

Remarks by Pat Owen, Membership Director, First UU Church of Richmond, given in the opening worship of the Southeast District's 2011 Annual Meeting:

The south has a story. The south loves a good story, and the south has stories it has yet to hear. I'd like to tell you a story through the eyes of a twelve year girl. Born the youngest of four children and the only girl, her father nicknamed her... Bitz.

1976 was the bicentennial of the United States. If you recall that year, a barbecue, a parade or fireworks display may come to mind. If you were a child in school, you were expected to learn and love the history of America.

For Bitz, the school year was filled with education models that addressed the bicentennial - there were stories and lessons. Bitz was a good student, a voracious reader, but she wasn't particularly engrossed in the history of the country. She entered the essay contests as instructed and wrote on historical figures but didn't win any prizes. That was fine - she was much more thrilled about the owl she had drawn for art class. That had gotten a ribbon.

I've been thinking a lot about stories lately. The truth about stories is that we all have them. The truth about stories is that they are all we have. Stories define who we are, they make sense of our histories. The bicentennial is the perfect example of the importance of stories. The marking of the two hundredth birthday of this country gave us opportunity to try the history on for size. In lessons and celebrations, in re-creation and pageantry.....

The south is filled with stories of wondrous beauty and hideous hatred.

The story of the south is filled with pain, with the cries of people stripped of the most basic human rights; the south is filled with stories of people who are trying to right some of the old wrongs.

When considering the future of Unitarian Universalism in this district, in this place we call the south, I believe we must pay close attention to our stories - both individually and as a people working to build a land that everyone can truly call promised.

There are roughly 162,000 Unitarian Universalists around the country - some 10,000 of whom are located in this district. 10,000 stories of Unitarian Universalist heritage, of Unitarian Universalist community, 10,000 stories of finding a faith community that welcomes you with your seekers heart, your intellectual wonderings and your desire for social justice throughout the world. And I am convinced that there are 10,000 more stories waiting to be told. The question is: are we ready to listen.

Bitz knew that every morning at around 7, her paternal grandmother would call and her mom would listen. Her grandmother did love to talk and it was still the days of party lines - In 1976 there was a lot to talk about - even rural county people were caught up in the excitement of a nation turning two hundred.

Her mother and grandmother talked about flowers, the weather. They talked about gardening and butchering hogs when fall came and temperatures dropped. They talked about church – they all belonged to the same small southern Baptist church, so there was a lot to talk about. In 1976 the church decided to celebrate the bicentennial as well. So everyone dressed up like church goers from 1776. A church wide picture was taken, and of course a picnic came after preaching. Bitz and her mother wore dresses her mom had sewn and muffed hats – the white kerchiefs – that was the worst part. Although that is not a very fond memory, the memory that sank in and remains with Bitz to this day is that of strong church community.

Community - In my work at First UU of Richmond as the membership director, I hear that word over and over – from visitors and new members – community. People come to our churches to share their stories. We are people who move more frequently than ever before, we are a nation less likely to develop close ties within the workplace, and we are a culturally a people who don't necessarily know our neighbors. We are people desperate to share our stories, and if your travels bring you to the south, our stories loom large.

For all the natural splendor of the south, there are times when I am still aware of the unnatural presence of the spirits of the past. When I moved into my predominantly African American neighborhood in Richmond in 2003, it was important for me to become part of the story. It was hard work. I learned to listen to the stories of my neighbors – they didn't expect me to be interested. After all those years, Mrs. Green, our neighbor, has invited me into her stories and consequently, into her life. She fusses at me now when I'm gone for a couple days, telling me I need to tell her when I'm going to preacher school. I've heard her stories of spousal abuse, of her first pregnancy at age 13, of poverty, of drinking. And I've heard them because for some reason both Mrs. Green and I wanted to sweep away some of those unnatural spirits and listen to one another.

