

“Stories, Messes and All”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on May 16, 2021

Shel Silverstein definitely has a way with words. And whether writing poetry or books, he is artful in putting words together to tell stories that are vivid and memorable. In the poem “Sarah Sylvia Cynthia Stout Would Not Take the Garbage Out” Silverstein draws us into a story that is quite a mess. A childhood friend of mine who was taught that it was improper to speak certain words would say “This poem was about a mell of a hess.” The poem exemplifies the topic of my sermon this morning, “Stories, Messes and All.”

Life is full of stories—stories about all manner of objects and subjects, happenings and imaginings, thoughts and emotions. Stories inform us, inspire us, entertain us, encourage us, terrify us and they teach us. Stories are important to us. Stories enable us to make meaning of our lives. Today, I want us to think about the stories we hold, the stories we tell and the stories we imagine. And I would invite us to think about the possibility that we probably cleanse some of the stories we hold, tell and imagine. We may have either deleted or downplayed the messes that were part of one story or multiple stories from our past. I want us to think about this story cleansing because I believe messes, and how we handle them, can teach us something. When we clean up our stories, we may reduce or even lose an opportunity for learning and growth by leaving out the messes.

Just as life is full of stories, it is also full of messes. Life is not always orderly, clean and tidy. And if the old saying is true, that life is a bowl of cherries, then we need to figure out what to do with the pits. With the pits in mind, I want to delve a bit deeper now into the subject of messes. As I am sure we all know, there are all kinds of messes in life. There are messes we play a part in making. We are personally responsible for these messes. I am certain all of us can recall any number of messes we have created and had to figure out how to clean up. There are messes created by something or someone else that we find ourselves having to deal with none-the-less. The COVID pandemic fits in this category. And there are messes that we may or may not have played a role in creating. Some of these we may attempt to deny or avoid acknowledging as long as possible. Human caused global climate change is one example of this type of mess. What I have learned through the course of my life is that if something truly is a mess, at some point the mess is going to have to be faced and addressed. And finally, I want to share something my mother said to me many times as I was growing up. “If you made the mess, you need to clean it up.” It is my hope that what I am about to share will assist us all in working together to address messes that we will encounter.

Now I return to the topic of stories—particularly stories that include messes. I have such a story from my own life that occurred since I moved to Bozeman. A few of you have heard a portion of this story—the shortened, cleaned up version. This morning I will share the full story, messes and all. Maybe by sharing this story you will recall some stories of your own where the messes have been left out. The story is about how my wife, Sandy, and I came to buy our house here in Bozeman.

When Sandy and I moved here in 2016 the housing market was tight—not as tight as it is today but tight none-the-less. We both started new jobs just a couple of weeks after our arrival. Our new jobs left us no time to look for a house to purchase. Before our move here we decided to rent for a year and do a serious house search beginning in 2017. The first several months of our search were disappointing to say the least. Week after week, each time we would see a home listing that was interesting and in our price range, we would quickly discover that an offer was already being considered or had been accepted. With each additional disappointment our frustration would intensify. After several months of this, we reached a point where we realized we needed to take break from our home search. We needed an attitude adjustment. We needed to change our outlook on the search process.

By this time it was mid-summer so we decided to take a hike to one of the high alpine lakes above Hyalite Reservoir—a lake we had hiked to the previous fall. We started out early in the morning to insure we would find a parking place in the trailhead parking lot. It was a beautiful, blue sky day. We hiked for about an

hour and a half before we decided it was time to catch our breath and get a drink of water. We stopped next to a old fallen tree and sat down on the log. I took off my daypack and set it on the ground next to the log. After resting there for 10 or 15 minutes we decided to head up the trail again. I grabbed my daypack and slipped my arms through the shoulder straps.

Very soon after getting my pack on I began to realize something wasn't right. There was a very pungent odor. And no matter which direction I turned, the odor seemed to be emanating from directly behind me. I took off my daypack and found the source of the odor. It seems that when I had placed my pack on the ground I had put it directly on top of a pile of, fresh, soft and very stinky—droppings. Droppings isn't what came out of my mouth when I discovered what I had done. And if that wasn't bad enough, I soon found that as I put my pack on, the droppings had gotten onto my shirt and pants. That led to another utterance of a word other than, but synonymous with, droppings. I hadn't created the mess that I set my pack down into. But I was now carrying the mess on my back. I was going to have to clean up the mess I was carrying and wearing. As you might imagine, I was not a happy hiker. I was no longer just disappointed and frustrated. At that point I was feeling totally downhearted. Before heading out that morning I had created a story in my mind about what this hike would be like. That story was delightful and invigorating. Setting my pack into a pile of droppings had not been in my original story. Doing so shattered my story into pieces, the most prominent of which were now very stinky.

