandela effect, in which many people seem to have the same incorrect memory. It started when many people were simultaneously surprised in 2013, upon learning that former South African president Nelson Mandela had just died, as they could've sworn that he had *already* died in prison in the 80s.

One of the first people to notice this phenomenon, speculated that a whole sector of the world population had lived in an alternate universe where Mandela *had* died earlier on, and that they had then somehow merged with this, the “wrong” universe, but then kept the memory of the old one...

Cognitive psychologists have a simpler explanation. First, is recognizing that memories are not as reliable as we'd like to think – which has been repeatedly demonstrated by data from studies. There is also a suggestion that people may be conflating other events and putting them into an easily-recalled narrative. For instance, another notable anti-apartheid leader, Steve Biko, *did* die in prison in the late 70s. Mandela also made news in the 90s, when he was released from prison and eventually made the presidency. It's possible that many people had a similar experience of recalling those events and somehow merging them in their minds until they could've sworn that a story, different from history, was fact.

Last week, I spoke about the fascination of experiencing optical illusions, along with other sensory illusions, which offer, in a sense, a magical feeling of awe, while also inviting an uncomfortable sense that we can't always trust our senses.

The “mnemonic illusion” of the Mandela effect, in which our collective memories fail us, can also bring that sense of unease, upon our acknowledgement that our memories can also be fallible... far more often than we realize. I often pride myself on having a decent memory,

and have still been surprised upon learning that some event happened significantly different from what I remember.

There are even academics who have studied people's recollection of where they were during 9/11 and what they were doing at the time. They've found that people who were in the same place and at the same time often tell vastly different narratives.

In speaking about mythology, we have seen that not all stories need to be factual to expose other profound truths about the human condition, about our spirituality, and in helping us understand ourselves and our communities at a deeper level – there is value in mythology. The flipside is that certain narratives that draw on faulty – or entirely fabricated – memories, can also be weaponized to dismiss historical harms and perpetuate oppression.

The stories of colonialism, slavery, and patriarchy, for instance, have often benefited from a collective erasure of experiences that have been well documented, as well as preserved in oral histories.

Every once in a while, some folks seek an easy path to power by drawing on an embellished memory of the “good old days”, and how we need to return to those simpler times, when things were better. What is often missing from that particular mythology is the coexisting reality that things may not have been as good in those old days as the power of nostalgia would have us believe. And for certain sectors of the population, those old days were significantly less good than current times, as different levels of systemic oppression were more acceptable.

We have some tools to manage this. Historians are trained to rely heavily on primary resources – contemporary accounts of people who record events as they happen. Journalists of integrity seek to keep records with minimal interference from their viewpoints (or, to at least acknowledge when their point of view is part of their reporting).

Archivists collect the documents of time, in essence creating the foundations of future history. And our church has that kind of archival team, seeking to preserve a memory that is both factual and can also nurture a healthy mythology that reflects who we have been, who we are, and who we want to be.

At a more personal level, many of us have learned to keep logs and journals, which allow us to keep track of what has been going on in our lives and in ourselves, to process the present, and to preserve the past. These kinds of practices may often serve us in staying in touch with another reflection of ourselves as we may have been in another time, and by better understanding ourselves, we may have a clearer path into our futures.

Recently, I've had a chance to visit some of the places of my childhood, and it hasn't been uncommon for me to find myself drawn by the lure of nostalgia's rose-coloured glasses, and occasionally longing for what seemed like simpler times.

I've been learning, however, to balance my perspective with more intentional consideration for those other aspects of my past life, in which things were, in fact, not always great, and when I couldn't wait to move on to other stages of my life – to grow up, to know more things, to be better at things, to find a more rewarding career, to bring more people into my life, and nurture closer relationships. Upon this contemplation, I can acknowledge the gifts of the past, while also appreciating the beauty of the present.

That's not to say that there aren't real losses in parts of our lives that have remained in the past. As we age, we experience perhaps inevitable deterioration in our physical abilities, mental capabilities, and relationships that are no more, due to interpersonal breakdowns, the distance of geography, or death. These losses are real, and often permanent. Their previous existence really was better in the past.

And as we process our memories, my friends, we may still be able to find balance in remembering the hardships gone before, and those of which we've been able to overcome. To appreciate those parts of ourselves that are wiser, perhaps more compassionate, and loving.

To recognize the clarity of mind that can often come only from experience, and even the peace that can come from learning to let go of old baggage that no longer serves us – grudges, unrealistic expectations (of self or others), desire for unlimited excess.

To celebrate the stories that we can only share now that they are over, with the benefit of time, with which the wounds may be perhaps less raw, less often. To celebrate the triumphs that were only dreams, uncertainties, or anxieties in the old days, and which may now be fulfilling achievements in this, our day.

My friends, with the humility of failing memories, be they personal or collective, we may inherit a past of coexisting, contradictory realities, that enrich this present moment, and which may yet lead us into a richer future of good new days.

My friends, may this be our day,

So may it be,  
In the spirit of the moment,  
Amen

## **Opening Hymn #65 The Sweet June Days**

~)-| Words: Samuel Longfellow, 1819-1892

Music: English melody, arr. by Ralph Vaughan Williams, 1872-1958,  
used by perm. of Oxford University Press

FOREST GREEN

## **Hymn #86 Blessed Spirit of My Life**

Words & music: Shelley Jackson Denham, 1950- ,

© 1987 Shelley Jackson Denham

PRAYER

## **Closing Hymn – *Baby Beluga* by Raffi**