

# White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

## The Exercise of Definition

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**By Terri Schanks**

Buddhists call people magicians because they say our stories create things out of thin air. It's also true that your compassion, your pain, your sadness, and your joy — these things all exist in a place of the non-physical yet totally tangible places you call your life. So tonight, after spending time with family, after watching the sands pass through the hourglass of time, after listening to the stories of my parents as they talk about the things on their minds, I have tucked them in and they are sleeping soundly. Their stories have become their lives, a lifetime of choices...They have become their stories, and their stories have become them. And so it goes.

## **“Understory” by Mark Nepo**

I've been watching stars  
rely on the darkness they  
resist. And fish struggle with  
and against the current. And  
hawks glide faster when their  
wings don't move.

Still I keep retelling what  
happens till it comes out  
the way I want.

We try so hard to be the  
main character when it is  
our point of view that  
keeps us from the truth.

The sun has its story  
that no curtain can stop.

It's true. The only way beyond  
the self is through it. The only  
way to listen to what can never  
be said is to quiet our need  
to steer the plot.

When jarred by life, we might  
unravel the story we tell ourselves  
and discover the story we are in,  
the one that keeps telling us.

One thing that intrigues me about our holidays and annual rituals is that there is the possibility of something beautiful and powerful: We have the ability to use the yearly events as benchmarks so we can chart and note progress. What has changed for you since last year's Thanksgiving? Maybe your child graduated or maybe a parent passed away. Maybe your parents separated, or maybe you started a new relationship. And what about two years ago? Maybe...like our Sanctuary family, you arrived at a border and summoned all your courage to cross that border, not knowing at all what was in store for you. What is that story for you, and how does that story shape and reshape your identity?

Every year around this time, I engage this simple practice of reflection. I think back to previous Thanksgivings, to previous Novembers. And this year, I am thinking a lot about November 2013. Only five short years ago. But also...it was five long years ago. So much can happen in five years, and so much has happened. In November 2013, I was in my first semester of seminary. Back then, I would occasionally get unexpectedly emotional when I realized that this new journey on which I was embarking was huge. I knew I would be changed, but I couldn't have predicted then what those changes would be. I had no idea what to expect. Maybe you have had similar moments—moments that you knew were auspicious, ripe with possibility, pregnant with expectation.

At the time I didn't think that parish ministry was right for me, because I didn't think I wanted to be a preacher. I was most acquainted with one style of preaching, and it was pushy and definite and certain. I couldn't imagine being able to hold court with a calm and authentic presence while delivering such rousing and engaging pronouncements of capital T truth. I'm not even sure if I believed in capital T truth, but the majority of the preaching I had heard up to that point in my life involved attempts to crack open that elusive nut that we called absolute truth or unwavering reality. Boy, did I have a lot to learn! I learned that this version of capital T truth lacked nuance; it lacked an understanding of both-and thinking; and it also failed to take into consideration the fullness of people's stories and to honor them as part of the fabric that makes up the human experience. I was on the cusp of inheriting a new way of thinking—a new understanding of preaching as public and

communal exploration that can (and should) be infused with humility and curiosity. Not just curiosity about the complexity of life but also curiosity about other people's stories and experiences.

During my first semester, I took a class called "Bearing Witness: The Power of Story," where we studied the intersection of race, theology, and theater. We read about the life and death of Emmett Till, we imagined the last day in the life of MLK, and we contemplated the life and death of Trayvon Martin. I was shocked that I had never been taught about Emmett Till, and quite frankly, I was embarrassed that I didn't know his story. Many historians pointed to his death and his open-casket funeral as an igniting spark for the Civil Rights movement, and I didn't even know his name. I was learning the hard lesson that the more you know, the more you realize that you don't know very much. I also learned how vital it was to be open to hearing new stories. We shape our stories, and our stories shape us. So as we learn new stories, we get a richer and fuller understanding of our own identity--both individually and communally. I was beginning to see a fuller picture of American history, and it was jarring. As the poet says,

"When jarred by life, we might  
unravel the story we tell ourselves  
and discover the story we are in,  
the one that keeps telling us."

And in that process of unraveling old stories and discovering truer ones, how do we allow ourselves to tell a new story? It is helpful and empowering to remember that we are not perfect. We always have more to learn and how we adapt to that new information shows a lot about who we are. It might be easy to become self-righteous or somehow high and mighty about lessons that we learned a while ago. "What is taking everyone else so long? What decade is it," we might ask. But who was it that had the patience to teach us that lesson (even though they themselves may have learned it **much** earlier than we had)?

