

October 6, 2013  
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Theme – Legends  
Sermon – Question Everything

**Reading:** George Carlin from “No One Questions Things” from *It’s Bad For Ya*

“[It’s] not important to get children to read. Children who wanna read are gonna read. Kids who want to learn to read are going to learn to read. [It’s] much more important to teach children to QUESTION what they read. Children should be taught to question everything. To question everything they read, everything they hear. Children should be taught to question authority. Parents never teach their children to question authority because parents are authority figures themselves...”

**Sermon: Question Everything**

Question everything.

Kids, when you are a little older, you’ll be able to find old George Carlin routines on youtube. Enjoy. But not yet.

I was raised UU and I think it gave me a great gift: the gift of knowing that part of my faith, a crucial and sacred part, was questioning. In my UU church growing up, fifth grade Sunday School was the Bible class, taught by two older women, Helen and Wanda. They had been teaching that class for about 20 years at that point. We fifth graders went into this class with fear and trepidation as everyone knew that this was the only Sunday school class that had...homework. Yes, homework. It wasn’t too bad though, because Wanda and Helen gave us M&Ms as a reward.

With Helen and Wanda, we learned Bible stories, how the books and chapters and verse numbers work, we memorized the order of all the books in the Bible, and we memorized a lot of verses and Psalms too. We were achieving real Biblical literacy, not too shabby for a bunch of UU kids. But the goal was not just rote memorization. The goal was to give us the information we needed as a foundation for critical thinking.

I will never forget our first homework assignment. We had to look up verses and fill in the blanks.

In the first fill-in-the-blank, it was a verse about Noah gathering the animals. How did Noah gather the animals onto the ark? Two by two. ...But a few verses later there was another description about Noah gathering the animals...and this time he gathers them seven by seven.

And there you go, that was my introduction to the Bible as literature, a document created by humans, for humans. The Bible is full of amazing legends, ugly truths and beautiful

parables, and it is full of contradictions. It is also a completely fascinating and cool document and I can thank my Sunday school teachers for giving me both religious literacy and the encouragement to ask questions, which played a part in my decision to major in Religion in college, and then go on to Divinity School and becoming a minister. I guess that is a real slippery slope...

So when I approach Bible stories—or almost any story I read, or hear on the news—I ask myself

Who is telling this story?  
When?  
Who is the audience—who were they telling this story to?  
Why?  
What is NOT part of this story?

These questions apply to pretty much anything, and it especially applies to stuff we read on the Internet.

The internet has this way of encouraging people to retell stories that SOUND good, or FEEL true, and they get told again and again and shared on Facebook and forwarded in email and yet, if someone just did a little critical thinking, we'd see that things aren't that simple.

Here is an example.

Maybe you have been at a wedding where someone read the “Apache Wedding Prayer.”

There are a few versions but in general it goes like this:

Now you will feel no rain,  
For each of you will be a shelter to the other.  
Now you will feel no cold,  
For each of you will be warmth to the other.  
Now there is no more loneliness.  
Now you are two bodies,  
But there is only one life before you.  
Go now to your dwelling place  
To enter into your days together.  
And may your days be good  
And long on the earth.

You can also find this on the internet as a Cherokee prayer, a Navajo prayer, or just a catch-all “Native American prayer.”  
Question everything...

Who wrote this? When?

Well, it is was not an Apache, I can tell you that.

This poem comes from a wedding scene in the 1950 Academy Award-winning Western movie *Broken Arrow*, starring James Stewart.

That movie was based on the historical novel titled *Blood Brothers* written in 1947.

The novel was based on a true story of a friendship between a frontiersman and an Apache chief.

So the real story is somewhere down here...

Writer Rebecca Mead dug into this history, from her reporting we know:

*Broken Arrow* has been praised by cultural historians for the sensitivity and faithfulness of its portrayal of Apache Indians, whose earlier representation in Hollywood had been far from accurate or flattering.

In fact, the only part of the movie that comes in for much criticism on the grounds of inaccuracy is a wedding ceremony...to inaugurate the—entirely fictional—marriage between [Stewart's character] and ...a Native American maiden. (The love story was an invention to appeal to mass American tastes: Elliot Arnold, in his introduction to *Blood Brothers*, wrote, "I have taken a writer's liberty and imagined that such a wedding took place.")<sup>1</sup>

Scratch the surface of this poem, passed around unquestioningly by so many people as a sacred Native American ritual, and we get an entirely different writer, time period, audience and message.