Sandy and I considered a couple of options. One would be to continue on to the lake with me remaining some distance behind Sandy so as not to assault her olfactory faculties. The other was to head back down the trail and then home where I could clean up the mess. We decided on the latter. Sandy was gracious enough to let me ride home in the car instead of tying me to the roof rack we use to carry our canoes. When we got home I took off my pants and shirt in the garage of our rental house. Sandy was kind enough to bring me some clean clothes to put on. I then proceeded to clean up the mess. I washed my daypack, my pants and my shirt, by hand, outdoors. After washing them I left them in the garage to dry. I would wash my clothes by hand again later before washing them a third time in the washing machine.

After the mess incident I wasn't sure I wanted to do anything besides sit in the house and brood for the rest of the day. Yet it was just mid-morning and the day was beautiful. Sandy, exhibiting her deep wisdom, suggested we take a drive to look at some new townhouses that were under construction. She knew it would be important to get me out of the house. I really didn't feel up to it. I knew, however, that staying in the house wouldn't improve my mood and could make it worse. So I reluctantly agreed to take a drive with her.

As we turned onto the street the townhouses were on we almost simultaneously noticed the "for sale" sign in the front yard. Seeing the sign quickly and dramatically changed the story of the day. We wrote down the realtor's name and number and then called the realtor we had been working with. Our realtor set up a viewing of the townhouse for that afternoon. Shortly after 8:00 am the next morning we made an offer on one of the townhomes. In just a couple of days the offer was accepted and a few weeks later we were moving into our new home.

I will say that not all stories that include messes come out smelling as good as the one I just shared. Sandy and I were incredibly lucky. And we were, and are, quite privileged to have the wherewithal to purchase a home. We would not be able to afford a similar home here in Bozeman today.

At this point you may be wondering how this story could possibly be relevant to any of you or to this Fellowship. While the story is about a specific mess, there are potential lessons in the story that can be generalized and may be beneficial to all of us going forward. Over the course of the last year we have all been part of a tremendous mess—the COVID pandemic. The pandemic has been one mell of a hess that has tested us and taxed us in ways that none of us have ever experienced before. The pandemic has threatened us and isolated us. The pandemic has taken away so much of what we were accustomed to and took for granted. The pandemic has dramatically changed the stories of our lives. In some ways the pandemic shattered our stories in a manner very similar to what we heard about in our Story for All Ages this morning.

While the pandemic is still with us, medical experts are indicating that the worst may be in the past for those of us who have been fully vaccinated. Now the challenge is to figure out how to pick up the pieces of our

broken stories and move forward into the future. It is very likely that some of us want to put the story back together the way it was before. We may strive to figure out how we can minimize or eliminate the mess from our ongoing story. We might want to relegate the mess to a footnote or an afterward to the story, if we include it at all. Quite likely, all of us would prefer that the mess not interrupt or tarnish the story we had been living and might want to return to. I am sorry to say that I don't believe that is possible. And it may not hold the most benefit for us as individuals, for this Fellowship as a community, for our nation or for the world. We need to include the mess of the pandemic in our stories so we can learn from it, grow from it and teach those who will come after us what it has taught us. One thing it has taught us is that we must do the best we can in our efforts to carry on. All of us have been doing the best we can for more than a year now and we will continue to do so in the days ahead.

And speaking of carrying on, the UUFB Board is thinking about and imagining how we will move forward as the pandemic recedes. The Board is very seriously considering returning to in-person services, possibly as soon as three weeks from today. I have heard multiple Fellowship members and friends express their anticipation for and excitement about returning to in-person gatherings again.

Like many of you, I look forward to the day when we will be together in the flesh again instead of just a collection of images on a computer screen. Mixed in with my anticipation and excitement are some of the lessons contained both in this morning's Story for All Ages and the personal story I shared. One of those lessons is to pay close attention to the imagined story I hold of what the future will be. That story quite probably won't go just as I think it will, and for that matter, as any of us think it will. I want to remember to hold my story, and particularly that future, imagined story, lightly. If I am going to make the most of the story that is yet to be, I would be wise, we would all be wise, to have the story include uncertainty and adventure. It will be important that I, that we, not carve the story in stone or even write it in permanent ink on paper. We might instead want to consider writing it with our finger tip in a gently flowing stream or even on the wind. We would do well to include lots of patience and compassion in our future story as well. We will need both patience and compassion as new messes occur, which they most certainly will. And whether we are responsible for creating those messes or not, it would be beneficial to remember what Sarah Sylvia Cynthia Stout figured out. If we willingly and graciously take care of the messes, whether they are ours or not, in the long run it will be better for everyone. And finally, it is my hope that I, that we, can seek to discover the totally unexpected opportunities that may result when we encounter some mess that pops up. May we move together into the uncertain future with an openness to the stories that lie ahead, messes and all.

So may it be.