

Villains and the Stories We Tell

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Unitarian Church of Vancouver

As the northern half of our earth home tilts further away from the sun, this part of the world plunges ever more into darkness. Look around—what do you see? It is the time of the year when we set fire to everything we can get our hands on in the hopes that something will burn and that light will keep the darkness at bay. Advent candles lit, Christmas tree lights switched on, shop display windows illuminated, Yule logs set ablaze, Hanukkah lights kindled; it's a season of light! "Let Christmas Come its great star glow," we sing. "Bring a Torch Jeannette, Isabella, bring a torch and quickly run." "See the blazing Yule before us, strike the harp and join the chorus..." "for in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light." "Hanukkah o Hanukkah, come light the menorah..." "love's pure light, radiant beams from thy holy face." O...Star of wonder, star of light...westward leading, still proceeding..."

We sing of light, set fire to all things flammable, and fix our eyes on every radiant star. The tenuousness of life, the inscrutability of fate, the dark of winter, and the nearness of death—each and all have propelled the human family to imagine, worship, and pray for enlightenment, purpose and rescue to come to us in the form of beings full of refulgent, unending light. Buddha is compared to an infinite light. Beams of light stream from the forehead of Moses. In the Quran, Muhammad is called "a shining lamp." The disciples of Jesus called him the light of the world. In the north, a shaman is one who gains *anak ua*, the gift of light "to see far ahead...through the mountains, exactly as if the earth were one great plain."

For blessed moments, we are drawn by their illumined forms and comforting light. Then, to celebrate their deeds and words, in resonance with their light, we strike a match, kindle a chalice flame, a hearth fire, or the menorah's candelabra and draw near in company with others. 'Tis the season; and once assembled together, what invariably follows are stories we tell one another; stories wherein our heroes—godlike or all-too-human—speak and act out the archetypal, myth-making, meaning-bestowing roles bequeathed them by the gods, the seasons, or by accidents of birth and place. And as we narrate their deeds and the events more or less in the order in which they occurred, from times mythic and immemorial, from the pages of creative fiction, or from the annals of human

history, we seek to find ourselves, our values, our beliefs tried, tested and ultimately affirmed in the crucible of myth and history.

Behind all the glut and glitz, the consumption and hype of this holiday season, pulses the steady beat of time-honoured, time-tested stories: stories Christian, Pagan, Muslim and Jewish. We tell stories because human lives, individual and communal, need to be told. And for all of the light and “joy to the world,” all the chamber of commerce driven pop exhortations “that this is the most wonderful time of the year,” the law of narrative, of story-telling, tends to require *trouble* for the story to unfold; and trouble usually comes in the form of villains.

The stories of the holiday season are full of villains. Behind the manger, Herod stalks the infant Jesus and massacres the children of Bethlehem. In the shadow of the menorah, Antiochus IV, Greek King of armies occupying 2nd century Palestine, rules with murdering force, orders the worship of Zeus in the Temple in Jerusalem, and thus provokes the revolt of the Maccabees. As the Wheel of the Year turns at Yule, the Oak King, Lord of the Greenwood, goes into battle and slays the Holly King. This year, two days after Christmas, Shiite Muslims observe Ashura—the commemoration of the martyrdom of Husayn, the grandson of Muhammad, at the Battle of Karbala in 680; an event that marked the split between Sunni and Shi’a to this very day. And woven into this day of mourning looms the malign figure of Yazid, caliph of Damascus, who ordered Husayn’s death, and then usurped and squandered the power he accrued. And speaking of the season and villains, someone recently noted that Scrooge in Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* is a villain in the eyes of capitalism as long as he was a miser, as long as he was hoarding and holding onto his wealth. He becomes a hero to markets everywhere when he’s terrified into loosening the purse strings and begins to spend prodigiously and to spread his wealth around.

Woven into the lines of the each holiday story runs a black thread of villainy, or violence personified in usurping monarchs, tyrants, sword wielding trees, and a penny pinching miser. Each hero is twinned with a malignant double; sometimes both aspects reside in the breast of one and the same person. This contest, the trials through which an infant and his family must pass, a people pressed down by foreign occupation, a season of the earth loath to let loose the turning of the Wheel of the Earth, a rightful heir betrayed and martyred, a skinflint at war with himself and others—these struggles are perennial; always with us. They loom especially at junctures in the year like the one we currently approach. It is by means of contrast and contest, peril and tension, climax and aftermath

that we locate ourselves and our values as individuals and communities. These stories bestow meaning and orientation to our lives. So we bank up the fires, draw near to one another within the circle of light, with the darkness close at hand, savouring what is to come, believing that, according to the Yiddish proverb, “Troubles overcome are good to tell.” That’s what this time of year is all about.

