

Many years ago when I was a UU minister in Georgia, I was having lunch with a Presbyterian minister who told me about a local radio station that been getting complaints from certain fundamentalist groups for playing a song titled "Devil In Blue Jeans", a song in which the singer claims to be tempted by this "devil in blue jeans". Evidently, some listeners thought the song encouraged Devil worship. Our favorite local D.J. had complained, "Haven't these people ever heard of metaphor?"

"I am afraid," said my Presbyterian friend, "that I have a good many people in my congregation like that. They have no sense of poetry or metaphor about anything and they insist on a literal interpretation of every word in the Bible.

"Some days I envy you Unitarians," he said.

"The Grass is Not always Greener," said I, "we have a couple of literalists, too."

He looked surprised.

"Oh, not that they believe in the Bible literally, on the contrary, they reject it entirely, but they reject it literally. They don't see it as metaphor and poetry with the possibility of some religious truths. Rather they think of it as an unscientific, false, history. They are fundamentalists in reverse. They do not see religious stories as mytho-poetic interpretations of human experience. They see them as superstitious nonsense. You know, I even know some UUs who refused to play Santa Claus for their kids because they didn't want them to be brought up on silly fairy stories."

"How strange! So really you're in the same boat I am!" he said shaking his head.

"Just the other side of the same coin." said I.

I could have told him a story. You see there was this little girl who loved stories. She had read all 30 Oz books and the blue, the green, the yellow, the purple, the red, the lilac and the pink books of fairy tales. She had read Norse myths, Greek myths, and legends from around the world. Her favorite movies were Peter Pan and Snow White and her favorite TV program was about Davy Crockett who "kilt him a bar when he was only three." As a young child she went to churches who told her stories: stories about a boy whose father gave him a beautiful coat of many colors, stories about a boy who protected his kingdom from an invading giant by killing him with a slingshot, stories about the people who were slaves in Egypt, stories about a homeless woman giving birth in a stable to a magical child.

One day, however, this girl's family moved to a far away place called Oregon. They visited many churches, but didn't find one they liked. Finally, her parents went to a place called a Fellowship.

She liked the place at first, because there was a big, deep puddle in the back yard where she and her sister could catch tadpoles, take them home, and watch them turn into frogs. They called their frogs "mystery" and "magic" because it seemed to them quite amazing the way these two little fishlike creatures had become little frogs. But that was the only amazing thing they found at the Fellowship. The first day they went to class the teacher told them, "Today, class, we are going to study rocks, and molten lava, and how the earth was really created. You may have heard stories from your friends, but here we teach only the truth. We are not a group that tells stories, we want to teach you the facts." So all through the spring, they studied molten lava using paper mache mountains and the little girl complained to her mother, "This isn't church! It's a science class -- a boring science class!". It was close to Easter and the little girl thought to herself of all the other Easters with flowers, and songs, and everyone dressed up in pretty clothes, and stories about Jesus rising from death. But when she went to the Fellowship there were no songs, no flowers, no new spring hats, and even the tadpole pond had gone dry, but all the children were gathered for an Easter play. In the play two men were walking along talking sadly about the death of their friend Jesus, who was a very, very, very, good man. In the play a third joined them and said that some people have said that they saw Jesus alive again. The play ended with the three agreeing that those reports must be due to mass hallucinations brought on by grief. When she saw this play the little girl asked her teachers if this was the respectful, tolerant, attitude, they claimed to have towards other faiths. The teachers had no answers.

This play was too much for the little girl, who convinced her mother to allow her to stay home and read the funny papers. She still read stories at home and in regular school she still studied molten lava, but she knew that, for her, a church had to have a little magic, a little mystery, and most of all, enjoy good stories without being literalists about them. She didn't come back until a hippy minister came to the Fellowship and taught the adults how to enjoy a good story.

That, you see, is the story of my childhood. And my experience of some UUs in the 1950's was to feel like a Sissy Jupe set upon by Gradgrinds and Bounderbies--- for they were so obsessed with "facts" that they could miss some magical truths. Indeed, you can see their obsession in their inability to see a much more engaging naturalist lesson right under their noses with the magical transformation of tadpoles to frogs.

