

Mysticism & Story Telling

By Robert Allan Roush

The whole, ultimately, is much greater than the sum of the parts. ***It has to be***. If you think it's not, that such a thing could not be, you shouldn't be sitting there listening to me right now. You shouldn't do things in life. If we're not more than the bag of bones and couple quarts of chemicals within us, then there is no point in living. But, OK, OK, you can conclude that life itself IS the meaning...

Meaning... That *is* what I'm referring to. Meaning for life and purpose for living: Is there any? I'm not going to run off at the mouth right now and tell jokes about crawling up mountains and asking hermit-swamis "What is the meaning of life?" But, maybe it is a little bit of a joke... And maybe that's a pretty good image to start with. And so, with that question of meaning, and that image, we have the stuff of mysticism and story- telling.

The type of subject-matter mysticism points to in any religious tradition, usually defines universal underlying spiritual "truth" and not dogma. These ideas include things like forgiveness, blessings (and especially blessings in disguise) and gratitude. Oh. Did I forget to mention Love..? More on that at the end...

No matter what I blather at you this morning, this question will always be the stuff for more stories to tell.

So, once we get beyond survival and perpetuation of the species, which is perhaps our biological purpose, does that biological purpose fit within a larger purpose? And once we age beyond that biological purpose, what purpose do we have? Psychological treatises tell us that self-actualization (or self-realization) is supposed to be our end-of-life

pursuit when our other needs are taken care of. What would be the point of that without broader meaning?

Notice I said psychological treatises, not “religion” ... And so we roll around on the floor with this question of meaning, holding our stomach like the pain is some kind of rot that needs to be expelled, or, are we pregnant? Keep that image in mind too.

Art Garfunkel said that, “We are like circus bears running about banging pots and pans, while all the while, we wish we could write music that would move the stars to pity.”

I’ve had this question about meaning in my mind since I was at least 14 years old. Probably before that, but I started to seriously explore it by age 14. I had been born with a sexual desire counter to the acceptable - at least at the time. Most, OK, ALL world religions get the (air quote) “meaning” of homosexuality wrong. Just plain WRONG.

And let us not forget that science also got it wrong, calling it an illness for which castration, electric shock, lobotomy, prison and institutionalization were the prescription. You can still find a doctor today to administer the electric shock. Anyone interested?... While “science” over-all reversed its opinion with further study, and only years *after* I was born, those who perished in an institution for their sexual desire would be little comforted.

So, from within me and from the way I was made, came the question: If religion and science can be wrong about me, it must be just one attempt of many to find meaning within human existence. So, this quest is both individual **and** collective. I suppose I could have concluded that I hated religion and science – but I didn’t. Far from it. Rather, I’ve

developed an affection for both religion and science as children that think they know everything (when they don't), but still say the most incredible (or the darndest) things all the time. The trouble has always been that we have tried to make that meaning match our other preconceived notions – mostly about other human beings. So, yup, cliché coming: religion, at least, really is just shoving a square peg into, well, not a round hole, but an infinity too vast for any of us to comprehend. And so we crawl: We falter...

Now, I will tell you a story... It's a true story.

But before I begin, the ending!: One of the things I feel strongly about concluding, is that our meager senses as humans are insufficient to observe the true and complete nature of the universe - let alone anything that might lie beyond it. I concluded this one evening while standing on a bridge over the Niagara River on Goat Island, which lies at the top of the American Falls at Niagara Falls. OK. I was tripping on acid at the time. But, while standing on the bridge and listening to the freight-train roar of water below me, I had an epiphany. I was keenly aware of the Falls with all my senses. But what else was there to perceive? I was certain that my senses were inadequate to know more. What else might be there with me? We already know that sharks and birds have sense organs that perceive electro-magnetic fields, a sense with which we are not graced. I further thought, "If I were to jump now, and kill myself, I might be able to perceive more..." This, obviously, was not an experiment I conducted. I also thought of how stupid it would be to do such a thing. Still, the experience, now more than 30 years old, was so profound, that I concluded that if we think we have all the apparatus we need in this life to know all of the absolute truth, we are

delusional, or, downright arrogant. The quest for knowledge is limited. Believing it is not, is just that: a belief.