And do troubles ever come! That is our lot, the card dealt to us by virtue of being thrown into this world shot through with weal and woe. It is written that the “Tao gives birth to both good and evil...being and non-being create each other.” In the words of the great 18th century British artist and writer William Blake: “Man was made for joy and woe.../Joy and woe are woven fine/A clothing for the soul divine.” Joy and woe are the threads, the right-angled web and woof, strung on life’s loom that clothe us with the raiment of experience *dearly won*; threads of darkness and light cover our naked, fragile innocence, our self-contentment, our unearned entitlement, our unknowing with the fabric of adult knowing. And what better place to weave the cloth than in a story?

In the book of *Job*, static perfection, contentment and fabulous wealth are brutally stripped from the protagonist by God and Satan, who play the villains and co-conspire to upend and torment Job, his life and everything he believed to be true. In Job’s anguish and torment, his despair, doubt and rage, twenty-five hundred years ago we humans began to find our voice; and like a thread bearing shuttlecock the words of the book of *Job* shoot back and forth across the page, and line-by-line weave a sense of a distinctive human self face-to-face with the pitiless, inscrutable powers of nature, the malign *and* the divine.

In the legend of Atanarjuat, “the Fast Runner” of Inuit lore, an evil, unknown shaman shatters the happy balance and cooperative spirit of an Inu clan. Murder, usurpation, jealousy, and deception ensue. We race with Atanarjuat naked across the ice escaping an assassin’s hand, bearing the thread of loss, running for our lives. And then, as we return in his footsteps, struggling to reclaim our spiritual path and the rescue of our imperiled family—again, we lay down another filament of thread on the loom; back and forth upon the ice under the sun wheeling across the sky. Will we continue the bloody cycle of revenge or restore harmony to the community; and how, in the face of implacable foes and impossible odds heaped in our path?

Once again, and these ancient tales, in times, cultures and lore so seemingly remote from our own, we encounter the human need to narrate, to tell the stories of our lives. We recognize what

seems to be an iron-clad law of narrative no matter who we are and where and when we lived—a story requires trouble in order to unfold. And trouble usually comes in the form of a villain.

What are the troubles and trials woven through our own stories? Who are the villains? A playground bully? A remote parent? The heartless gods? A tyrannical boss? An inscrutable, unfeeling bureaucracy impervious to a desperate plight or chronic need? Have we bedeviled ourselves? Have we ever considered, as the *Tao Te Ching*, suggests that the great person “thinks of his enemy as the shadow he himself casts”?

2009 has been something of a commemorative year. We have marked the bi-centennial of the births of Lincoln, Mendelssohn, and Darwin; the one-hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *On the Origin of Species*; Lotta Hitchmanova’s 100th birthday and the centenary of our congregation. The year is almost at an end, and I would be remiss, I’d be missing something, if I did not point out that 2009 is also the five hundredth anniversary of the birth of John Calvin, one of the great and enormously influential 16th century leaders of the Protestant Reformation. John Calvin of Geneva, of the Presbyterian Church, Calvin the theological eminence behind the Puritans, the doctrine of double predestination, and founder of what’s called the Reformed tradition in the Protestant community of churches that includes Lutherans and Anglicans, among others; Calvin the implacable foe of Michael Servetus, and the man directly responsible for Servetus’s execution by burning him at the stake, along with his books, in Geneva in October 1553.

If ever there was a villain in the story of Unitarian origins, it’s John Calvin. Today, we credit Servetus as the man who set the wheel of Unitarianism in motion. He is the founder of our religious tradition. And if ever there was a means by which to lift a hunted heretic like Servetus from obscurity, a man who lived most of his life on the run under a succession of assumed names, if you want to kindle insatiable fires of curiosity and stoke flames of pity and compassion—then ban and burn the man’s book and consign his living flesh to flames. In more recent times, just issue a *fatwa*, and everyone wants to know: who’s Salman Rushdie, and where can I get a copy of *The Satanic Verses*?

The outcome of Servetus’s execution was to propel people all across Europe and eventually in North America—scholars, ministers and lay people alike—to discuss his ideas, to try to get their

hands on his writings, and to condemn religious and secular authorities for killing someone merely because of what a person thinks, speaks, and writes. Even more momentous, his death in Geneva in 1553 helped people to identify and advocate some of the very hallmarks of modernity and of the liberal ideal: which include the priority of human autonomy, the use of reason as a counterweight to traditional authority, the rights of free speech, and the principle and practice of toleration of religious and political differences. The burning of Servetus in 1553 helped to light the bonfires of modernity.