You see, the word "Magic" has two meanings. One is that of power over the natural with supernatural spirits intervening to help. That is the irrational side of magic, not the magic I am talking about. But the word Magic also means "overpowering influence, unusual effectiveness, or enchantment". We can reject the irrational and still wish for a religion that is powerful, effective, charming, and even enchanting.

I learned the word to describe the UU Gradgrinds: "Positivists."

"Those who believe that science is the only valid knowledge and facts the only possible object of knowledge; that philosophy does not possess a method different than science; and that the task of philosophy is to find the general principles common to all sciences for use as a guide to social organization. They deny existence or intelligibility of forces or substances that go beyond facts ascertained by science. They oppose any procedures of investigation that is not reducible to the scientific method."

Parenthetically, most of the more advanced and creative scientists are not themselves positivists. Their creativity requires them to realize that there are paradigms other than the ones they are currently using. Scientific revolutions are created by those who are open minded enough that they can find a whole new way to see something old. Those on the cutting edge of science realize its limits and relativity. They know how little they know. They are, they say, in awe of the mysteries beyond current knowledge.

Most of the UU positivists of the 1950's Fellowships have become more sophisticated in their understanding of religion. But our movement still tends to have a difficult time realizing that the language of religion has always been mytho-poetic. That if we choose not to take something literally we are not outside religious tradition, but rather that traditionally, sacred reality has been distinctly different than historical reality. It was orthodox Christianity which was unusual among religions in its not infrequent claims that its sacred stories happened in an historic setting --- although that has changed for many, many Christians today.

None the less our culture, shaped by old time Christianity is one that often fails to understand the difference between concrete historic reality and the subjective reality of religious myth, poetry, and story. The fundamentalists demand that we teach the Biblical story of creation in science classes as if it were a concrete historical, scientific, fact rather than a metaphor -- yet positivist UU's can scarcely afford to be too critical if they teach science instead of story in religion classes. The language of religion is poetry and story and metaphor, not disconnected facts.

The truth of a the story is measured by whether it happened, but by whether it really sheds light on the human experience.

Now I knew that at the tender age of eight when I had the unfortunate brush with UU fundamentalists. I knew that snakes didn't talk. I knew that men didn't live to be 969 years old, that that was just a way of saying very very old. As a youngster, I particularly liked the story of Joseph's coat of many colors. I certainly could identify with some of the issues presented -- a parent who played favorites, sibling rivalry, the anxiety of separation from one's family and being alone in a strange land. It was a story truer to my eight-year-old experience and more relevant to it, than a lesson about molten lava made from paper mache.

Religious stories are like poetry in other ways. As our life experience expands, the better we can understand the metaphors and stories.

Macbeth describes life as a “walking shadow,” “a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more, a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing.” While the denotative meaning of the passage may be perfectly clear to a sixteen-year-old, one is usually older when you have a moment that you experience your life in the the way Shakespeare describes it and you suddenly realize what it really means. Myth, stories and poetry gain meaning for us when they throw light on or give expression to some human experience of our own. There have been times in my life when a certain biblical story or passage has suddenly come to mind and I have realized that the oft repeated story or passage was getting at something that I didn't have enough life experience to recognize earlier. Suddenly an old story describes a new truth.

Images feed us emotionally, this is the reason of symbols. They make facts and experiences live. The symbol of the tree whose roots reach down to the center of the earth and whose branches reach up to touch the heavens evokes much stronger feeling for the strength and breadth of life than all the imageless words we could put together. The prayer "I will lift up mine eyes into the hills from whence comest my help" creates a feeling, almost an experience, of drawing in strength from the solid beauty of creation which surrounds us. To have vision, we must have images.

What religions are there where story is not an important aspect of the people's religion - a central part of the way they learn about life, nature, spirit, and human relationships? The native religions have stories of gods, animals, human beings and nature. Jews have stories of oppression, freedom, laws and promises. There are Suni wisdom stories. There were Greek myths. Jesus spoke in parables. And what lonesome traveller ever travelled to the High llama without getting a story? And do not the zen masters tell us impossible stories of paradox?

Our minds themselves when left alone to roam the night away from our conscious control don't speak in neat scientific formulae and linear statements. No, they talk to us with the complex symbols and images of the narrative of dreams. Recent scientific discoveries find that when the brain doesn't quite have a way to connect facts, it tends to use narrative.

