

A Story Told

By Rev. Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD March 19, 2023

The Buddha offered his students a powerful story. Long ago, a traveler carefully made his way through rough, mountainous terrain. Without warning, a huge and hungry tiger bound towards him, and as the traveling man ran in flight, he found himself at the edge of a perilous mountainside. With nowhere else to flee, he grasped onto a thick vine and swung himself over the edge of the cliff. Above him growled the hungry tiger. After hearing another ominous snarl, he looked below and saw another tiger awaiting his fall at the bottom of the mountain. With hardly enough time to comprehend the terror around him, he glanced up and saw two mice gnawing away at the vine, chewing away at that which was only barely saving his life. As he swung, in probable doom, he noted something red and green growing on the cliffside. Looking closer, he saw a lush, ripe strawberry. Holding on to the vine with one hand, he reached out with the other to pick and taste the sweet fruit. “Yum,” he paused and said to himself. “How delicious!”¹

While tasting the unexpected fruit, the man no longer focused on the terror around him but concentrated on that which was sweet, good, and life sustaining – noting the beauty and wonder of only one moment – the present moment. This story, in all of its brevity and simplicity, offers us life-shaping guidance. It begs us to ask: How can we find beauty and presence amidst some of the most desperate circumstances of our lives?

Today I want to focus on this month’s theme of vulnerability by journeying together through both ancient stories and current day literature. Today we focus on those stories which reveal and give meaning to life through protagonists who are seemingly defenseless, exposed and most susceptible to harm – the stories that offer narrations of the most vulnerable among us.

¹ *Doorways to the Soul: 52 Wisdom Tales from Around the World* edited by Elisa Davy Pearmain “The Wild Strawberry” pg. 92

Fictitious myths, parables and fables serve to depict some of the most intimate moments of life through the lens of human creativity and imagination. The Buddhist tale of tigers and strawberries is no exception. This story reflects on a minute or two of a life well lived. We learn from but a few lines that living in the present moment allows us to release ourselves of anxieties of the future and keeps us from ruminating on our recent or distant past. When living as this tale portrays, we can immerse ourselves in the natural beauty – the holiness which is life – not fear. Some believe that the present moment is where we find God. ² Trapped in that perilous position between life and probable death, the fleeing man paused, centered, and found beauty.

Other stories serve to depict survival and offer wisdom from real life situations that cause angst and misery and yet offer life-giving lessons. Many of life's most vulnerable of experiences are so personal and seemingly unrelatable that they can only be truly understood if they have been lived. Think of a physical illness or mental illness that disrupts daily living. Think of the life-diminishing truths of addiction or poverty, the pain of deep grief or the perils of racism or sexism. If we do not experience it, the next best way to understand these detrimental hardships is to immerse oneself in the stories of those who have. Stories offer depths of complexity that statistics, facts, definitions, and diagnoses simply cannot. I find it a safe assumption that many of us breathing and worshipping together in this sacred space have experiences that we feel society at large can never fully appreciate. Through sharing and receiving vulnerable stories, we find sacred connection with one another. This connection is twofold. There are those who share our struggles and offer us powerful and much needed solidarity, and there are those connections we form because we learn to understand someone who is so very different than ourselves.

I offer two stories that may, depending on the audience, offer either safety in hearing hardships that parallel our own life experiences or, on the flipside, give us an understanding of a life that is so very distant and alien from our own.

² *Doorways to the Soul: 52 Wisdom Tales from Around the World* edited by Elisa Davy Pearmain pg. 93

Let us first enter a well-known work of fiction that serves to depict two of life's greatest vulnerabilities: poverty and addiction, written by an author who experienced both. Let us take a moment to reflect upon Betty Smith's novel *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*.

The story narrates the painful juxtapositions of parenting while facing addiction, depicting a father's unconditional love for his children paralleled by his own detrimental inability to remain sober – his disease of alcoholism. The story highlights children experiencing the contradictions a loving, kind, and compassionate parent with one whom at other times is entirely unrelatable, coming home intoxicated, a different person all together. Pain and deep love held side by side, separated by the veil of addiction – an illness that ultimately took the life of this fictional man with three young children.