My story, and, I assure you, it *is* a true story, speaks of an insight, an intuition that cannot be proved – well, I could not return to tell you the results of the experiment; I am not Lazarus – *that* is another story! But it connects me to St. John of the Cross and the words from the special music song this morning: “from o’er the fortress walls, the wind would brush his hair against his brow. And with its smoothest hand, caressed each sense it would allow.” So, from the great beyond, at this moment of death, St. John is saying that all senses were activated... all it would allow. So, what would it *not* allow? It was not until more than 20 years later that I would hear Loreena McKennit’s song “Dark Night of the Soul” and recognize that I had experienced the same thing. Imagine my further surprise to find her inspiration lived hundreds of years earlier! We are connected, even to those who lived long ago. To me, this is part of our 7th principle: the principle which emerged when UUs reached out to the Pagans. Yes, it also means we believe in recycling as Hope mentioned last week as part of a joke, but the meaning goes a bit deeper.

Whether my story is about a glimpse of real truth or it is about a drug-induced delusion doesn’t matter. To view it one way or another, you would personally have to ***believe*** it meant one and not the other. It *could* possibly be true, but, more essentially, it is the circumstance of the story that is important: the way needed to prove such a “revelation” makes it something that cannot be known. Only a story can begin to draw back that veil between us and the vast truths we have yet to and will likely never perceive. Remembering again the

words of St. John of the Cross: “The veil concealed my eyes, while all within lay quiet as the dead.” He is referring to the veil between worlds.

Our natural tendency to tell stories might mean we know this to be true at some level. Like the three blind people positioned at a different part of an elephant – they fumble and mistake what small thing they feel with their hands as the whole of the truth – perhaps the ear is a fan, or the tusk a plumbing pipe... but working together (and yes, I’m referring to our third and fourth principles) we just might get a more complete picture.

Talking about these concepts is a bit like the dialogue about “time” in a Dr. Who episode. Our personal beliefs vary widely within our own congregation. I’ve met different congregants that “believe” in the possibility of such things as ghosts and UFO’s. I’m comfortable with grouping many things like that with the unknowable, and accepting that some may be knowable. I’m less sure of some of the quantum science that is emerging as “knowable”: The former is supported by my personal experience, but not the latter, and so, the lines may be blurred between the knowable and unknowable. Science has proven many times what was thought as unknowable. It is right to be suspicious about claims of mysticism (do you hear “magic” when I say that word?) when so much of what we believed to be magic in the past, has become explainable. But, it is arrogant to assume we as the simple creatures we are, have all the apparatus necessary to know everything. We can only know what is knowable.

So, yes, not being able to prove something isn’t true, doesn’t prove it to be true. But, my epiphany permanently opened the possibility of truth to a much larger field. *Much* larger. If infinity means anything to you.

In Carlos Castaneda's series about the Yaqui warrior Indian, Don Juan (and a side note here: I realize this series was a fiction that he claimed to have really happened), but in this series, Castaneda *correctly* describes the Yaqui system of dividing the universe into 2: That which is known (which includes what could be known): the "Tonal", and that which is unknowable: the "Nagual". The distinction between the unknown and the unknowable is significant: You cannot ever know the unknowable. Ever. Some refuse to believe in such a classification. But, again, we're back in the realm of "belief".

When we tell stories, we are telling about ourselves and our lives. We are telling about what we think happened, and what didn't happen... But, we are also putting a spin on the way we want someone else to see something.

Science can only tell us about that which can be known. Stories can tell us more. Stories tell us about who we are and where we are going in relation to where we have been. One thing that story telling allows us all to do is to convey that the whole is somehow greater than the sum of the parts. How can this be? Surely, a symphony is far more when taken as a whole than the "collection of sound" that the term suggests. A story or novel transports us. It is a canvas on which we can paint our own lives and ideas about life. If action can play itself out in real time, we can create an alternate universe in which we can explore that action – and deeper aspects of its meaning. I suppose what I am addressing is the idea that something in our existence *actually has a meaning*, beyond the random collection of sensory experience it is composed of. For that, we need *intent*.

So now, the second part of what I want to tell you about this morning (don't worry I'm WAY more than half done) is a bit of a warning... The stories we tell can hurt one another, and often, that *is* the intent.

From an April 25, 2015 editorial by Leonard Pitts, Mr. Pitts states: "On topics as varied as climate change, healthcare, terrorism and the president's birthplace, GOP leaders and media figures have obfuscated and prevaricated with masterly panache, sowing confusion in the midst of absolute clarity, pretending controversy where there is none and finding, always, a ready audience of the fearful and easily gulled." OK. Let's blame misinformation on the right-wing. Or should we?