Myth in secular language has often been used to mean a false story. But in the field of religion it has meant a story about the gods or holy ones or a story that expresses significant truths about human life and human nature. We can reject false stories and yet still want to tell stories to illumine our holy ones and our own humanity.

Joseph Campbell, famous scholar of myths and mythmaking, tells us that human beings have been involved with the creation of religious stories since the Neanderthal clans hung bears' skulls in their caves. And Campbell said of mythmaking: "Nobility of the spirit is the grace or ability to play, whether in heaven or on earth. And this was precisely the virtue of the Greek poets, artists, and philosophers, for whom the gods were true as poetry is true. We must take it to be the primitive and proper view of myth---contrasted with the heavier positivistic view.

For if it is true that God is not like anything: hence no one can understand the holy by means of a single image then it must be conceded that whenever a myth has been taken literally

its sense has been perverted. Reciprocally, whenever (myth) has been dismissed as a mere priestly fraud or a sign of inferior intelligence, truth has slipped out the other door."

While it is my belief, that an obsession with facts, what scholar Marcus Borg calls, "fact fundamentalism," meant that those 1950's UUs did not explore the deeper truths, to be fair to my positivist elders I have to say that their reaction, however extreme, had some validity.

For stories, laden with symbols and touching the deepest parts of ourselves, while they have inspired great good men and women like MLK or Mother Teresa have also been used for evil. Look at demagogues and tyrants and you will often see the skillful use of mytho-poetic images. Martin Luther King inspired people to do justice by calling up the images of our Biblical Heritage, images of the justice of the Prophets, images of love from the New Testament. But, too, the 20th century saw the images of supermen, the master race, the pantheistic gods of blood and soil become a rallying cry of genocide and conquest. In fact, the definition of a demagogue is of a leader who leads by arousing prejudices and passions -- emotions easily aroused by an unscrupulous storyteller. So we UUs are right to bring examination and thought to the mythic images of both the religious and secular worlds. We should look carefully at the images thrown at us in our daily world. Images and stories which play on our fears and our desire to vanquish evil are ones most deserving of our scrutiny. No doubt, the UUs of my childhood, had reacted against the practice of some fundamentalist churches which used the negative emotions of fear and conquest rather than the positive ones of compassion and enlightenment or of love and justice, to motivate their followers. Perhaps my elders thought it was imagination and metaphor itself, rather than imagination and metaphor used for the wrong purposes, which had caused their pain.

James Hopewell claims that not only religions, but also religious congregations often have stories, which patterns their lives. Sometimes, he says, congregations are unaware of the stories they tell and how they get caught up in the story. They may be unable to see things that don't fit the stories they tell. The stories can move them forward or hold them back or take them in the wrong direction. I thought of different churches I had known. One church I remembered, had a story that went something like, "Throughout our history our clergy and employees have taken advantage of us and we must watch very carefully and check up on them constantly to keep safe." That congregation couldn't figure out why they had such high staff turnover and everyone seemed to leave mad. There was an atmosphere of unhappiness and distrust and until they could tell a more complete story they were doomed to keep living out the old one. Another congregation's story was something like, "We are an oasis for liberals, eccentrics, and non-conformists, in a desert of right-wing fundamentalism." This story helped the congregation welcome all kinds of people. It had one of the most colorful mix of characters of any congregation I know.

On the other hand that story sometimes made it difficult to set limits on behaviors that were inappropriate and made the church somewhat too inward looking --- reluctant to make common cause with others in the community whom they had defined as a part of the desert.

The stories people tell about the character of their community and their relationship with it, can tell you a lot about them. The stories people tell you about their religion can tell you a lot about them.

There are good stories to be told about who we are as faith communities and who we aspire to be. There are magical stories. There are stories about lives that have been changed. There are stories about finding a place of acceptance and caring after years of rejection. There are stories about making a difference in the community. There are stories of bravery and kindness in the face of death. There are stories about crossing bridges that some thought uncrossable. There are stories of finding a spiritual home. I think we are sometimes afraid to tell those stories and those dreams. We have had disappointments. We like to be absolutely truthful. But sometimes we lose the magical moments weighed down in a recitation of facts. The Grandgrind part of us the part that is afraid of fancy, or metaphor, or magic, or dreaming, gets in the way of the stories that might give life and hope and pride to a religious community. We step on the Sissy Jupe in ourselves and in one another.

