

Revisiting Old Truths
Rev. Linda Thomson
First Unitarian Congregation, Toronto
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This summer I was sitting on my back porch, as the thunder rumbled overhead. I knew my grandson might be a bit anxious about the storm, and that got me thinking of what people told me when I was a child, worried about storms: Thunder is the sound of angels who are bowling, or thunder is the sound of God snoring. I am not sure, but I think I understood that I was being reassured, not participating in a science lesson. But I did, all the same feel reassured.

What silly things did people tell you? I bet we could come up with a long list: storks and babies – or cabbage patches. If you make a face it will stay like that. If you swallow a watermelon seed a plant will grow in your stomach.

There is a second kind of list too, sometimes believed by the adults who were telling us things, and sometimes not. An omni-present and beloved parent who watches over us. An elf who visits with gifts. We'll come back to these ones...

As children we tend to believe the things adults tell us, especially if we believe the adult believes them too. Over time, as we see more of the world, talk to more people, hear more ideas, learn something about hypothesis and science, we modify our thinking.

I know that when I was a child, I believed wholeheartedly in the stories I learned in Sunday School. I poured over the activity sheets and colouring pages designed to teach me some of the core stories of Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. I was an earnest child, who spent a fair number of childhood hours looking for evidence that the things I was being told were true. I longed to see divine visions, I so hoped that explorers might chance upon the gates to the Garden of Eden. I wasn't very old when my puzzling found some gaps in the logic. If all the boy babies were ordered killed, how could there possibly have been disciples? I heard a clergy person talking about original sin, and every fibre of my being found the notion of babies being born with sin, unbelievable. And so, it was about the time that I was 13 years old I decided I was done with religion. If there were flaws in the logic, I felt duty bound to reject the whole lot of it. And I did.

I had an intellectual curiosity about religion during the next years. As a student of history, I knew that a knowledge of a culture's religion could provide valuable insights into the culture and the world view of its people. For many years that is where my relationship with religion resided – religion and other mythical tales were, I concluded, like windows that provided limited views and insights.

However, after high school my studies included the previously mentioned history, and also English literature. Now, in case you don't know this, there is nothing quite like the study of Victorian poetry to disavow you of the notion that literal interpretations are the only kind of valid interpretation. Let's just say those Victorians were far more interested in human sexuality than I had previously thought they were! Allegory, parable, and metaphor became central to my way of thinking about most of what I read.

I imagine that my journey isn't unlike some of yours. As a child I had a literal understanding, I became a skeptic as I aged, and then in time I became a little bit more open to considering the understandings that religion might offer us. I was still quite skeptical... I remember sitting uncomfortably at the First Unitarian Church of Hamilton, where I'd become a member, squirming, in fact, when someone referenced God. Pshaw, I thought, that concept is an intellectual curiosity, not something that is relevant to my daily life. In time, after conversations with people I respected, I found my thinking shifting a bit more.

Remember the list I started earlier? Sometimes the people telling the stories believe them, and sometimes they don't.... An omni-present and beloved parent who watches over us. An elf who visits children. What are we to make of them now?

Joseph Campbell, a scholar of comparative mythology, asked, about many of the stories he studied, "Is this factual? No. Is it true? Yes." Maybe some of those stories fall into that category.

Let's look at a few of them:

- Maybe the Adam and Eve story reminds us that we, despite our differences, all really come from the same place.
- Noah's Ark is after all a story about new beginnings and promises to make different choices.
- The holiday elf? At its core we are reminded to value generosity and wonder.
- There are Buddhist stories about lotus flowers growing where the Buddha stepped. Lotus flowers root in the muddy bottom of the water and are held above it – maybe there is a lesson in this for those of us who might like to forget some of our beginnings.

The literature, scriptures and folk tales of the world are full of stories. We might believe some of them, and some of them we might not. That's ok. What isn't ok, in my mind is to quickly dismiss someone else's literal or symbolic understanding. Rather than rush, as I used to, to dismiss something because it didn't happen, or might not have happened, or might not have happened in the way the story is told – instead of dismissing someone's understanding or important story, I believe we, most usefully, should find a way to sit

with it. Instead of rejecting something why not ask 'what truth is in this?' or 'what can this teach me?', or 'how can this help expand my understanding and compassion?'.

