



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

### Restraining the Beads

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Years ago, I had the good fortune to hear the South African playwright, Athol Fugard, give a talk about the essential nature and origin of the theatre—that in his view, it began when the first cave dwellers sat around the fire and one of them said, “Listen, this is what happened to me.” It would seem that our stories can shape, sustain, inspire us, and they can even help define us to ourselves and each other. They can certainly serve to connect to us to others—to our families, to the larger circles of life.

I have a friend Polly, a brilliant woman, who is a professor of world cultures. She was telling me about the Luba people of Central Africa (about whom she is an expert.) The Luba document their collective memories and in turn histories into beadwork... often creating an elaborate artifact known as a lukasa or sometimes stringing these beads of memory and history in an intentional way into a necklace. The reading of that artifact, the telling of that history, deciphering its code, depends on the one who has the standing to do so—who has the authority to wear the necklace, or to restring the beads. And that history, that meaning is fluid... based not only upon how the beads are arranged but upon the time and place and who is doing the telling. Not so different really than the way we recount and interpret our own personal histories using the language of words.... Also changeable over time and based on who's doing the telling. But I love the image of that, the artistry of that, the concreteness of that... creating an object in a way that a word can never be.

While our story may be the thing that sustains us, it can also haunt us. Either way, our stories can help us to make some spiritual sense of our lives, deciding what it all means. How do our stories intersect with our belief, faith or understanding of any larger truth or reality? That clarified view, though, may be as momentary, and as changeable as the arrangement of beads on a necklace. Our story may simply serve as a guide to see us through a particularly challenging circumstance.

I once had an ovarian cancer patient. Norma. She was in her 70's, a highly accomplished woman. Norma shared with me, “Michael, I get a lot of strength from the movie of my life that plays in my head,” drawing her courage from the very challenges she, herself, had met in the past.

In slight contrast, many years ago I had a hospice patient, Harold, a stroke patient who had significantly diminished mental capacity. Each week I would visit him and he would share the same closed loop tape of the same five or six stories from his life. “And then I met the most beautiful woman in the world,” he would say with such joy. Turning on a dime, “and then she got sick and died,” he would recount with tears in his eyes as if it were yesterday. “And then I was in Germany fighting the Nazi's and they shot my best buddy right in front of me.” And so it went over and over for about an hour—the same five or six events each visit, as if his eighty-plus years had been distilled to these few landmarks. If I tried to break the loop and interject a question—“How did you meet your wife, Harold?” He would get flustered as if awakened from a trance—his reading of the beads. He would answer me, a bit irritated and then go right

back to the comfort of his chant. His necklace had been simplified, distilled down to five or six beads. Who would we be without our stories?

As one who loves to collect objects from my travels, I love the idea of stories and meaning being evoked in objects. The object remains the same, but the meaning changes and evolves over time. It is sometimes tempting though to confuse the object with the meaning itself.

Lourdes, sat in her wheel chair in the clinic, razor thin, frail, in her 70's. Rectal cancer. She had been devotedly and tenderly cared for through her long journey by her son, Enrique. Today, Lourdes was distraught and tearful. She told me the story of a few precious pieces of jewelry which had enormous sentimental value for her, given to her by her mother when she left her native Puerto Rico many decades ago. Lourdes was kind of a packrat and kept the jewelry in a plastic bag by her recliner at home where she spent most of her waking hours. Several days earlier, in a hasty effort to tidy up, Enrique had inadvertently thrown the jewelry away. Lourdes was beside herself with grief over the loss and overcome with anger at her son for being so "careless and such a control freak." She had lost sleep and lost 6 pounds over the last week since the loss. I invited her to gently dip into spiritual waters of acceptance, and forgiveness—for self and for others. (Not my best strategy!) We also tackled attachment to material things and confusing the meaning we attach to objects with the objects themselves--that is to say, what the necklace represented... the undying love and devotion of a mother to a daughter who was leaving. That love and devotion is a keepsake Lourdes cannot lose, it can't be thrown away. She had a choice to make, where she would find the meaning and value of the gift. And likewise, it appeared the time she had remaining with Enrique was precious indeed. Would she let her anger rob her of that which was truly meaningful? She just might. Maybe the very last power we have is the meaning we will make of our own story.

Do we alone have the standing to tell our own stories, to own them? Or do we sometimes give that power away? To the opinion or interpretation of others? I'm sure most of us have those in our lives who are all too happy to tell us what we should make of the events of our lives and how we should feel about them. Or what about giving our power away to the values of the culture? As one who looks daily at the idea of "success in life" both in my own world and certainly in the lives of the patients I serve, it can be a daunting challenge indeed to choose the way we would read those beads—the beads of success—unencumbered by the values of the culture we've all been fed, of just what a successful life looks like. What about notions of health, healing and wellness? Are we limited to only the definitions we see on magazine covers or hear from the medical establishment? Can we inhabit a dying, cancer-ridden body but still claim a sense of a healed spirit, even of wellness? I think so. I've seen it. But what about the reverse?

