

Growing Values
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Reading: Sister Helen Prejean's essay "Living My Prayer" from *This I Believe*, the NPR series.

Sermon

When I was little I wanted to be Robin Hood. I didn't want to be *like* Robin Hood, I wanted to *be* Robin Hood. To me, this was everything that being in second grade in a suburban elementary school was not: he spent his days in the woods, he had cool and relevant skills like archery and hunting, he lived with his friends, no one bossed them around, and most of all, he made life fair. He *made* life fair. He didn't have to stomp his feet and hope that some condescending grownup heard his cry. He *made* it fair. And he was so clever that he always got his way in the end. In retrospect I'm sure being thrown in the Sheriff of Nottingham's dungeons and almost getting hung every several chapters was unpleasant, and no matter how good his men were I'm sure it made him just a little uneasy, but as far as I could see he was smart and witty and teasing but not mean, and his life looked a lot better than mine. Thus was launched a lifelong fascination with woodcraft, with ancient and medieval England, with archery, with the power of community, and with justice.

And look where I ended up.

Story is powerful. Examples are powerful. Heroes are powerful. They can change your whole life.

In the last ten years we've seen a spate of movies about unlikely heroes: In the Matrix we have Neo; The Lord of the Rings trilogy sports two: Frodo and Aragorn. And Harry Potter has a whole host of them: in our culture, children are not supposed to be saving the world. In all of these, the development of the ordinary into the extraordinary is at the heart of the tale. What happens next is climactic, but only because we are so invested in the success of the character's transformation. If we *knew* from the beginning that our hero was heroic, if we were certain that she or he was bred and raised to be a king among kings with no doubts, no pitfalls, no tragic flaws, we'd be bored. A supernatural hero with unparalleled strength and unrivaled success might be handy on a really bad day, but they're not interesting. They're boring because they are foreign to us. They are other. They are over there, in the fantasy world where the all-powerful meet to discuss the fates of mere humans. It's nothing to do with us, not really.

What we need are heroes who give us the sense, the creeping, nagging hope that they might be us.

Then they can change our lives.

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This I Believe is a radio series that airs regularly on NPR in which people from all walks of life take three minutes to talk about a core belief. Anyone can submit an essay; the speakers range from dignitaries to the slightly-famous to the absolutely-not-famous-at-all.

It was not ever so.

The original show was hosted by Edward R. Murrow and aired in the 1950's, and the original concept did not involve ordinary people. It was only after the series began that they heard from their listeners, who (QUOTE—ordinary voices). So they listened. The series changed. People wanted to hear from each other, from people who looked and sounded and acted like them; people who were not imposing figures with extraordinary resources.

The new show, based on the old, is hosted by Jay Allison and it follows much the same format. Selected essayists are coached and their writing edited before they record their work in their own voices, and then it is aired with a brief introduction and conclusion. Thanks to the modern age you can listen when it broadcasts or you can stream it from the website, download it to your ipod, read the text version online or order a transcript. Likewise, you can submit essays through their online process or, if you must, by postal mail. You can also read essays that were not selected for broadcast, yet another case of the internet making spaces where everyone can be heard.

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At the end of December we had an unusual service here. A panel of members sat on the chancel and, with the help of a moderator, fielded questions about religion and belief. We've gotten a lot of good feedback about that service—it seems we don't know much about each other's beliefs, but we want to. We want it very much. We want it like the woman who wrote to Mr. Murrow in the '50's, everyone's voices. But without turning over every Sunday service to the project, how do we find out?

We talk.

In 1966 Unitarian Universalism, still in its infancy, was subjected to a study in which the researchers looked for the beliefs that hold us together. Their topic was taken up again in 1976 by Robert L. Miller, who eventually concluded that while our theologies are wildly disparate, our *values* are very, very similar. More similar than the values within most other faith traditions. He found that we most valued things like self-respect, wisdom, and inner harmony and that we least valued things like forgiveness, obedience...and pleasure.

I do hope we've changed some in the last 30-odd years. To my knowledge there has been no large-scale values study since then, but some people think they've got us pretty well pegged. A website called Beliefnet has a what-religion-are-you quiz that actually sends a lot of people to our doors. What it produces is not one religion or two, but a long list of possibilities sorted by percentage. For some of us it's fairly accurate, but I know others, dedicated members of our faith, whose lists put Unitarian Universalism somewhere near the bottom.

The fact is, we never quite know. We do fall into the trap of thinking we know, and that gets us into trouble, but we never quite learn to stop, which is unfortunate.

It does raise the question, though: how would we know a Unitarian Universalist--how would we know that *we* were Unitarian Universalist—without something we could assume in common?

Perhaps the things we hold in common don't have to be values. Perhaps the things we hold in common are less directive than values; are less formed than values; perhaps they are...principles?

We do have the principles. As a living document they have thus far managed to give us something to rally around without becoming creed or dogma, and they have managed to give us a shifting house to sail the shifting sands of this religion. Perhaps what we rely on, then, is some kind of loose and changeable framework on which to build our own foundations.

And what are those foundations, anyway?