Part of being a UU has to do with owning our stories, and choosing which myths and stories our lives will embody in dramatic form. We are not just the listeners, as the great storyteller weaves her magic, but we ourselves create stories of our own. We are the magicians, if we are willing to roll up our sleeves.

Reading 1 and 2 on the following pages

The Prince and The Magician
by John Fowles from The Magus

Once upon a time there was a young prince who believed in all things but three. He did not believe in princesses, he did not believe in islands, he did not believe in God. His father, the king, told him that such things did not exist. As there were no princesses or islands in his father's domains, and no sign of God, the prince believed his father.

But then, one day, the prince ran away from his palace and came to the next land. There, to his astonishment, from every coast he saw islands, and on these islands, strange and troubling creatures whom he dared not name. As he was searching for a boat, a man in full evening dress approached him along the shore.

"Are those real islands?" asked the young prince.

"Of course they are real islands," said the man in evening dress.

"And those strange and troubling creatures?"

"They are all genuine and authentic princesses."

"Then God must also exist!" cried the prince.

"I am God," replied the man in evening dress with a bow.

The young prince returned home as quickly as he could.

"So you are back," said his father, the king.

"I have seen islands, I have seen princesses, I have seen God," said the prince reproachfully.

The king was unmoved.

"Neither real islands, nor real princesses, nor a real God exist."

"I saw them!"

"Tell me how God was dressed."

"God was in full evening dress"

"Were the sleeves of his coat rolled back?"

The prince remembered that they had been. The king smiled.

"That is the uniform of a magician. You have been deceived."

At this, the prince returned to the next land and went to the same shore, where once again he came upon the man in full evening dress.

"My father, the king has told me who you are," said the prince indignantly. "You deceived me last time, but not again. Now I know that those are not real islands and real princesses, because you are a magician."

The man on the shore smiled.

"It is you who are deceived, my boy. In your father's kingdom there are many islands, and many princesses. But you are under your father's spell, so you cannot see them."

The prince pensively returned home. When he saw his father, he looked him in the eye.

"Father, is it true that you are not a real king, but only a magician?"

The king smiled and rolled back his sleeves.

"Yes, my son, I'm only a magician."

"Then the man on the other shore was God."

"The man on the other shore was another magician."

"I must know the truth, the truth beyond magic."

"There is no truth beyond magic," said the king.

The prince was full of sadness. He said, "I will kill myself."

The king, by magic caused death to appear. Death stood in the door and beckoned to the prince. The prince shuddered. He remembered the beautiful but unreal islands and the unreal but beautiful princesses.

"Very well," he said, "I can bear it."

"You see, my son," said the king, "you, too, now begin to be a magician."

From Hard Times
by Charles Dickens

"Now what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!"

The scene was a plain, bare, monotonous vault of a school-room, and the speaker's square forefinger emphasized his observations by underscoring every sentence with a line on the schoolmaster's sleeve. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's square wall of a forehead, which had his eyebrows for its base, while his eyes found commodious cellars in two dark caves, overshadowed by the wall. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's voice, which was inflexible, dry, and dictatorial. The emphasis was helped by the speaker's hair, which bristled on the skirts of his bald head, a plantation of firs to keep the wind from its shining surface, all covered with knobs, like the crust of a plum pie, as if the head had scarcely warehouse room for the hard facts stored inside.....

"In this life, we want nothing but Facts, sir; nothing but Facts!"

The speaker, and the school master ... backed a little, and swept with their eyes the inclined plane of little vessels then and there arranged in order, ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim.

Thomas Gradgrind, sir. A man of realities. A man of facts and calculations. A man who proceeds upon the principle that two and two are four, and nothing over, and who is not to be talked into allowing for anything over. Thomas Gradgrind, sir --- peremptorily Thomas--Thomas Gradgrind. With a rule and a pair of scales, and the multiplication table always in his pocket, sir, ready to weight and measure any parcel of human nature, and tell you exactly what it comes to. It is a mere question of figures, a case of simple arithmetic. You might hope to get some other nonsensical

belief into the head of George Gradgrind, or Augustus Gradgrind, of John Gradgrind, or Joseph Gradgrind (all suppositions, non-existent persons), but into the head of Thomas Gradgrind --- no sir!