What would it mean if we focused more on being curious than we did on being clever? Or more sympathetic than strident. We UUs like to think of ourselves, justifiably, as discerning people. The path of unexamined understandings is not ours. We assert that we value a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. However, we sometimes cling to the picture of ourselves as rigorously discriminating at the expense of some larger truths. And when we do that, we sometimes hurt others, and we sometimes hurt the communities and congregations we love. To be confident in your opinion is laudable, but not if it means, in my estimation, dismissing others, without consideration. In my previous role with the Canadian Unitarian Council, I've seen congregations fall apart. It makes me very sad. I've seen people, conscientious and justice minded people, insist that their way of doing things, their set of 'acceptable words' and their set of 'appropriate practices' were the right way. I remember hearing someone mockingly dismiss a piece of music that had been included as a service, a piece of music written after 1990, written and performed by a women, as 'not very Unitarian'. Sometimes when people assert their theological or liturgical choices are the 'right' ones, other people have been made to feel that they don't belong. Successful navigation of differences requires deep generosity and a lively curiosity. Maybe you squirm, as I used to, when you hear the word God. Maybe there are songs that remind you too much of the church of your childhood. Maybe you'd be pleased if you never heard another reference to the word religion, or religious texts. However, if we are generous and curious, we'll challenge ourselves to remember that the thing that makes our religious allergies flare up, might be exactly the thing that is a healing salve for someone else. Maybe the phrase that makes us roll our eyes is the same one that makes someone else feel welcome. At our best I believe our communities are ones where people can say to those that make choices that seem opposite to their own, 'tell me about the ways that story, or that theological understanding or that song, or that particular worship format are important to you?' When we can shake our binary – right/wrong – thinking new possibilities for our lives, our relationships and our congregations becomes possible.

We don't really need new evidence, do we, of how wrong things can go when people are so very sure of their opinion and choices. There are so many stories. In the past few years we've heard about graves at the site of a former residential schools. Certainty made people confident in their decisions to remove children from their homes, to be assured that de-indigenizing them was the right thing to do. Those choices were born of a sense of superiority and rightness. Since 2023, when the current Israeli-Hamas conflict began. police have reported a sharp increase in antisemitic and anti-Muslim incidents. I know there are a variety of opinions regarding the choice and actions by both groups affected by this conflict. There are strong feelings. But someone has to be

very sure of the rightness of their thinking to threaten a Dr. in Toronto or a family in London. These are extreme examples. But, I do believe we need to be careful, to be mindful of our own certainty ... I heard a saying years ago, attributed to a North American aboriginal group that went something like, 'don't spank the child, in case you kill them'. I don't know if it is a real saying or wisdom teaching, but I'm not sure it matters, because I hear an important lesson in it. Most of the choices we make in relationship fall somewhere on a continuum between kind or cruel, or right or wrong, or safe or unsafe... and when we give ourselves permission to move along that line away from our ideals, we've given ourselves permission to centre our own preferences over that of another. And when we do that, I believe we do others, and ourselves a disservice.

As I've mentioned there was a period, after I became a UU, when God talk made me uncomfortable. I used to wonder what the value of ministers were, when UUism so clearly valued the priesthood and prophethood of all. There were more than a few years when I spent far more time thinking about what I was rejecting, than how I was learning and how I was helping to grow a community. And building community is what I've come to believe is most important. In a world where hurtful binary thinking is so prevalent, I believe we can build communities where we remain open and loving even with those who don't see things the same way we do.

You don't need me to tell you all this. You've already thought of this. Our website says, First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto is a vibrant, diverse, intergenerational community of people from across Toronto who come together seeking answers to their questions about life, healing for their hurts, and inspiration to live into their best selves within our complicated world. That sort of says it, doesn't it? And even though you've said this is what we want to do, and that this is the kind of community we want to create, sometimes we won't. Of course, we'll disagree. We get stuck sometimes; we get stubborn sometimes. Sometimes it will seem as if there is no possible path forward. We are, after all, human. There are times when people will leave because their way of doing things, or their opinions are significantly at odds with those of the majority. That's ok too. We can say goodbye to people with kindness and encouragement, with sincere hope that they find a path and companions that work well for them. However, I've come to believe that we don't need to part ways quite as often as we sometimes do. I believe if we can keep our minds and hearts open enough to understand the truth behind someone else's story, even if it isn't ours, we can move beyond begrudging tolerance to heartfelt celebration of the varied and collective wisdom we represent. It has been said that sometimes the heart sees what is invisible to the eye. And I suppose that is what I'm talking about here. Personally, I don't see the bible stories of my childhood in the same light I used to. But increasingly I find myself coming back to them. There are days when I'm feeling down and the line from the psalm comes drifting into my brain, making

me feel calmer and more grounded. “He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul.” There are days when the idea of speaking out for social justice feels daunting but then I remember, “whenever you did this for the least of these you did it for me”. Are the stories in the scriptures of the world, the myths that inform our culture, or the fairy tales we tell our children factual? Probably not, or at least not completely so. But when I’ve been able stop worrying about that, I’ve come to a deep and abiding appreciation for the truth they hold.

When I think back, I’m both amused and moved by the ways in which my thinking has shifted. The very certain young Linda would not have predicted it. And I’m grateful for the practices, and attitudes that have helped change me... Curiosity, my friends, curiosity and kindness and openness – We don’t know what the future holds for us, for this community. But if we can travel the path of kindness and openness we will build deep and sustaining connections – We’ll travel well – together.