



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

How We Learn What We Learn

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Last month, I was visiting with a friend who lives in Germany, and we took her young daughter, Clara, to the Berlin Zoo. Something I really enjoy is watching children watch other young animals interact and socialize. As the monkeys clustered with each other and even seemed to get into a few spirited debates, Clara stood mesmerized and delighted by the sights and sounds of their sociable chatter.

During this zoo visit, it occurred to me how much Clara herself had grown in just one year. Last summer, she had discovered the power of the word, "No," which she would say with a great deal of enthusiasm. This summer, she was quite taken with the word, "Why?" Her mother especially enjoyed a question that had been repeated in recent weeks: **"Why did I do that?"** In her innocent exploration of the cause-and-effect of her own actions, Clara had uttered the question that trouble many people throughout their adult lives.

On the plane ride return to California, I began to think about what the rest of my summer would look like. As a high school English teacher, I usually spend the summer and winter breaks reading the major texts I teach during the school year. This means spending quality time with many coming-of-age stories. Among the pages of these novels are post-it notes which contain question prompts for discussion, observations about character development, and quotations from my immensely quotable students.

Two coming-of-age novels that generate a lot of student reaction are Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* and Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*. Though separated by space and time, the fictional journeys of the two main characters resemble each other in key respects. Both Pip and Amir live within the constraints of highly stratified social hierarchies. Both deal with absent parents (literally or figuratively). Both contend with the haunting effect of early events in their personal history. Dickens and Hosseini teach us that the journey into maturity is not marked by untroubled success and achievement, but one fraught with confusion and self-consciousness and attempts to forget behavior we are not particularly proud of.

It is simple characters who lack formal education and high social status that are Pip's and Amir's greatest teachers. And yet. It takes many years for them to realize the validation and approval they sought from so many dubious sources was a vain pursuit. After enduring the snobbish scrutiny of the beautiful Estella, young Pip tells the readers, "I had never thought of being ashamed of my hands before; but I began to consider them a very indifferent pair. Her contempt for me was so strong, that it became infectious, and I caught it."

As a result, he subjects the people who raised him to the same judgmental behavior. Because her snobbish contempt infects him, much like a disease, Pip adopts her way of looking at himself and his place in the social scheme of things. Dickens shows us that judgmental behavior is modeled for us in our youth and that we unwisely may pay it forward.

My students tend to have very strong feelings about these young characters. They feel sorry for Pip, because he lives in a society driven by an aristocracy that does its best to distance so-called superiors from inferiors. But, forgiveness does not forego justice. When he gains his gentlemanly status, they appreciate the fact that Pip is not happy, because others have suffered due to his social climbing.

The question my young zoo companion asked--**Why did I do that?**--becomes a fixture in the coming-of-age hero's inner monologue and self-interrogations. Due to early mistakes, characters such as Pip and Amir begin to tell themselves a story of their own failings and regrets, which prevents them from seeing themselves in a positive light.

Reading these novels make me wonder: Is the way we're telling our own story really serving us? Do we do ourselves a disservice by being unwilling to see ourselves in a more mentally generous light? More to the point: how do we cultivate a mental generosity toward ourselves when the emotions associated with painful memories seem overwhelming? Our church community has played a key role in helping me answer these questions.

In Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, Amir tries to suppress his memory of something terrible he did as a child. Because he cannot withstand the mixture of guilt and resentment he experiences whenever he sees his friend and servant, Hassan, Amir compounds his crime: he stashes money and other items under Hassan's mattress, leading to the accusation of theft and Hassan's departure from the only home he's known.

While earlier coming of age stories offer my students a more straightforward, linear-unfolding plot, depicting the journey of an innocent young man, ready to step into the world to learn the lessons that life has to offer him, Hosseini's plot relies on dreams and flashbacks. This manipulation of narrative time helps us understand, first, Amir's jealousy over the affection his own father gives Hassan, and, second, how much Amir's adult life in California is determined by what happened during his childhood in Afghanistan.

It is only while reading the last hundred pages of both novels, my students remark, that they even like Pip and Amir. I get it. As a reader, you can perceive how Pip and Amir were bullied, in turn paid this behavior forward, and then spent a great deal of life trying to atone and make things right. Strikingly, readers and characters undergo a parallel journey: Pip and Amir judge themselves as much as my students judge them.

One thing I appreciate about young Amir, though, is his love of language and his desire to become a writer, a goal wholly unappreciated by his father. I have long felt that you enter into a special communion with an author and other readers the moment you have been exposed to the beauty of a narrative created by someone else. I think literary analysis makes you sensitive to all kinds of responses—forcing you to take a second, longer glimpse at other people, perhaps prompting you to imagine what their experiences and trials have been like.

In her *New Yorker* article, “Can Reading Make You Happier?,” Ceridwen Dovey writes: “In a secular age, I suspect that reading fiction is one of the few remaining paths to transcendence, that elusive state in which the distance between the self and the universe shrinks.” This theory strikes a chord with me. Works of literature can dissolve my experience of the solitary self and affirm what I like to think of as the “the human echo” —the idea that my reading experience connects me to past and future readers, the hope that my reading experience has prompted a sense of possibility that others might hold in common.