Let me back up for a minute: a few more words about Calvin and Servetus. Calvin was born in 1509 in France; Servetus two years later in Spain. Calvin was trained in law, linguistics and logic at the University of Paris—this training had a major impact on how he thought and expressed himself. We know that Paris was a hotbed of reformation debate in the years during Calvin's matriculation, and that France was deeply divided by the theological struggles of the day. Calvin never recorded the circumstances of his "conversion" to the Protestant cause, but by his late twenties he had gone over to the Protestant side and started working out the basics of the "new," that is, Protestant teaching. On one foot Calvin's theology goes like this: this "new" Christian movement was consistent with the true Christian tradition built on the foundation of Holy Scripture. Here we know God through the Bible; there we also learn of our sinfulness and utter dependence on the sovereignty and mercy of a Triune/Trinitarian God. Human salvation is by grace through faith in Christ, not by any of our works. Jesus is the perfect revelation of God; thus all we need to know of the divine is in the Bible. The true church is to be found where this gospel is rightly preached and heard; and the church should enforce moral standards within the community as best it could.

In 1536, Geneva had voted for the Reformation, but it was a city in complete turmoil. Factions everywhere jockeyed for power. To make a long story short, Calvin was summoned to the city and wrote constitutions for both churches and civil government. Strict moral discipline was enforced by church tribunals: no dancing, no card playing, obligatory church attendance. You get the picture. Predictably, a number of Calvin's opponents left Geneva; some were forced into exile. Others, condemned by the courts for criminal conduct, were imprisoned or executed on orders of the city government. The issue of governance, order, and control were paramount in the minds of Calvin and those who had summoned him to Geneva. Hold this picture in your mind. Now, back to Servetus.

In his early twenties, he wrote a book condemning Trinitarian doctrine and was sentenced to death *in absentia* by both Catholic and Protestant tribunals. He went underground, and for the next twenty years, under assumed names, Servetus practiced map making, anatomy, medicine and wrote commentaries on the Bible. He had an incredible knowledge of ancient and modern languages and history. Servetus was deeply learned in rabbinic and kabbalistic literature; he studied the Quran, and Arabic commentaries on the Greek philosophical and scientific classics. His heresy was complete: he condemned Catholic and Protestant doctrine alike. Servetus rejected the doctrine of the Trinity, the virgin birth of Jesus, the practice of infant baptism, and insisted on the pre-eminent importance of human responsibility as an authentic response to the moral example of the mission and death of Jesus. Every one of these assertions, put down in writing in that era, was a capital offence in both Catholic and Protestant territories.

A second book laying out Servetus's ideas, called *The Restitution of Christianity*, was clandestinely published in Lyons, France in the spring of 1553. The book and its author were immediately condemned. Nearly every copy of the book was seized and destroyed, and Servetus himself was apprehended and put on trial in Lyons. One night during the trial, dressed in his pyjamas, he asked the prison guard if he could relieve himself in the garden. Granted permission, he scaled the wall and escaped, thus frustrating his would-be Catholic executioners; and he set out on the road looking for sanctuary, if he could find it, somewhere in Italy.

It was October 1553, and the road to Italy ran through Geneva. An irresistible force was about to run head-long into an immovable object. Upon learning of Servetus's escape in France, Calvin declared that the Spaniard would be put to death if he came to Geneva. Calvin was as good as his word.

Now here is what I think about this tragic story of two forceful, brilliant personalities and of events long ago. Calvin was preoccupied, obsessed with the imposition and maintenance of order in a city that had passed through extraordinary turmoil. Servetus was the ultimate outsider, a carrier of the contagion of alien, threatening, discordant ideas and practices. Operating according to the ground rules of pre-modern, authoritarian governance in both church and state, Calvin and Geneva could not, would not, countenance or condone a plurality of ideas, beliefs, and expression. And so these ill-starred twins, Servetus and Calvin, almost exact contemporaries, played out their fateful roles to their tragic conclusion.

And in a coda to this story, the Swiss are at it again. Last week, a national referendum in Switzerland resulted in the banning of the building of minarets, those pointy towers usually constructed along with mosques from which the muzzzeins call faithful Muslims to prayers.

“A great nation is like a great man,” says the *Tao*. “When he makes a mistake, he realizes it. Having realized it, he admits it. Having admitted it, he corrects it. He considers those who point out his faults as his most benevolent teachers. He thinks of his enemy as the shadow that he himself casts.” I think the Swiss, in 1553 and 2009, made and corrected the wrong mistake. They mistook the presence of “the Other,” the stranger—of Servetus, of Muslims, as a threat, rather than a potential blessing. Obsessed with an irrational, tribal idea of identity, they have turned on the very people who could, through constructive encounter and dialogue, enable them to write the next chapter of their story as a tale of liberation and transformation.

Autonomy, reason, and toleration that leads to a transformative embrace of religious and political pluralism—these are the ideals of the liberal religious tradition of which we are heirs. May we be mindful of this heritage, this treasure as we move into the holiday season, and of the story we are writing with our lives one day, one deed at a time.

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