Just a few nights later, while watching "The Bible" television mini-series (no, I'm not embarrassed to admit it), I watched as Saul gathered Jewish male citizens to take up arms and march against the Christian encampment outside of Jerusalem. In his speech to the rabble, he insisted that it was an encampment of the "weak minded and gullible". These similarities in addressing the characteristics of the right wing (or any opposing party) are not lost on me and they should not be lost on you. The right and the left in the US, now sharply defined due to social media, are two ends of the same animal, and, if we don't stave off the growing schism, the resultant rot might lead to another and excruciatingly ridiculous civil war. So, now remember the image of rolling around on the floor to either expel waste or give birth. The powerful image from the Bible television mini-series is that if you believe in Christ, those who would put you down, believe you to be ignorant and gullible. Something the left echoes against the right as the right complains about leftist intellectual elitism, and that the right claims about the left with its "Libtard" label. I assure you, I have reached the age where I know this story to have been updated to

today's politics. In my youth, the Jesus of the day was depicted as quite liberal in popular musicals like Godspell and Jesus Christ Superstar. It's not the first pendulum swing for Jesus. It's funny how such polarized views can "own" a mystical religious figure like Jesus. Remember the blind folks and the elephant? [longest pause]

There is little worse today, than alarmism sown by either the left or right. Most of it unravels quickly once facts are checked, or additional information is considered, that places a statement in context. It makes it even uglier when the truth is used to mislead and sway our opinion against one another. The legal definition for the civil offense of slander has included the truth, when it is specifically used to harm someone, and sometimes such cases are won. Let us learn a lesson from this: hurting each other is not the end which we are trying to achieve. An improved world is what we are looking for, and that improved world can only exist in a place where we do not try to harm one another any way we can. Does that make sense? I hope it does, because it's common sense. No degree or advanced education is required.

No one is more on the front lines of this thing than my husband and I. Take it from someone who belongs to a group who gets its daily dose of scapegoating. Homosexuals are responsible for everything from all natural disasters to a train crash in Philadelphia, and yes, someone gullible believes it. But now, I am gulled by the use of alarmism to attack others regardless of a "side to pick". We have lived our lives, my husband and I, in a relatively free fashion-not imprisoned, ruffed up or murdered for who we are- provided we apply common sense to whom we share "what" with. That said, most people who know us longer than a couple weeks learn that we are a couple. Some people learn that neither we nor they will explode for being civil toward one another-

and that the assumed evil of another person is really just a myth. Neither the homosexual nor the conservative Christian who got to know them perished. Neither of us may ever want to be the other, but, we get along in the world, and, we learn to work on what we *do* agree on. We may be seen together at a fundraiser walk for cancer. One of us might hold a trash bag for the other while we clean garbage from the waterfront. Everyone can be an example to the people around us who know us, and knowing us is an important part of the equation.

Life is lived at the local level with our neighbors. If we get to know our neighbors, we will know them to be worthy people. Every last one of them. *This is our UU principle.* The static and noise of left and right wing politics uses the truth as a conveniently moveable wall, whose epicenter is wherever we choose it to be. If you are participating in this “right and left” debate, stop it, and become only an observer. Let it be the non-sensical fictional movie that it is, playing on a screen of hatred and mistrust. It is not real.

There are no sides to pick. The truth is not told in 140 characters. The truth is that bigger concept of all those “parts” that I’ve been referring to, and, when we add it up, the whole *is* greater than the sum of all those parts.

So, I’ll say it again: There are no sides to pick. There *is* attacking that needs to stop on both sides.

As UU’s we are in a unique position to bridge the gap, rather than jump to a “liberal” or “leftist” view. I don’t like calling our religion liberal. It places us on a side of a divide that if we do not act to mend, will bring us all down in the end. Maybe the truth can start to be told in 4 characters, rather than 140. But it is the action of that truth that

matters. Corny cliché time again: Those four characters, of course, are “L O V E”. But, you can’t just say, “All we need is love”. You have to show it. Demonstrate it. You have to act on love in the face of all the noise. In spite of the noise. Wait. BECAUSE of the noise.

We tell stories to try to explain these feelings we have about where we fit into the universe. We tell stories that we put a spin on that try to destroy other people and their viewpoint. Being “right” is not a justification for destroying or even trying to destroy someone else. Ever. It is against our principles as UUs.

You don’t need to drop acid and go to Niagara Falls to feel that the whole has got to be greater than the sum of the parts. Maybe you have or will need to take care of a loved one who is dying, or whose personality is slipping away due to something like Alzheimer’s disease. We can feel those feelings of love that make us sure that the whole is indeed greater than the sum of the parts. We can feel it in the quietest of ways – while walking in a forest or playing with a child or pet. It can come about without drama or fanfare. We can take a serious look at ourselves and what we are, and, in the end, we can be certain that there is both the meaning and purpose in life we seek: that our capacity for love is the answer to the equation, and the answers to all those other questions we have, lose their meaning in the light of such a truth...

Robert Roush, August 2015