And how do we allow others to tell new stories? As Unitarian Universalists, we value a world where the dignity and worth of each person is upheld and honored. Part of that dignity comes when we honor the definitions and labels that people set and use for themselves. We purport to be a community that honors our neighbors' self-determination, self-definition, and autonomy. But so very often we get into trouble because we give people around us the labels or definitions we think they deserve or the ones we want them to have. Or maybe we are still using old definitions or assuming that people still identify as they did thirty years ago. My theory is that the more we are open to our own evolution and growth and to the changing nature of our own stories, the more we are open to hearing and growing with the changing stories of others.

So let's take a moment to think about some of our own changing stories. Have you told a new story lately? Or have you encountered a story that is untrue or no-longer-true? Maybe you broke the power of a lie that had been holding you under its thumb. Maybe you used to tell yourself that you had to choose between happiness and health. Or maybe the choice was between being honest and being loved. Whatever the case, what does your life look like now with those walls torn down? And which walls still need tearing down? Maybe some form of addiction is holding you captive. Maybe you are living with fear of the unknown or fear of the other. Or maybe you are just stuck in a routine that is slowly sucking away your spirit and your joy. Today is a day to celebrate the stories of people who have found their power and authenticity while swimming against the current, and I hope you find resonance there.

With your permission, I would love to tell you a bit of my story...

Growing up, I had been taught that homosexuality was not a legitimate way of living life as a good Christian. It was made clear to me that being gay and being Christian were mutually exclusive, which was especially hard since I was coming to terms with my own gay identity. All I knew was an exclusivist and dogmatic religious community, and as a youth I did not yet have the power to imagine another way of being religious. I felt trapped both by my religious community and by the heteronormativity that functions like many other dominant norms—silently

and effectively. It was not so much a flood of messages saying “straight is great.” It was more a steady and constant drip of subtle messages implying that gayness was funny, unnatural, different...dangerous. And in the schoolyard, it was the worst thing you could be. Smear the Queer, we said.

I was told that my very being was sinful, that my innermost desires were demonic. Everywhere I looked, there was judgment and fear of gay people. I was told and shown consistently that what I knew most intimately about myself was not just less than beautiful, it was the opposite of beautiful. I was taught to feel guilt and shame at the core of my very existence, and I carried that guilt and shame with me through therapy, prayer circles, accountability groups, and to the local chapter of Exodus International. For those of you unfamiliar with them, Exodus International is a self-proclaimed ex-gay ministry that advocates for conversion therapy. I was at my wit's end, and I was willing to try anything. I wanted to be able to tell a new story, and I thought I had found my answer.

Well...spoiler alert: The conversion therapy didn't work. I came to accept my sexuality as the incredible gift that it was, but it didn't happen instantly. When I first came out, I didn't go to Pride parades. I refused to be fabulous or flamboyant in any way. I was so used to the boundaries that I had set for myself that I couldn't imagine living without them. I tried to make myself smaller, simply because I knew the label I had accepted for myself was so threatening to certain people. I still wanted so badly to be tame and normative even in the midst of my queerness. “I'm just like you,” I claimed just a little too loudly, trying to hide the thing that made me so special and powerful.

But something inside of me was calling me deeper, calling me to heal the divide between my body and my spirit. I knew there was a greater truth somewhere deeper, and I was committed to finding it. I began taking dance and yoga classes, longing to be more connected to my own body, and in these embodied activities, my spirit came alive. I often wonder what would have happened to me if I hadn't fought for this power and agency to heal the division between my sexuality and my spirituality. But this whole and integrated self did not bloom overnight. There had

been so many impediments to growth. There was infertile soil. Droughts of denial. The weeds of self-hatred had almost suffocated me, yet still I grew. The belief that I held more passionately than the Nicene Creed was the belief that I was beautiful as I was and that I did not need to be ashamed, secretive, or apologetic about it anymore. And now, 14 years after breaking free from the fences that constrained me, I am confident that I can live and thrive in any climate and weather any storm. I am not invincible, nor do I pretend to be, but I envision myself as a mighty tree. I still need watering and pruning, but my trunk is strong and my roots are deep.

As more and more people on the margins are telling their stories, we are able to broaden our circle and expand our concept of who is in the center or whose voices and whose stories get privileged. The poet Marge Piercy says it best when she says, “it starts when you say *We* and know who you mean, and each day you mean one more.” People with specific identities of privilege have grown accustomed to seeing themselves represented almost everywhere that they look. In this moment, the call is to decenter whiteness, heteronormativity, and other identities of privilege. It will surely cause some people grief and pain. But can we also find an invitation in the practice? An invitation to wonder about other people’s stories and an invitation to connect with those who have felt underrepresented or marginalized. In that spirit of sharing, I have asked one of our beloved friends to share her story. And I invite you to hold a spirit of curiosity and welcome.