The narrator simultaneously offers a glimpse of economic hardship. And yet this story does not only depict lament but offers a powerful and inspiring “how” – how did this family survive? Smith writes of a single mother whose very hands, chapped and raw, reflected the physical maladies of the manual labor that she endured from dawn to dusk in order to provide food and housing for her young ones. This story also tells of a childhood devoid of the basic pleasures abundant to those in the middle and upper classes, but which is filled with simple delights, nonetheless. Pennies made from selling scraps of old tin were used to buy candy – a humble and, to some, curious experience that nonetheless brought the children joy which allowed them to endure.

And so, we wonder.

How can we find happiness even if all we have is but humble means? “People always think that happiness is a faraway thing, something complicated and hard to get,” reflects the young protagonist named Francie. “Yet,” she continues, “little things can make it up.” Those modest

things that inhabited her own life – shelter from the rain, a hot cup of steaming coffee, a book to keep her company. She found happiness in the most basic of objects and experiences.

Or her reflection on what makes a person who they are. Yes, she was shaped by poverty and addiction, by her mother’s sorrowful laments and her quarrels with her sibling. And yet young Francie was so much more – as we all are, no matter what our hardships or limitations. She was the novels she immersed herself in, she was the beautiful petals on the flowers she adored, she was the strong and sturdy tree growing in the space adjacent to her humble apartment.

I paused, too, during her reflections on what else could occupy her mind while steeped in hardship. Francie journeyed through book after book after book for many years. While her father turned to the bottle, while her mother scoured the homes of the wealthy, while the hardships of childhood and youth descended upon her – she read.

I offer, next, a tale that takes the form of a detailed, loving, blunt and honest letter written from father to son, Ta-Nehisi Coates’ book entitled *Between the World and Me*. A Black man writes openly and honestly to the one he loves most in this world – his teenage son. The narration details the vulnerability of those suffering from the oppression of racism. The book answers the question, “What is it like to grow up Black in a country founded on the slavery of the stolen peoples of Africa?” The book is a narrative born of centuries of pain, of generations of oppression, of bodies seen as property and treated with disdain. This is a narrative of something so vulnerable, only Black men in America can understand, and so the rest of us are called to read and watch their stories – glimpses of lives so very different from those of us who are white. “This is your country, this is your world, this is your body,” Coates writes to his son, “and you must find some way to live within all of it.”

What is it like to grow up Black and male in this country? “Fear ruled everything around me,” Coates reflected as he worked to depict his childhood in West Baltimore. “To be black in the Baltimore of my youth,” Coates explained, “was to be naked before the elements of the world,

before all the guns, fists, knives ... and disease.” This was a nakedness not born of error nor science, but, Coates writes, “the correct and intended result of policy, the predictable upshot of people forced for centuries to live under fear”

I invite you to reflect on your memories of Michael Brown, shot while his hands were raised, or Trayvon Martin shot while his young arms were filled with goods from a convenience store. Coates’ story elaborates on these events that shook a nation. “You are a black boy,” he writes to his beloved son, in stark, raw prose, “and you must be responsible for your body in a way that other boys cannot know. Indeed, you must be responsible for the worst actions of other black bodies, which, somehow, will always be assigned to you.”

Let us hear, again, the words that Pam read earlier – the words offered to a beloved son, endangered because of the hue of his skin, the words of a book written to expose hidden, terrible truths. “I am sorry that I cannot make it okay. I am sorry that I cannot save you - but not that sorry.” We often reflect together, as a church community, on the least of these. In his carefully chosen words, Coates seems to lift up a hidden gift of those who have suffered as the least cared for populations in humanity. “I am sorry, but not that sorry... Part of me thinks,” this father wrote, “that your very vulnerability brings you closer to the meaning of life.”

Today we journey, intimately, alongside the vulnerable. What of the man, dangling on a rope, stranded between two hungry tigers, who taught us of the importance of the present moment? What of the young girl whose father loves her yet dies of addiction, whose woes are amplified through a life in poverty – who taught us of happiness and a of our true selves? What of this father trying to save his son by sharing with him the stark and harsh realities of life? We learn from their stories, or we find familiar solace in them. We are offered the opportunity learn and grow from the most vulnerable among us – from the least of these. For this moment, they take center stage. So may we be. May we listen.

May we learn. May we live.

May it be so, and Amen