

“A Story from Different Perspectives”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on May 2, 2021

As Susan mentioned, our Story for All Ages this morning, *Voices in the Park*, won a number of awards, and for good reason. It provides four different perspectives on a visit to the park. The experience of each of the characters is clearly very different and unique. Each person's experience is influenced by a number of factors such as their stage in life, their life circumstances, their gender, how they perceived themselves, others and the world around them, and many other factors as well. The book offers us an opportunity to look at one event, shared by four people and two dogs, that is seen and experienced from multiple perspectives. The book illustrates what all of us experience at some point, and likely many points in our own lives. Namely, that not everyone perceives things the same way we do. When I first read the book I knew it needed to be the focus of a sermon. I will admit, however, that I wish the author had included the stories as told by the other two characters in the book. We saw images of Victoria and Albert and heard references to them, but their stories about the trip to the park are missing. I wonder how much broader our understanding of the events that day would be if we could hear about the park trip from Victoria's and Albert's point of view. My experience with dogs has been that they are often quite direct and up front with their perspectives and reactions to the situation they are in. I imagine the description of the common and customary sniffing event would have been much different than how it was portrayed by other characters in the book.

This book reminds me of many experiences from my days as a marriage and family therapist. Through the course of more than 25 years as a counselor, I can't tell you how many times I sat with a couple or a family that was experiencing discord and distress. Often there was a particular situation which was perceived by at least one of the parties as problematic. My practice was to ask each person to tell me their story of what occurred. Frequently the stories each of the people shared with me would have some common elements, just as is the case in *Voices in the Park*. But the stories also contained differences, sometimes quite significant differences. Usually each person in my office would share what they believed was a reasonably accurate description of the situation in question. In other words, each person believed what they had shared with me was the truth. The differences in the various stories, however, would frequently be so pronounced that another person in the room would question or challenge the other person's openness, honesty or sincerity. The differences would often become the focal point of disagreement. And these differences of perspective could lead to a growing sense of distance and distrust if a way couldn't be found for each person's perspective to be given consideration and respect.

But my counseling office isn't the only place I have experienced different perspectives of a particular event or situation. There have been plenty of times in my own life when I had a very different perspective or story than another person, such as a family member or friend, about a particular situation we both experienced first-hand. Even with all of my knowledge, training and skill in how to handle this kind of situation, there have been many times when my reaction and response to another's story about a situation we both experienced was, to say the least, less than optimal. I imagine all of you can think of times in your own life when you had difficulty accepting another person's version of a situation you were a part of.

For example, it is not uncommon in my family of origin for one of my sisters to tell a story about some past family gathering—a story that the other members of the family, including me, recall very differently. When this occurs, I sometimes wonder if that sister grew up in the same family I did. There have been more times than I like to admit when I have expressed my doubt, or even my disbelief, about what my sister would claim to have taken place. As you might imagine, doing so doesn't usually turn out well.

Situations like the one I just mentioned offer me an opportunity to learn and grow. These situations offer me an opportunity but there is no guarantee that I will make the most of the opportunity at hand. Such situations, whenever and with whomever they occur, give us all a chance to recognize that what we perceive, and how we interpret what we perceive, isn't necessarily the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

They offer us opportunities to learn and grow as individuals. They also give us a chance to learn and grow as couples, families, groups and communities of all sizes.

The current situation in our nation, with people divided by the stories they hear and hold to be true, is ripe with opportunities for learning and growth. The question is, will we make the most of the opportunities that are present. Will we be able to hear each other's stories and find ways to convey consideration and respect for the person whose story we may not believe or accept to be true? The answers to questions such as these are important. For if the eventual answers turn out to be no, then our nation is in serious trouble.

I want to be clear here. I am not suggesting that we always accept what another asserts as fact. Doing so is no more helpful than telling the other person what they are saying is a flat out lie. The issue frequently isn't whether the story another tells us is true or false. What often matters more than the accuracy or the truth of the story is how we respond to the person telling it. Do we respond in a manner that recognizes and communicates the inherent worth and dignity of the person telling the story? Or do we respond in a way that challenges the person's worth and dignity? Does our response promote further discussion and the possibility for building respect between us? Or does our response generate defensiveness, increase disagreement or animosity, or create more distance between us? If we hope to solve the issues we are facing as a nation—issues such as the ongoing pandemic, systemic racism, and the environmental crisis of global climate change—we are going to have to establish, maintain and build relationships—relationships that allow us to work with people who perceive things very differently than we do.