Anna was a beautiful young woman in her early 30's, cured of Hodgkin's Lymphoma, given the all clear—"Go! Live your life and be happy!" Yet she was paralyzed with fear and grieving the lost innocence of a limitless future. She now knew, in no uncertain terms, that any good thing might be snatched away at any moment. What's more, she felt like damaged goods,

and that no man would ever want her. That bead of cancer meant something very different to her than it did to her oncologist, I'm sure.

What I've found though, is that sometimes our attachment to the meaning we find in our beads, the belief that that meaning is fixed, can really trip us up. It can intensify our suffering and stunt our growth... particularly when we add faith into the mix.

Doug is a great guy in his 50's, an earnest student of life, a spiritual explorer—you might describe him as devotedly New Age. For Doug, forgiveness is the very core spiritual value of life. So when he was diagnosed with colon cancer, Doug was convinced that his cancer was caused by the anger he had held in his heart for his ex-wife Tracy. They married very young and though they'd been divorced for years, he confessed that he had carried such anger for her betrayal of him so long ago. Doug saw that his spiritual work was to forgive her. He methodically sought the help of spiritual counselors and engaged in all the forgiveness exercises he could find. Then the big test—he was going to call Tracy and tell her, "I forgive you." Well I guess Tracy didn't even know she was in trouble all these years! She had moved on and was living a different story, but she told him she was glad he was at peace and wished him well. When Doug's oncologist told him that his surgery and chemo had been successful and his cancer was in complete remission, well, his faith was only solidified and affirmed! He would share the story with anyone who would listen, with the passion of a zealot. Forgiveness is the answer! That is, until the cancer came back. Getting too attached to the meanings we find can be dangerous and cruel business.

In the early 90's when there was another recession that hit Los Angeles, my design business at the time had gone to zero. As a stopgap survival strategy, I took the CBEST test and got an emergency teaching credential and became a substitute teacher in Inglewood, a week or two after the LAPD/Rodney King uprisings in LA. It seemed a good idea at the time (but that's another story). Lacking the constitution to face those schools everyday, ("I know it's been longer than 5 minutes since I looked at my watch!") on the off days I volunteered at Project Angel Food delivering home cooked meals to those living with AIDS and I got involved with AIDS hospice work. In my own mind, though, I was the loser of the world. No one could convince me otherwise. I would avoid friends assiduously, fearful that they would ask me the unthinkable question, "So what are you doing these days?" What's more, I was convinced that God had dispensed all the necessary components to having a successful life to everyone else but me. I was firmly attached to that idea. When I look back on that time now, I see it as the very pivot point that made this part of my life and career as a chaplain possible... though it wouldn't materialize for many years. A blessing? Hurting so bad that I wanted to die? Success and failure. Hard to tell which is which.

A career or so before that, I was a professional dancer. In 1975 the Broadway musical, *A Chorus Line*, opened in New York. I had never wanted anything so badly as to be a part of that show—and that's without even having seen it—just listening to the cast album over and over again. Hey, those were MY stories too! And I wanted to be a part of the telling of them. So in January of 1976 Michael Bennett, the creator, director, choreographer of the piece, came out to LA, with

his entourage in tow, to hold open auditions for the LA and national touring companies. The audition was held at the old Aquarius Theatre on Sunset. Every dancer in LA was there and it went on for two days. Though broke, I even went out and bought new dance clothes for the audition. We danced, and sang, and danced and sang some more, and I survived cut after cut until late in the day on the second day, with a couple dozen guys left, Michael said, "OK guys, we're going to pass out scripts and ask you to read." I was beyond excited! "But wait! Uh, Michael and Jim, would you step forward please?" Just then Bob Avian, Michael's co-choreographer jumped up onto the stage, walked over to me and gently said, "You are very talented, you sing and dance beautifully. There just isn't a part for you in the show. Thanks for coming. I'm sorry."

As if kicked in the gut, I sucked up my tears and scrambled to get my things and hurry out the stage door into the alley before I lost it. Jim too, he was a few feet in front of me. Just then Charlene, who'd been assisting Michael and with whom I'd worked on a few TV shows, rushed out the stage door and up to Jim to console him, and she offered him another job, right there on the spot, for an upcoming TV special. "Hey, what about me?" I silently pleaded. The memory is still so vivid and potent.

Fast forward nearly 40 years. Every Saturday I take a dance class for former professional dancers of, shall we say, a certain age. I call it my "old farts dance class." It is heaven on a stick! It is church. It's the place that has reconnected me to a very tender and sacred part of my soul. It is taught by Walter Painter who gave me my first professional dance job, 40 years ago—1973, Sacramento Music Circus. He is assisted at times by his wife Charlene. The one and same from that alley behind the Aquarius in 1976. I love Charlene. It has never occurred to me to share with her my memory of that day. What's the point? It's so long ago.