What is NOT part of this story?

The *real* rituals and experiences of the Apache or other Native American peoples are absent.

They've been painted over by a Hollywood fantasy of what a romantic Indian wedding would be—and yes, in the movie, they do ride off on a single white horse together, towards a ceremonial teepee.

Question everything.

What happens when we question everything—in this huge long book? When we study the Bible and its history we learn of the struggles people fought over what should be

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<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Mead, *One Perfect Day*

included and what was cut out. Right now over at the Museum of Science you can view the Dead Sea Scrolls, which illustrate this. These two thousand year old texts were discovered around the same time that *Broken Arrow* was hitting movie screens. Some of the scrolls are sort of like first drafts of the books we can read in here today. Those legends “won”; they got to be canonized, retold, held up as “true.” For a modern analogy, they are the stories that got the most “likes.” And some of the scrolls are legends that were excluded from the Bible—the “losers.”

The people who win the wars are the ones who write the history.

Questioning our sources is also very important in our 24 hour news cycle. I ask

Who is telling me this story? What are their credentials, who is their employer, their publisher?  
What are they not telling me?

As our government leaders were struggling with the situation in Syria, trying to figure out if the US was going to become involved, they relied on the work of a Syrian expert. Her name was Elizabeth O’Bagy, PhD, and she worked for an organization called “The Institute for the Study of War.” She heavily supported the Syrian rebels and argued that the US should help them. She showed up on all the major news channels. She wrote an opinion piece for the Wall Street Journal. John Kerry and John McCain quoted and commended her work during congressional hearings.

As NPR put it, she went from anonymous to a media star to unemployed in a week. Unemployed because, as her star rose, people started asking questions. And it turned out she did not have a PhD, she had lied about her credentials. She also had not disclosed that she was actually being paid by a Syrian rebel advocacy group. She was also 26 and had only recently been promoted from being an intern. Yes, she probably was sharing some messy combination of truth and propaganda. Yet her ideas and words had been repeated and recycled as unquestioned truth by leaders that actually get to decide if our country goes to war or not.

Question everything.

Our challenge, as people of faith, is to figure out when our questions have been answered to our satisfaction, when we can stand on solid ground and proclaim our beliefs, our values. Question even the statement: “Question everything.” Healthy skepticism can become unhealthy cynicism. Questions should support our spiritual journey, not undermine it.

Here is a great example of how we can keep a questioning mind and still find useful lessons in ancient legends. Minister Quinn Caldwell reflected on this verse from Psalm 133:

“How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! It is like the

precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes.”

Rev. Caldwell wrote:

This simile does not work for me.

I will go to some lengths to avoid having so much oil poured on my head that it runs through my beard and down inside my robes. If that’s what it’s like when kindred live together in unity, it makes me want to move far away...

This type of thing is exactly why I don’t understand biblical literalists. Of course, this is a simile, so in that sense it wouldn’t be taken literally even by them. But aside from that: if you’re a literalist, do you have to believe that getting oiled up that way...is pleasant? If not, why not?...

A much more sensible approach... is to simply say that some similes don’t last. Not all of them can survive a leap of several millennia intact. I’m sure that oil dripping off some guy’s big beard was a delight to somebody some time, but even the best historical criticism isn’t going to make it work for me. All I really need to know is that the Psalmist thought I should try to get along with [people].

This simile does not work for me. The good news is, it doesn’t have to.<sup>2</sup>

Rev. Caldwell goes on to give thanks that the Bible is not a “tame” book. It has “weird bits, inscrutable bits, challenging bits, and just plain grody ones, too.” Within this book of legends, this book of ugly truths and beautiful parables, are stories that we can live our life by, and stories we can let go. Legends have power. And we can harness that power if we know the stories, question the stories, find answers in the stories, and choose for ourselves what informs our spiritual lives and what does not.

So, kids, question everything.

But, um—still do your homework and clean your rooms, okay?

*Amen.*

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ucc.org/feed-your-spirit/daily-devotional/oily.html>