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I think we believe in community. There's an old joke about a fire traveling down Church Street. It started in the vacant lot next to the synagogue. The congregation there took their Torah and ran. The Catholics, at Saturday night Mass, grabbed their relics and their Bible before they left. By the next morning it had made its way all the way down to the Unitarian Universalists, who took their membership book and their coffeepot.

It's funny, of course, because it's got an element of truth. No matter what we can't agree on, if we didn't agree on the power of community, we wouldn't be here. Our theologies, generally devoid of cosmic repercussions for nonattendance at church, are not the things that compel our presence. So our *presence must be driven by a belief that being here together is important.*

I think we believe in transformation. Much as we resist it, I even think we believe in change. I've never met a UU who was entirely content with the world exactly the way it is, and most of us recognize a thing or two we'd change about ourselves. As a corollary, I think we believe in hope, because if we didn't have hope that something different would be better, we'd slide into irretrievable apathy.

But how do we know? How do we figure it out? It's all well and good to talk about elevator speeches, but if someone stopped you in coffee hour and asked what you believed, where would you go with that question?

Rumi said, "Let the beauty we love be what we do." And in a conversation across continents and centuries Sister Helen Prejean replies, "I watch what I do to find out what I really believe."

Values are the place where the work of our spirits meets the work of our hands. Whatever we find beautiful, central, important; whatever we are willing to work for; whatever moves us such that we will make some sacrifice in order to have it, these are our values. These are the things around which our lives are shaped. And as such, if we want to know what our values truly are, we have only to look at the things we choose, the little things and the big things, every day.

And the beauty is, we are always at a place of choice. We can always choose. Even as children, even in schools, in prisons, at work, we are always at choice.

The myth we tell ourselves is that we are not, that we are limited by the visions of those around us, by those whom we believe hold more power than we do, by the dreams and expectations of the acknowledged leaders in our every-waking-day context.

It's a lie.

It's a lie we tell ourselves to survive. It lets us get by.

But the truth is we are always at choice.

And seeing the power we hold allows us to embrace what we choose.

Even if we don't change a thing.

We live our lives from the inside out, from head and heart to hands and breath.

It is up to us to decide how that's going to work for us.

If we think that we cannot choose, that we are stuck, predestined to our endings before our beginnings take hold it might relieve us of a little stress; it might teach us grace in the face of the inevitable, but it is unlikely to bring us hope; it is unlikely to bring us joy; it is unlikely to bring us face-to-face with the sacred in our own hearts or in the world.

But we are always at choice.

And those choices tell us what we believe, what we value, to some extent who we are.

Our identities farm our time and quietly plant values while we're busy doing other things.

Our values, sprung from our hearts, then become beautiful gems to uncover, brilliant spots of color in a stark landscape. They warm a spot in the snow and pop through, bringing the dawning spring on their heels. When we see and know our values they can change our whole lives.

If we watch what we do, we will see what we believe.

Often we can see deeper into our hearts by looking outward than we can by introspection, because our pressing desire to believe ourselves good can interfere with the clarity of our vision. Our actions, though, are right out there, indisputable behaviors ringed by hazy motivations. Over time they form patterns, laying out our lived values and, if we are watching, sharpening our sense of comfort or unease with our own lives.

We know somehow that we should believe in what we do; that our living should line up with our theories. We know it before we can articulate it, when we're still protesting against "unfair" and seeing the world in high contrast right and wrong. We learn it as children; we call the adults to account until we ourselves approach adulthood and realize we have to maneuver in a world that would just as soon not have some truths brought to light. But just as we are quieting the outer critic, the inner voices pipe up, holding our own choices up for inspection. And we know, with that sinking feeling that only comes with irreparable mistakes, that we've gone far too long without really testing our lives for consonance with our values. We suspect that there is more dirty linen in our past than we're willing or ready to confront—so we stash it under the bed and get a nice dust ruffle.

Eventually, though, our spirits come calling. They are sweet or sharp according to our personalities, and it turns out they already know about the laundry behind the curtain. They work like Dickens' ghosts of

Christmas, playing videos of all the pertinent facts and details in Technicolor as we lie awake at night or stare into our dinner stew. And they make it absolutely clear that those patterns we're seeing are not a trick of the light or a bit of undigested beef (Dickens), but an etched overlay, recurring missteps tracing paths that don't match the maps our beliefs have laid out.

It's not easy. It's not usually fun. But it's a gift. It's the gift of perspective; the gift of vision; the gift of possibility. Because if we can see both the map and the paths we've walked, we have a chance to correct our route...or to correct the map.

Because what we value can change. The beauty of a living tradition is the flexibility of continuing revelation. We know that our minds are imperfect and our wisdom can improve over time. This tradition gives us space to follow those improvements into a better life. Our values, which shape our lives, can shape us right into something that works more smoothly, that damages less and heals more; that rejects less and embraces more; that grows stronger and follows our heart's moving target into deeper wholeness and deeper connection with the world.

And if it works; if we become the people we think we should be; if the change takes hold and our lives follow the new possibilities, then we could become the stories. We could become the examples. Every one of us could be a desperately-needed and unlikely hero.

If, of course, that is what we believe in.

Blessed be and amen.