In such terms Mr. Gradgrind always mentally introduced himself, whether to his private circle of acquaintances, or to the public in general. In such terms, no doubt, substituting the words "boys and girls," for "sir", Thomas Gradgrind now presented Thomas Gradgrind to the little pitchers before him, who were to be filled so full of facts.

... "Girl number twenty," said Mr. Gradgrind, squarely pointing his square forefinger, "Who is that girl?"

"Sissy Jupe, sir," explained number twenty, blushing, standing up, and curtseying.

"Sissy is not a name," said Mrs. Gradgrind. "Don't call yourself Sissy. Call yourself Cecilia."

"His father as calls me Sissy, sir" returned the young girl in a trembling voice, and with another curtsey.

"Then he has no business to do it," said Mr. Gradgrind. "tell him he mustn't. Cecilia Jupe. Let me see. What is your father?"

"He belongs to the horseriding, if you please sir."

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"You mustn't tell us about the ring here. Very well, then, Describe your father as a horsebreaker. He doctors sick horses I dare say?"

"Oh yes, sir."

"Very well, then. He is a veterinary surgeon, a farrier, and horsebreaker. Give me your definition of a horse." "Girl number twenty unable to define a horse! Girl number twenty possessed of no facts in reference to one

of the commonest of animals! Some boy's definition of a horse. Bitzer, Your definition of a horse."

"Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, shed hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth." Thus (and much more) Bitzer.

"Now girl number twenty," said Mr. Gradgrind. You know what a horse is."

Another gentleman stepped forward. "very well," said this gentleman, briskly smiling, and folding his arms. "that's a horse. Now, let me ask you girls and boys: Would you paper a room with representations of horses?"

After a pause, one half of the children cried in chorus, "Yes sir!" Upon which the other half (seeing in the gentleman's face that Yes was wrong,) cried out in chorus, "No, sir!" --- as is the custom in these examinations.

"Of course, NO. Why wouldn't you? I'll explain to you," said the gentleman, "why you wouldn't paper a room with representations of horses. Do you ever see houses walking up and down the sides of rooms in reality -- in fact? Do you?"

"Yes, sir!" from one half. "No sir!" from the other.

"Of course, No," said the gentleman, with an indignant look at the wrong half. "Why, then, you are not to see anywhere what you don't see in fact; you are not to have anywhere what you don't have in fact. What is called Taste is only another name for Fact. This is a new principle, a discovery, a great discovery," said the gentleman. "now I'll try you again. Suppose you were going to carpet a room. Would you use a carpet having a representation of flowers upon it?"

"There being a general conviction by this time that "No, sir!" was always the right answer to this gentleman, the chorus of No was very strong. Only a few feeble stragglers said Yes: among them Sissy Jupe.

"Girl number twenty," said the gentleman, smiling in the calm strength of knowledge. "So you would carpet your room --- or your husband's room, if you were a grown woman, and had a husband --- with representations of flowers, would you?" said the gentleman. "Why would you?"

"If you please, sir, I am very fond of flowers," returned the girl.

"And that is why you would put tables and chairs upon them, and have people walking over them with heavy boots?"

"It wouldn't hurt them, sir. They wouldn't crush and wither, if you please, sir. They would be the pictures of what was very pretty and pleasant, and I would fancy ----"

"Aye, aye, aye! But you mustn't fancy," cried the gentleman, quite elated by coming so happily to his point. "That's it! You are never to fancy."

"You are not, Cecilia Jupe," Thomas Gradgrind solemnly repeated, "to do anything of the kind."

"Fact, fact, fact!" said the gentleman. And "Fact, fact, fact!" repeated Thomas Gradgrind.

"You are to be in all things regulated and governed," said the gentleman, "By fact. We hope to have, before long, a board of fact, composed of commissioners of fact, who will force people to be a people of fact, and of nothing but fact. You must discard the word fancy altogether. You have nothing to do with it. You are not to have, in any object of use or ornament, what would be a contradiction in fact. You don't walk upon flowers in fact; you cannot be allowed to walk upon flowers in carpets. You don't find foreign birds and butterflies come and perch upon you crockery; you cannot be permitted to paint foreign birds and butterflies upon your crockery. You never meet with quadrupeds going up and down walls. This is the new discovery. This is fact. This is taste.

The girl curtsied, and sat down. She was very young, and she looked as if she were frightened by the matter-of-fact prospect the world afforded.