There is no story if there is no one to listen. And stories are all we have. Listening to one another's stories is our most fundamental way of acknowledging the worth and dignity, indeed the being, of another person. Being present to another persons' story is part of who we are called to be, and becoming a vessel for pain poured out or joy raining down is a privilege.

Bitz' grandmother called her mother one morning with a new story to tell. You see, her grandmother's maiden name was Jefferson, and in 1976, Jefferson was a heavy hitting name. There was a lot of attention paid to an organization called the Daughters of American Revolution – the DAR put a lot of effort into the education of school children, and offered membership into the society to any woman over 18 - regardless of race, religion or ethnic background – who could prove lineal descent from a patriot of the American Revolution.

Along with her aunt, Bitz' grandmother went to work. These were the days before ancestry.com – so family bibles were examined, old birth certificates were found. This was important work. This family would be part of the story. Now for the record, Bitz' mother wasn't impressed. One of her favorite sayings was, Don't get above your raisin's. And this felt like that to her. Now, truth be told, Bitz did get a little excited – after all, how cool would it be to related to a

president? Her father didn't care one way or another. He was working too hard to support the family.

The investigation into the Jefferson name soon uncovered the prize. Sure enough, the link was found. This family was descended from Thomas Jefferson – third president of the United States, principal author of the Declaration of Independence. Hallelujah, amen this was good news.

We must be careful when we set about to author our good news as Unitarian Universalists in the south. If we are only comfortable when our stories are similar we don't grow – in spirit, or in maturity. If we look for people to fill OUR needs instead of working to meet theirs we may as well hand out membership after a test of similarity, like the Daughters of the American Revolution.

Think about it....

“yes, maam, do you have any revolutionary religious liberal people in your family tree?”

“has anyone in your family tree fought to preserve your religious freedom?”

“have you defined yourself as angry with our religious upbringing?”

“do you look the same as me?”

That is not our good news.

Suddenly, the good news of Thomas Jefferson stopped. Now, in all honesty, it took Bitz a while before she realized it was no longer a topic. She asked her mother why it was no longer talked about.

Her mother, who was relieved not to hear about it anymore, asked the grandmother. Annie Jefferson Shelton was in fact kin to Thomas, but she was also kin to Sallie Hemmings – who at fourteen became the enslaved mistress of Thomas Jefferson. The application to the Daughters of the American Revolution was politely and quietly declined. That story was erased. I am Bitz, and to my knowledge my grandmother never mentioned any of this again. Yes I am the descendant of Sallie Hemmings, an African American slave woman and Thomas Jefferson the third president of the United States.

You may see me as a European woman, but until you hear my story, you don't know who I am. There is not a story if there is no one to listen. This is the first time I'm telling my story in public.

I think about Sallie Hemmings' story now more than ever before – it's hard to find her voice, but that is the story of oppression. The story of oppression leaves people silenced and invisible. The story of privilege is that you get what you want. I must be mindful that in my veins runs the

blood of a fourteen year old slave girl. Although that blood runs through my veins I am the face of privilege.

Our story can begin again today, here in this beautiful space if we are brave enough. It can be the opening chapter of a new and fantastic tale of courage, of justice, of inclusion, of a message that is undeniably different than most told in these parts.

As Unitarian Universalists we are challenged to choose everyday who in our world is silenced and who is heard. We create sacred spaces of worship each week that invite visitors from all walks of life to enter and tell their stories. Or do we?

Hearing stories requires us to give up power. Hearing stories means its not about us. Giving voice to others means listening to the fringe dwellers. Giving voice to others means giving a damn by what I mean when I say fringe dweller. What is our good news in the south? Is it that we stand as people waiting to welcome the other, waiting to hear the stories that affect us so deeply we cannot help but be changed? Or is it that change too scary to be invited? Is our good news that we are ready to address oppression and offer community to all people, regardless of our differences? Or is it that our commonalities are too comfortable to give up?

The south has its stories. We all do. The south loves a good story – don't we all. And there are stories yet to be told. Let us listen.

Hallelujah and amen...amen...