[Guest speaker]

Good morning.

I am going to violate decorum by NOT introducing myself. I’ll come back to that later. Jack invited me to briefly speak with you about identity and name.

I am a firm believer that it is a basic human right that everyone can claim the name by which they are to be called. This is true of the individual, as well as peoples. Negro vs. Black. Ojibway vs. Anishinaabe. Gender non-conforming, gender-fluid, transgender, pan-gender.....

According to my birth certificate, I was given a name within five days of my birth. I don't recall anyone asking me if I liked it. But, it was a fine name.....if you are a boy. In all of my life, I rarely thought of myself as being a boy. Through my childhood, the disconnect between my boy name and my self-identity grew. It was my name, but it might as well have been a number....08-24410...My name, like a number, had little meaning, but it did identify me to others.

In my early adulthood, I gave myself a new name....a very secret name. Back then, I was profoundly ashamed of myself, who I was...how I felt inside. In the event that someone would "catch me" being myself in the future, I thought, I did not want to be traced back to my family.....and thrust my shame upon them. So, having succumbed to Society's judgment upon me, I dropped my family name...which is DeBroux. I didn't want to completely cut myself off from that name, so I feminized it to Debra. I liked it. It fit me.

My new last name was long, pretentious, and showed my immaturity, frankly. Eventually, it evolved simply to "Sault".....as in Sault St. Marie, Michigan....a favorite region of mine. Still a little pretentious, but too much a part of me to be abandoned. For years I was Debra Sault. I like the name. Remnants of it are still found in my email address.

I began my gender transition process a few years ago. As I slowly moved from presenting as a man to presenting as womanly as I can at my age, I found myself in a tricky situation: people wondered what in the world I was. "Is he a man? Or is she a woman?" So, I introduced myself as Dee--it is more androgynous, less definitive than Debra--just to reduce other people's discomfort. At least, that was my goal. I also RE-claimed, with pride and NO shame, my family name.

Those of you who know me, know me as Dee. Over time, I thoroughly embraced that name as a sort of nick name. I like it. Please feel free to continue to use it.

Last Tuesday, November 20 (5 days ago), was special for two reasons.

It was the annual Transgender Day of Remembrance. The day that people remember the names of those who, in the past year, were murdered simply because they were gender non-conforming. I use the day to remember the MANY more people who experienced violence, but were not killed by it. Particularly poignant to me, I also give time to the transgenders who ended their own lives because they experienced psychological violence just too long to endure.

Last Tuesday is especially important to me personally, because at 1:00, I appeared in court... the Circuit Court of Pierce County, Wisconsin...the Honorable Judge Joseph Boles presiding. Twelve minutes later, my legal name was changed from my boy name to the name by which I declare myself! a half-century in the coming! Remembering the names of the dead and changing my legal name on the same day?.....That was not planned. But, perhaps there is some cosmic meaning in there, somewhere. I don't know.

I don't need government recognition of my name to validate who I am. However, from now on, all levels of government and their creations must bend to MY will—my basic human right—to be recognized by the name that I claim for myself. Now, please indulge me, as I start over with my presentation.

Good morning.

I would like to celebrate with you and introduce myself to you for the first time... again. I AM Debra Sault DeBroux ! And I think I've finally come home. Thank you for listening.

[Jack] Thank you, Debra. Thanks, Dee.

It is good and important to center the voices and stories of those on the margins, the queer, the non-normative. What a privilege it is for our community here to be made richer through the expression and celebration of those among us with marginalized identities! And to be clear...MY life is enriched by being here in a space where I know that I am fully embraced and welcomed in my complexity and

where people across the gender spectrum are welcome not just to exist and survive but to express and thrive.

I also wonder what strength it has taken for you to be you. In just a moment, I'm going to ask you to turn to a neighbor to engage in the beautiful practice of telling our stories and listening to each other's stories. You'll have one minute each to respond to the following questions: What fences have you busted out of? What has tried to keep you small? When have you told a new story? I'll ring the bell to bring us back together. And once more I'll repeat the questions: What fences have you busted out of? What has tried to keep you small? When have you told a new story?

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Can we imagine what we might learn about ourselves and each other if we remain curious and open to telling and hearing our stories? And more importantly...will we be ready and equipped to do this work? We must keep our eye on the changing tides and adapt appropriately. We must acknowledge and atone for our previous missteps. We must continue the work of de-centering the various privileges that we hold. And we must keep looking toward the margins and learn how to broaden the circle.

This is the work that pulls on me. This is the work that calls to me, and I am responding. Will you join me?