This is no simple task. In fact, there are times when the task will be beyond our capability or even impossible. And yet it is a task we must work toward whenever possible if we want to make this world a better place than it is today.

What can we do to work toward getting beyond the differences in the stories we hold to be true? I think the best place to begin is by considering our own stories. As I said earlier, when people would tell me their stories during a counseling session, they usually believed their story to be the truth. In actuality, what they shared was only a small portion of the truth with some inadvertent untruth sprinkled throughout. Whether we like it or not, that is the case with all of our stories. You heard that correctly. None of our stories are entirely true. And none of our stories contain all of the truth. We all see, hear and feel things in different measure. What stands out in a situation for me or you, may not even be noticed by someone who is right beside us. And through the course of our lives the experiences we have begin to congeal into a set of stories, often referred to as beliefs—beliefs about ourselves, others and the world. As these stories or beliefs solidify, they become filters through which most, if not all, of our perceptions must pass. And this filtering of experience occurs outside of our conscious awareness. There may be a tiny number of people who attain a level of awareness that prevents this kind of filtering from occurring. I have never met such a person myself, but I haven't met everyone in the world yet. Starting with the person we have the most experience with, ourselves, we can begin to recognize the stories we hold about ourselves, others and the world that aren't totally true or accurate. As we discover the inaccuracies and untruths in our own stories, we can explore various ways to respond to those stories or beliefs.

I will offer a personal example from my own life. When I was very young I came to believe that I was dumb. I held this belief, this story, in my head all the way through grade school, high school and even into my first year of college. This is quite amazing since I was the first member of the entire Peet side of my family, which was quite large, to go to college. And I didn't even recognize that this was a story I was telling myself. It wasn't until a good friend in college caught me mumbling "dummy" under my breath that I became aware of it. My friend thought I was calling them a dummy. That led to a difficult but enlightening conversation. The friend was initially quite upset to think that I thought they were dumb. It took a bit, but I eventually convinced my friend that I hadn't called them a dummy. At that they settled down. But they were soon upset again, which was very confusing to me. They were upset, I soon learned, because it really bothered them that I would call myself a dummy. They were certain that wasn't true. That situation made me aware of the story I had been carrying and telling myself for years, a story that wasn't true. At that point, the first step in the work had been accomplished, once, the step of awareness. It was a step I would have to repeat many, many more

times. The next step was figuring out how to change that story. Initially when I would become aware that I was thinking myself a dummy I would tell myself it was dumb to believe that. As you would expect, that approach didn't work very well. I tried numerous other approaches and eventually found one that helped me begin to change that story. In time, the process of trying different approaches with myself, noticing the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of each one, helped me develop a new story, a new belief about myself. I was able to find a way to recognize when the inaccurate story would kick in. Then I could acknowledge the story and offer myself another version of the story to consider. Eventually the new story replaced the old and untrue one.

I offer this story from my own life to illustrate several things. The first is how we can change our own stories that aren't true and don't serve us well. The second is how having caring and respectful relationships can help us become aware of our blind spots. I will say that I don't advocate getting upset at a person, like my friend did with me, if you disagree with the other person's story. Yet in spite of my friend getting upset with me, I knew they cared about me, and that made a world of difference. And a third point I want us to remember is that as we practice changing our own stories, we can learn important lessons about listening to and learning from the stories that others hold to be true.

Since we all hold stories that are inaccurate or incomplete, we need one another to help us gain a fuller perspective. I would encourage all of us to pay attention to situations where the story we hold and believe to be true about a situation doesn't match that of someone we encounter. Each of these encounters offers us an opportunity to learn and grow personally. And such encounters hold the possibility for us to be part of the learning and growth of another as well. In the days ahead, as we make the transition to in-person gatherings, I imagine there will be numerous situations where we will encounter multiple perspectives about some situation in the Fellowship or beyond. It is my hope that we will take advantage of these situations to live into our Third Principle, "acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregation(s). The more we practice listening attentively to stories that we may not agree with, the more we can hone our skills of being respectful and caring toward the person who is sharing the story they believe to be accurate and true. In time, and with concerted effort, we may, one situation and one person at a time, shrink the divides that exist in our families, our communities and our nation.

So may it be.