

More Than Sometimes Why
A Sermon Offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist
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By the Reverend Hilary Landau Krivchenia

Before I married my husband, Mark, I had a different name. Hilary Joyce Landy. I changed my name to his because he had two other children, Lea and James, and I wanted the little one, Chava, to have the same last name and to give her a strong connection by name as well as law and love, to Mark's sprawling and sweet family. And I changed the Landy to Landau because my aunt had once asked me to do it since there were no more living Landaus in our immediate family and that was our original last name.

I was happy to do it, though I did have an attachment to the last name I had grown up with. As a little kid – and it may be that all little kids do this – or it may be that I had too much time on my hands since my parents did not seem to believe in sports or exercise – anyway – as a kid I'd write out my name and what I appreciated in growing degrees over the years was that each of my names had a "y" in it. I thought of the y's in my name as some sort of badge of curiosity or at the very least – a sign that I was meant to ask questions – not to take things at face value.

In childhood I certainly didn't have to. My parents seemed to question everything. As soon as I could read they bought a set of the encyclopedia Britannica – something that made me feel as though I could double check any information I was given and that I had the world at my fingertips – the Britannica was the 1961 version of Google.

But I'm sure that it saved my mother from having to answer the endless questions of childhood. My Dad sometimes told me to go look it up in the Britannica, but he was far more likely to answer my questions himself. We loved talking, yet, even to this day, I'm bushwacking my way through the underbrush of periodic misinformation he gave me – like Yiddish phrases that don't actually exist, misidentified plants, and odd interpretations presented as fact about the lives of famous people. In all fairness, he gave me lots of good information, too, and even, insight. But even he, who loved to talk with me, reached those moments when he was exhausted by questions, yearning for peace, or just too busy or when I was challenging his decision about bedtime or some other unpleasant reality. At those times, he'd answer my "Why?" with that timeless nugget "Because I said so."

Now there's a non-answer we've all heard – the answer that hides an answer. We aren't fooled. We know that there's a real answer somewhere – it's just not being delivered. And all of us in this room – the seekers, skeptics, and free-thinkers – from the lifelong to the newly professed Unitarian Universalists – we carry that recognition with us through life – when it comes to theology, faith, sacred text, to our understanding of religion as a whole – "because I said so" carries no weight with us. The once Reverend Ralph Waldo Emerson said in the "Divinity School Address" – that the truth "cannot be received at second hand."

We want to know the hidden answers – to look behind the curtain – or, at the very least, to know the hidden question. We live in a world where too many people take the blue pill – if you didn't see the movie "the Matrix" – the blue pill is the one that keeps the illusion going – makes the sleeping person remain asleep dreaming a life rather than living one. But in that world, challenging though it may be, those people who are or become

Unitarian Universalist are those people who choose at some moment in life to take the red pill and wake up.

In such a sleeping world, to question, as the hymn by Shelley Jackson Denham says, truly is an answer. But, it's not quite enough of an answer. I don't believe that there no answers – there are some – but they may lead to new questions, or they may evolve in interpretation over time. The phrase “all men are created equal” is proof enough of that. *(a slide which moves through successive interpretations and realities of the phrase comes onto the screen.)* Real answers to deep questions seldom lollygag around on the surface of life. The questions about which we sing are really more of a means -- the way we dive deep -- toward the answers. And you are deep – every one of you here has an infinite depth and breadth – a vast inner landscape. When I perform weddings – whether the two people are early in their years together or they've been together many years, I remind them that they've each been given passage to a voyage of heroic exploration – the geography – well – more like the cosmography of another human soul. Cosmography was the ancient art of mapping the heavens. Cosmography, because the chart of a human soul is never exhausted – there is always new depth to discover. Therefore, I warn in weddings, do not take one another for granted. But I say this also so that people – so that you will not take yourselves for granted. Go deep, learn your landscape.

I'll bet that a few of you have been able to catch some of the Ken Burns series on the Roosevelts. I saw the first two – and I love a good biography. I love when they go behind the public story and discover what makes a person tick. I've always known that Teddy Roosevelt was pretty macho – but I didn't know that part of that extreme bravado came from his shame that his father had not served in the Civil War – an act, TR felt, of cowardice. He spent much of his life pushing to prove that neither he nor his sons would back down from a fight. I might not be terribly drawn to this man who killed thousands of animals in sport to demonstrate his manliness, but I'm fascinated by the way that there are resonant truths that shape our lives.

A good biography tells you what makes a person tick – a really good one goes to the center of their being. Although it was largely fictional the classic movie Citizen Kane is that kind of story – of a man who grew to be larger than life, hard, yet thin-skinned, a giant, a wheeler dealer always trying to accumulate more and more. But at the moment of his death he whispers Rosebud – the name painted on the wooden sled he was playing with as an impoverished, small boy the day he was taken away from his mother to be raised in wealth in the care of a bank.

But not every core truth in our beings is a painful truth from which we run as fast as we can -- some are glorious and beautiful truths – moments in our histories and our hearts when we are changed – when a path opens up to us and in us. And often, just beneath the painful truth is a core value – a deeper truth that, if we but dive deeper, we can touch it and then rise back into the world with more creative spirit – it wouldn't have been so good a story if Citizen Kane had realized that he was simply yearning for love and a deeper belonging than belongings can give you.

Sticking with movies for a moment – there was a movie called Contact many of you might be familiar with – based on a book by the same name by Carl Sagan. In the movie a young girl is inspired by her father to search the depths of space for signs of intelligent life. As the viewer you know that along with a love of the stars, her father's death at an early age

also drives her to search the heavens – knowing that in some way she can connect with him there.

