***Reinterpretation***

**A sermon for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation**

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**Delivered on April 29, 2018**

They didn’t ask and I didn’t tell. That’s right. I served in the United States military—the United States Army to be exact. As you might imagine I wasn’t your typical recruit. I question authority, scream when I see a snake, and never look good in dark shades of green—it’s not my signature color. I’m more of an autumn and look much better in orange. I’m fond of sleeping, prefer the Sheraton to a tent, value non-conformity than obeying orders, and have a moral issue with war. There is also the small issue of fancying people of the same gender. But, like I said they didn’t ask and I didn’t tell.

Believe it or not I excelled in basic training. In fact I received special recognition for excelling at all the basic training exercises. I was a sharpshooter using the M-16 rifle and a handgun, was a master grenade thrower, at the top of my class in setting M18 Claymore mines, and could assemble my gas mask in record time. There never seemed to be an appropriate place to add these skills on my application for ministerial fellowship with the UUA. I was stationed in Fort Dix in New Jersey. I was trained as a combat medic which means I was trained to stabilize severely injured soldiers on the field until they reached the field hospital. So I have many tricks to control bleeding and can set up an I.V. while under fire. Perhaps this will come in handy at the next annual meeting.

I hated it. Actually, this was one of the most miserable times in my life. I found myself enlisted in the Army at the insistence of my mother. At the age of 17 she aggressively persuaded me to meet with recruiters and at the age of 18 I was loaded onto a Greyhound bus leaving my hometown for boot camp. Why I went along with this baffled me. I resented my mother for manipulating me and pushing me into something I loathed. This resentment grew and rooted itself between my mother and I and our relationship was forever changed and damaged.

This resentment not only damaged our relationship it damaged me. Having to hold on to and live with this emotional burden affected how I interacted with the world. I thought I was smart by tucking this experience away where I couldn’t see or feel it. I was naïve. This experience absolutely affected how I loved Richard and my family and led to destructive behaviors---some of which I still battle with today. Like it or not I was trapped and had come to the conclusion that I couldn’t change the past and would simply need to learn to carry this burden.

In my late twenties, a few years after my mother’s death, something changed. I realized that all of her controlling, overbearing, and persistently nagging behaviors were oddly coming from a place of love. You see she believed the Army was the only way out of what she considered to be a dead end existence. We lived in a small and impoverished town, we were hard-up and opportunities for college and jobs were slim. She saw a way out. Her methods were misguided but the result she was trying to achieve was my success and happiness. I had missed this a decade earlier. Revisiting and reinterpreting this time in both our lives gave me freedom. I was released from pain and misunderstanding and free to love my mother in a different, perhaps deeper, way. The freedom wasn’t instant. Rather it grew as the truth was revealed.

Why don’t we revisit and reinterpret our past more often? Maybe a better question is why would we do this? Why not let bygones be bygones. Why don’t we just keep moving forward not wasting time dredging up the past? “Stop living in the past” my grandfather would say. Why are we determined to release ourselves from our past by putting it and keeping it behind us? In his book, *The Responsible Self*, H. Richard Neihbur describes the method of reinterpreting and calls it “useful or fitting to us humans who have, like it or not, a remembered past which we cannot forget or leave behind.” Reinterpreting recalls, accepts, reorganizes, and understands the past instead of abandoning it. To move towards freedom, towards freshness, towards something new and adventurous in our present we need to reinterpret or reconstruct our past.

I once met with a group of clergy and a theme of our conversation was the notion that we, as remarkable humans, make ourselves believe that we have made it, that there isn’t anything we should consider changing about ourselves. Others should change. Not us. We’ve arrived, cornered the market on being fully matured emotionally and spiritually, and are comfortable basking in our own light thank you very much. We are fooling ourselves. Our emotional and spiritual growth is stunted and often frozen by our ability to neglect our past. Some of us, whether it be conscious or not, work very hard to push away, hide, forget, and pretend we don’t have a past. Trust me. I know all about it. Years ago when I was accepted to seminary I decided that I could not live a life that was not authentic. It would be impossible for me to minister and not be authentic. You see up to that point I spent much energy on avoidance, shame, and denial. I wasn’t too proud of my childhood and family. But as I reinterpreted my past I was able to see the advantages and honor of my past and how it graces my ministry.

In his book, *The Book of Secrets*, Deepak Chopra describes how ancient cultures answered the question, How do you set your mind free? He tells us “they tried to understand how the mind traps itself” and that “the ancient Indian sages devised the key concept of samskara. A samskara is a groove in the mind that makes thoughts flow in the same direction. Buddhist psychology makes sophisticated use of the concept by speaking of samskaras as imprints in the mind that have a life of their own. Your personal samskaras built up memories from the past, force you to react in the same limited way, robbing you of free choice.” Chopra writes “unable to escape their toxic memories, people adapt to them, adding one layer after another of impressions. The samskaras rule the psyche through a jumble of old, outworn experiences”. We end up living the experience over and over and unfortunately getting the same old results.

