

March Theme 2020

Identity: The Practice of Story

“[E]veryone tells a story about themselves inside their own head. Always. All the time. That story makes you what you are. We build ourselves out of that story.”

Patrick Rothfuss

Identity has been defined as the “condition or character as to who a person or what a thing is; the qualities, beliefs, etc., that distinguish or identify a person or thing.” This definition suggests that identity is comprised of many elements. Some elements of a person’s identity tend to be more outward-facing and, as such, may be (or may seem) apparent to someone trying to identify that person, and other elements tend to be more inward-facing and intimate.

Outward-facing elements of personal identity may include gender, race, body type, age, physical ability, ethnicity, dress, socioeconomic status, marital, familial and other relationships, religion, occupation and other roles, and area of residence. Inward-facing elements may include the person’s memories, experiences, and values. These are but a handful of elements of personal identity. As Walt Whitman writes in *Song of Myself*, “I am large. I contain multitudes.”

As we consider a person’s identity, we must ask ourselves how that person defines his/her/their own identity, and how others may define that person’s identity. Such definitions will often come in the form of a story, which, as we know, can be told from any number of viewpoints, and contain elements that are factual or fictional, accurate or inaccurate, rich or sparse in detail, and anything and everything in between.

As children, many of us are told stories about our parents and other relatives, and how we came to be in this world. We are also told religious, moral and historical stories. Many of these stories are told to us repeatedly and become a part of our early identities. As we develop, experience life and make memories, we create stories – verbal and non-verbal – that inform our identities. We may share some of these stories with others, and keep others to ourselves. We may retain certain stories and wrestle with them our entire lives; and we may revise, reject or dispense with others when we feel they no longer reflect – or realize they never reflected – who we are.

As we try to understand and develop relationships with people, we often ask ourselves (or a close confidant): “What is their *story*?” In other words, what is the *essence* of that person? Though simple on its face, this question is extremely difficult to answer in part because of the multitudinous elements of that person’s identity – many of which we will never know – and of our own identity. Thus, we are often unable (or unwilling) to understand fully any person’s identity, and may fill in the missing details with stories that are incomplete and inaccurate, but fit our version of their narrative.

As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm and promote “the inherent worth and dignity of every person” and “acceptance of one another”. One way to do this is to appreciate that we all have

“mysteries that lie beyond [the] certainties”, and to resist fabricating stories about others that might solve those mysteries.

Questions to Explore:

1. What stories have you been told that relate to your identity? Do you know whether they're true and accurate?
2. What stories have you told yourself about your identity? What stories do you tell others about yourself?
3. Have you told children stories about identity? Why? To what do the stories relate?
4. What stories would you like others to tell about you?
5. What stories would you dislike others to tell about you?
6. Other than the spoken or written word, what are some ways people tell stories?
7. Although much of this month's theme focuses on personal identity, the theme can also be explored as it pertains to group identity. Of what groups are you a member? How do they form part of your identity? How do you think an outsider would describe those groups? How would you describe the group to an outsider?
8. Which groups have you affirmatively joined? What stories were you told about the groups before you joined? Were they true?

Quotes:

“He allowed himself to be swayed by his conviction that human beings are not born once and for all on the day their mothers give birth to them, but that life obliges them over and over again to give birth to themselves.”

- Gabriel García Márquez

“Your story is what you have, what you will always have. It is something to own.”

“If you don't get out there and define yourself, you'll be quickly and inaccurately defined by others.”

- Michelle Obama

“Carve your name on hearts, not tombstones. A legacy is etched into the minds of others and the stories they share about you.”

- Shannon Alder

“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.”

- Maya Angelou

“‘Child,’ said the Lion, ‘I am telling you your story, not hers. No one is told any story but their own.’”

- C.S. Lewis