When I began to explore Unitarian Universalism, I felt a little bit like Alice - like I had just fallen down a rabbit hole. While there were no Mad Hatters, riddling cats, or violent queens, I had no frame of reference for what I was experiencing. I was not told where I was going to go, what to believe, or whom to follow. I only was asked to bring my authentic self, and each Sunday, as I listened, I began to register something the sermons appeared to have in common. In a way unique to their own gifts, each preacher offered an idea *about* the practice of living that helped me manage emotionally what I had learned about living *in* practice.

During my first years of attendance, I made many new friends here at Neighborhood. Though there was a big smile on my face, my inner critic was reminding me on a psychic loop: “You’re not growing up to be the person you wanted to be.”

While in graduate school, I had to switch doctoral advisors for reasons beyond my control. The difference between working with someone you choose and working with someone you’re told to work with is massive. It was a challenging time. The economic collapse exacerbated the already alarming shortage of professor positions in my field. I was feeling homesick for my family and the agreed upon timeline for submitting work and receiving feedback was a farce. When I mentioned my interest in teaching high school to my advisor, he became very dismissive and lost interest in helping me finish my program. Too late, I realized he only was interested in working with students who molded themselves in his image.

One of my favorite writers, Patrick Rothfuss, told me the advisor-advisee relationship in such programs can make you feel like you’re being hazed into a secret society, for which the rules for membership never seem clear. That’s how I’d been feeling. Like I was jumping awkwardly through hoops, but not jumping toward my goal.

Too much time in one program made it hard for me to imagine life beyond it. Because I was deviating from the course I’d already made progress on, I began to feel like a failure. It didn’t matter that this judgmental self-assessment had been impressed upon me by someone who did not have my best interests at heart. I continued telling myself this story of failure, not yet awake to the fact that the yardsticks I’d been using to measure my success were not really aligned with the values I have now, in the present.

Lin-Manuel Miranda, creator of the successful Broadway musical, *Hamilton*, stresses we must be mindful of the stories we tell ourselves. As he said in a recent commencement address:

“This act of choosing--the stories we tell versus the stories we leave out--will reverberate across the rest of your life.”

While up at Camp de Benneville Pines, I thought about why I trained to be an academic in the first place. This meant mentally revisiting all the hours spent in covert consumption of books. Reading with a flashlight under the covers as a kid. Reading the trade paperback novel behind the school textbook I ostensibly propped up on my desk in class. For most of my life, I had been wholeheartedly, unabashedly in love with books. How, I wondered, had I lost that relationship with reading? My world was still reading, only it was not the joyous, end-in-itself reading I had done as a child. Instead, I'd been doing a type of intellectual labor that was full of mystifying jargon, intended for a small, exclusive readership, and not really accessible to a broad audience.

Characters like Pip and Amir teach me that when we're busy chasing a life that's really about meeting someone else's expectations, we're not able to appreciate the real wellsprings of our joy, right in front of us. I didn't want to live that way.

In an interview with *The Atlantic*, author Raj Raghunathan explains the virtues of adopting an abundance mindset, versus thinking with the scarcity-minded approach. He says:

If you were to go back to the three things that people need—mastery, belonging, and autonomy—I'd add a fourth, after basic necessities have been met. It's the attitude or the worldview that you bring to life. And that worldview can be characterized, just for simplicity, in one of two fashions: One extreme is a kind of scarcity-minded approach, that my win is going to come at somebody else's loss, which makes you engage in social comparisons. And the other view is what I would call a more abundance-oriented approach, that there's room for everybody to grow.

I know, that when I teach, I do it believing student growth occurs as a result of engaging lessons that may prompt them to imagine how this learning might enhance their quality of life. If I hoped my students would use their imagination this way, why couldn't I extend this abundance oriented-thinking to myself?

I grew up with two teachers, and my childhood memories are filled with images of classroom scenes. I eagerly helped my parents set up their classrooms before the start of each school year, and the sight of all those new school supplies seemed to symbolize the promise of a new beginning. I remember helping my mom pour glue into individual bottles and the strangely soothing physical repetition of sharpening pencils meant for her new students. I remember looking up at the posters hanging on my dad's classroom walls, and wondering about these familiar celebrity faces, beseeching the world to “READ” in big, bold capital letters. Through their words and actions, my parents taught me the practice of teaching should be carried out by compassionate people who cared deeply about their students.

My parents' example, and my relationship with reading, helped me form a generous outlook toward the world. It's my place in this church community that has helped me form a generous outlook toward myself.

Epic stories, shaped by the archetypal journey of the epic hero, show us a hero that encounters obstacles. But he or she also encounters mentors and guides that help the hero balance an initial unwillingness to move forward with an eventual readiness to do so.

So, you see, it's heroic acknowledging you need help. Because with that help, you may wake up one day and realize, "That thing that felt like it sucked my heart from my chest cavity? I've healed from that." My sense of the miraculous arises from the fact that **we can heal** from our wounds. We can't predict when we'll feel like we're standing on the opposite shore, waving at our misery from a distance. But we can be open to the possibility.

While characters in early stories face a foe in the form of an external threat, it is now more common to read stories where characters have to confront an internal threat--themselves.

For me, our church community does the assistive labor of the mentors and guides in these stories. Neighborhood helped me tell my story differently. It didn't happen overnight. But entering into community with big-hearted people willing to be honest and grow together helped me realize just because one person didn't take me seriously meant I had to lower my regard for myself.

Like the coming-of-age hero at the story's end, I'm at a place where I can say, "I can live with this now."

May we all grow together, in compassionate witness of each other's journeys, attendant to possibility, and nurtured in hope.