Reinterpreting offers us a chance to experience freedom and to claim the opportunity to successfully move into and through the future and salvage that which has meaning and truth from our past. We can understand and produce the meaning of our lives from the stories that are available to us from our personal histories. Reinterpreting allows us to discover possibilities, hope, and previously unrecognized meaning. Reinterpreting goes both ways. When we engage this practice we may discover or realize pain that we have previously missed, ignored, or stowed away to be forgotten. Either way freedom will ultimately result and bring new understanding. I’ve heard reinterpreting described as the “liquid plumber for the soul.” This description assumes that the path to deeper truth and meaning is clogged and that we shouldn’t be surprised when we can’t move emotionally and spiritually. Several caps full of reinterpreting and time clears the way to growth and wisdom. You are freeing your soul, your mind, and your spirit to experience peace and stillness.

Author Steven Levine asks the questions “If the future rapidly becomes the present, and the present condenses into the past, how do we fully stay alive each day? How do we live a full and rich life in the present?” To be alive in the present we shouldn’t mute the music and sounds of voices, erase names and memories of our past. We should be mindful of days gone by and recognize the wisdom and visible marks indicating the places where we’ve lived in laughter, sorrow, friendship, and in spirit. Reinterpreting is the stringing together of these experiences that will allow us to reshape and rethink our today.

Reinterpreting is not solely for the individual. Communities, especially congregations, can benefit from reinterpretation. If we’ve spent time together this week you’ve heard me talk about the writings of Gandhi as I’ve spent the last week deep in his words. Gandhi characteristically led by example more than by grandiose speeches or writings. To him words are nothing if they are not demonstrated by action. He actively sought out people of other faiths, even as they sought him out. After his initial encounter with Christians in England, he read the Bible; after meeting and working with Muslims in South Africa, he read the Qur’an. He tried to learn what he could about the teachings of other religions and always welcomed dialogue, as long as it was pursued in the spirit of a sincere, friendly and respectful interchange of ideas and knowledge.

There are several principles that governed Gandhi’s interaction with those of other religions. A couple are useful to us. The first principle is that God is truth, and Truth is God. Gandhi famously inverted the statement “God is truth” to say “Truth is God.” It “is very difficult to

understand ‘God is love’,” he wrote, “because of the variety of meanings of love, but I never found a double meaning in connection with Truth”. In other words, it is more difficult to argue that truth does not exist than to argue that God does not exist. For Gandhi, commitment to truth had to be a core principle animating efforts towards the creation of a world based on nonviolence.

And so the second principle is the search for truth. For Gandhi this search, or the independent investigation of truth, was a lifelong passion. And he felt that it is an obligation of every human being. This is why we have the capacity to reason and to have a conscience. “Truth must be weighed by reason and tested in practice.”

Gandhi believed all religions are imperfect because they are transmitted, interpreted and practiced through imperfect vehicles He said: “We have not realized religion in its perfection. Religion of our conception, being thus imperfect, is always subject to a process of evolution and reinterpretation. Progress towards truth is possible only because of such reinterpretation.

Our fourth principle, a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, is referenced by Unitarian Universalists all the time. In fact we hold it up as a major reason we are Unitarian Universalist. It is in this tradition that we can freely search and question without being told what to believe, think, or feel. This principle calls us to use reinterpretation as a practice to understand ourselves, our theology, and the world. You see reinterpretation is very different from misinterpretation. Reinterpretation calls us to understand, evolve, and to make whole. Misinterpretation takes religion of love and murders, hates, and oppresses. This is why Gandhi prescribes reinterpretation. It is the act of understanding versus dividing. I wonder, if we practice this how we might feel about those we disagree with.

If not reinterpreted we will respond like we always have versus gaining new understanding. What are our stories that deserve reconsideration, a second look--reinterpretation? Where are the opportunities for this congregation to reinterpret and bring healing versus letting the past continue to bog us down, hold us back, and remain clogged? What can we reinterpret that will allow us to be free?

Tired of responding emotionally and spiritually in the same old and ineffective ways, let us challenge ourselves to revisit this principle and understand it differently. Let us beautify our inner space. Let us be free to choose how we will act, work, live, and worship together versus being bound by our samskaras. Let us search for the truth and the meaning that allows us to unravel suffering and transform it into healing and serenity. “Know the truth, and the truth will set you free (John 8:32)”.

May it be so.