A few years ago, I got a terrible summer cold that had me coughing so violently that I ruptured a vocal chord and lost my voice completely. I couldn't utter a thing even if I wanted to. (I think Scott may have secretly been kind of happy about that.) Feeling better except for no voice, I went to dance class. It just so happened that the touring company of the Broadway revival of *A Chorus Line* was playing at the Pantages. Several people in the class had been in the show originally, starring in London—what have you. Before class, waiting for the ballet class before us to wrap it up, we gathered in the lobby to stretch and chat. The gals were all sitting there on the sofa, some had just seen the revival at the Pantages and they were offering their opinions, and recollections and fond memories... and I am dying! And I can't talk! A nearly 40 year old scab picked right off. All the envy, the pain of rejection, the disappointment, feeling like a loser—it all came rushing back. And then Charlene chimes in, "Yeah, Michael Bennett called me to assist him with the audition ("I KNOW") and I told him that I haven't even seen the show. 'Charlene the audition IS the show,' he said." And I'm stretching and cringing and aching inside to jump in with MY story, not because I wanted to beat Charlene up—but because I wanted to be seen, to be heard, to be received... "I was there too that day!" And I CAN'T TALK! I can only listen.

Almost in an instant I had this awakening as to the perfection of the moment. That I couldn't jump in. That it's my story. Not Charlene's story. While it may be a significant point on my biography, it is not a blip on hers. And it really only matters to me, to the degree that I have assigned it meaning on my journey. And what if in the end, it really doesn't mean anything at all? Yes, we might *use* the story, allow it to shape us, inspire us, fascinate us, even, as in this case, anchor us into a place of humility and compassion, touching deep wounds of rejection, dashed hopes and dreams, disappointment and loss. But perhaps it is our folly to attach to it as fixed and unchanging in its meaning.

A few years ago I attended my 40<sup>th</sup> high school reunion—Wilson High School in Long Beach, Class of '72. No setting could be more fertile ground for the telling of stories than a high school reunion... and, if we keep our eyes and hearts open, no opportunity is greater for reinterpreting those formative stories—loosening our grip on their meaning. I'd been to these Wilson reunions every ten years, and each has its own personality and flavor for me as we reach these milestones together. At the 10 year, of course everyone was most interested in impressing everyone else with their success it seemed. At this age, most of us have been humbled by life and loss in one way or another. I find that we come to those reunions in a kind of compressed time warp—feeling both 14 and 57 in the same moment and seeing the same in others. Looking right through the wrinkles, missing hair and extra pounds to the handsome athlete, the cheerleader, the bully, the one who made me laugh so hard in 9<sup>th</sup> grade English.

Of course everyone's memory doesn't serve them quite so well. Randy Tichauer came up to me and said, "Yeah I remember you, Mike, wearing your letterman's jacket." "No Randy, I never had a letterman's jacket." Just then Gary Wilson, who'd known me since 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, and knew me for the sissy that I was, chimed in, "Trust me on this Randy—Mike would NEVER have had a letter in anything." Gee thanks Gar. (I was Mike then.)

The highlight of the party for me came very nearly the end of the evening. I was sitting at a table, grateful to find myself alone for a moment to catch my breath from the overwhelming nostalgia, and Cheryl Young approached me. "Hi Mike! Do you remember me?" I knew who Cheryl was since junior high days, though I don't think we ever had a class together or even had a conversation that I could recall. She had the sweetest smile and manner and there was a simplicity in the way she spoke that hinted that something else might be going on with her. Her hair was short and a mass of wiry curls and she had a wide scarf tied around her head with a poof of curls poking out the front.

"Sure Cheryl, of course I remember you! How are you? How's your life?"

"Well," she said sheepishly, "I've had some health problems. I had thyroid cancer and earlier this year I had an AVM. Do you know what that is?"

"Yes, Cheryl, it's an arterial venous malformation." (I once worked on the neurosurgery and trauma unit.) With that she pulled back the curls of her wig to reveal a nasty scar across her skull. I told her how sorry I was and asked to hear a bit more about it. In what really felt like a

holy instant, I realized I had no need to hear any more of her story, and what's more, I really had no need to share even a bit of mine at all. All I wanted to say was, "Cheryl, I'm just SO glad you're here!" (Meaning at the reunion of course, but much more deeply, here, in life.) It seemed that nobody's story mattered at all. Particularly my own. "Cheryl, could I give you a hug?" "Oh yes," she said. In the moment of that hug it was in my mind, that's what heaven must be like, if there is such a place. The story just falls away. It doesn't matter. It's just the path that brought us to this moment where we can hug and say, "I'm glad you're here."

Last May, Glen Johnston, a dear member of our family, a great guy, my mom's partner, the love of her life, the love that took her 70 years to find—took his own life. Approaching 90, failing health, resolute that he would not be a burden to anyone nor die hooked up to machines in a hospital, he chose to write the ending of his own story. He left my mom a note on a bit of yellow lined paper. He left it on the unfinished jigsaw puzzle he had been working on the evening before. Three words. "I love you." Ninety years and it all comes down to three words on a scrap of yellow paper.

For the entire journey of our lives, that may be the one bead we turn over and over in our hand, trying to understand it, the shape, the weight and size and color of it. We search for it, hold it, want more of it--don't want to lose that one. We may spend our lives stringing and restringing our beads and maybe it all comes down to that one bead. Maybe our stories matter. Maybe they're everything in fact. And maybe they're nothing but stories. For me, I will just say, I'm glad you're here.