Beneath all of our social masks are our stories, beneath our stories are decisions, beneath our decisions is striving toward life, and beneath our striving toward life is feeling, and beneath that feeling is hidden truth, and beneath that hidden truth is a pure hope and an original faith.

In a love relationship, the key is to explore your partner with courage, tenderness, and generosity. There's a poem I read again recently by Wendell Berry called the country of marriage. In one stanza the poet wrote of the intimacy of marriage as a forest:

The forest is mostly dark,
its ways to be made a new
day after day,
the dark richer than the light
and more blessed,
provided we stay brave
enough to keep on going in."

Years ago, before we were married, Mark and I picked up a book called "Lifemates" by Harold Bloomfield. It was based on a simple and yet challenging technique to use when there may be something troubling going on or when you just want to get to know them more deeply. You listen to your partner with genuine curiosity – and, until you and your partner feel as though you have touched a core truth – you just keep asking gently – "Tell me more". You do this over and over until you get to the heart of whatever is happening. In this way you keep going deeper until you what makes you both tick uniquely works better and better together.

But, really, it's a technique you can use to learn more about yourself – to figure out why you've chosen something in your life – a job – a city – a bigger house. To get to the root cause. Or to find out what is hidden in your heart hoping to be discovered in order to inspire you to a more fulfilling life.

In my mid-thirties, I remembered a very small event in my early childhood – a moment when I stopped, while walking down my street, and looked at a plant growing up through the sidewalk. It amazed me with its strength and vulnerability and I thought to myself that it had changed me and that everything that I see and experience changes me and has the power to teach me. I remembered my childlike utter joy in that moment. And so vividly remembering that moment and those feelings gave me access to energy, purpose, and a sense of adventure and discovery that has remained with me since then.

A few weeks ago I used Ira Progoff's meditation "The Well and the Cathedral" to talk about this going deeper. You look into water – into the self – and it is cloudy with mud, then the mud settles and you can see deeper through your own reflection back through your own past, through faces, memories, feelings, events, and dreams. And then, with greater clarity you enter a great stream – it is the stream of life from which inspiration flows. Amazingly, in this stream, you find not only yourself but you find every soul who ever dove deeply and bravely. You find poets, heroes, artists, philosophers, composers, leaders, loving souls, creative spirits.

Joseph Campbell wrote: "People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences

on the purely physical plane will have resonances with our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.”

And, thinking back on my own experiences – I believe that we do want to be fully alive – and in that aliveness we find meaning, purpose, direction – we discover the “why” of our existence.

For every one of us the “why” holds a paradox. It is completely unique – which is why you have to move so deep to get at it, as in Progoff’s meditation, going deeper through the layers of your self with a small s to the find the Self with the large S – that spark, quirk, flair, character that is uniquely your own. And the why of our existence is also utterly universal, shared.

We belong to all that is – it is in us and we are of it – interconnected – we inter-are. We cannot be subtracted from All That Is – nor it from us and, just as in Progoff’s meditation, after you reach your own depth, there is more – an underground depth, the stream and in it we join all souls. In it we discover that the “what” of history – every event shaped by the “why” that humans have chosen to listen to, by the combined “why’s” of all souls -- every soul that went deep enough to discover their own life giving “Why”. And, unsettling as it is -- the future depends entirely upon the wise “Why’s” of every person alive now. Daunting though it seems, we have no other course. But moving deep – we can not be daunted. Moving beyond false myths: of saviours, fears of failure, progress, power, acquisition, status – we each find the life-affirming “Why” that makes us and our world truly alive.

Reverend Dowd reminded me of this passage from the Hero with a Thousand Faces by Campbell “Furthermore, we have not even to risk the adventure alone; for the heroes of all time have gone before us, the labyrinth is fully known; we have only to follow the thread of the hero-path... where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to the center of our own existence; where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world.”

I got to thinking about all of this in the conversation with the team that is preparing a process for us as a congregation to begin strategic plan. It’s no mistake that two of my favorite congregational consultants and writers call such planning “Spiritual practice.” The group began to say that what was more important to learn is not the “what” of everyone’s hopes for Countryside – but the deeper shared why of those things. What is the “Why” of this faith tradition? Why are we each here together now? Why do we have hopes and plans for this place, this faith, and our world?

Art Paton pointed out to me that there is a technique in quality control called “The Five Whys”. Like “Tell Me More” – it depends upon not stopping until you find the root cause – in the case of quality control—it could be the root cause of a problem – but in the life of the spirit of each person and our world – it is also the root cause that can liberate, heal, and bring life – affirm life.

It’s a hero’s journey indeed. And, at the risk of using a quotation too often used Helen Keller is reported to have said “Life is either a daring adventure or nothing. To keep our faces toward change and behave like free spirits in the presence of fate is strength undefeatable.” It echoes the poem that Elizabeth read earlier, by Judy Sorum Brown Life’s “Not a battle, But adventure, ‘Tis knowing this/ As simple fact/ Makes all The difference.”

In the days and months to come, let us explore together and each in our so-called own lives -- the why of our lives as unique persons – as you and you and you and you and

as Unitarian Universalists in this house of shaping meaning, this house of good faith, this house in this world. In the days and months to come let us ask why not sometimes on the surface but in prayer, in meditation, in spiritual exploration, until what we find liberates our courage, our energies, and our spirits and draws us on a truly living path that serves life in all its many forms here on earth.