

Beyond Categorical Thinking: The Van Gogh Café

Unitarian Universalist Society of Schenectady

Sunday, September 25, 2016

Rev. Keith Kron

Readings

"Eleven" by Sandra Cisneros

What they don't understand about birthdays and what they never tell you is that when you're eleven, you're also ten, and nine, and eight, and seven, and six, and five, and four, and three, and two and one.

And when you wake up on your eleventh birthday you expect to feel eleven, but you don't.

You open your eyes and everything's just like yesterday, only it's today.

And you don't feel eleven at all. You feel like you're still ten. And you are-underneath the year that makes you eleven.

Like some days you might say something stupid and that's the part of you that's still ten.

Or maybe some days you might need to sit on your mother's lap because you're scared, and that's the part of you that's five.

And maybe one day when you're all grown up maybe you will need to cry like you're three, and that's okay.

That's what I tell Mama when she's sad and needs to cry. Maybe she's feeling three.

Because the way you grow old is kind of like an onion or like the rings inside a tree trunk or like my little wooden dolls that fit one inside the other, each year inside the next. That's how being eleven years old is.

You don't feel eleven. Not right away. It takes a few days, weeks even, sometimes even months before you say "Eleven" when they ask you.

And you don't feel smart eleven, not until you're almost twelve. That's the way it is.

***"The Possum" by Cynthia Rylant
from The Van Gogh Café***

Kansas is not what one would call picturesque. It is flat. So flat it could make some people a little crazy, people who need a hill now and then to keep their balance. But in Kansas at least things get noticed. The flatness makes everything count and not one thing slips by. That is why, if a possum was going to choose to hang upside down somewhere, Kansas would be a good choice. People would notice. And if the possum chose to hang outside the window of the Van Gogh Café in Flowers... well then, everyone would start talking about magic. And that would be good for the possum, too.

The Van Gogh Café is owned by a young man named Marc and his daughter, Clara. Clara is one reason for all of the magic in the café. She is ten and believes anything might happen.

Marc and Clara open up the café at six every morning except Sundays, when they sleep until ten. Clara takes breakfast orders for Marc—who is the cook—for half an hour on school mornings, then she goes to their apartment across the street to get ready for school. Clara likes taking orders because everyone is sleepy and sweet and all they want in the world is a cup of coffee, please. Clara thinks morning is the kindest time of day.

Most of the people who come to the Van Gogh Café are Flowers people and know each other: "Hi Ray." "Hello, Roy." But sometimes someone is new, for Flowers sits near I-70, which

people take when they are escaping from an old life in the East to a new life in the West or the other way around. Clara has met many people between six and six-thirty on their way to something new.

But she has not met a possum until today. Today is Saturday and she's working a couple extra hours for her father, and it is eight o'clock in the morning when suddenly a possum is hanging upside down in the tree outside the café window. Right on Main Street. A minute ago it wasn't there and now it is.

Clara sees it first: Look, there's a possum. Coffee cups go down, heads turn, and outside a little gray possum enjoys being noticed. It scratches its nose and blinks its eyes and stares back at all the faces.

No one sitting down can say hello to a possum. So everyone in the café gets up and stands in front of the window. Now, this is the magic of the Van Gogh Café: not one person says, "Amazing! A possum upside down on Main Street!" No, everyone is not all that surprised. They, like Clara, have come to believe anything might happen, because they have been having breakfast at the Van Gogh Café all their lives.

What they do say is, "Hi." Many of them wave. Ray asks Roy what possums eat. And, with their usual curiosity about every new person in Flowers, they all say, "Wonder where he's from?"

Well, it's hard to know a possum's story before he does something magical, but after he does, there's story and more to tell.

One of the first stories is that the possum starts coming back to the Van Gogh Café every day. Eight in the morning, he's up in the tree.

But that's a small story.

The possum begins to attract people, and this is the bigger story because he attracts people who haven't been getting along. Best friends who had a fight the day before: today they're standing on the sidewalk next to the possum. The possum is hanging upside down and blinking, and the two friends are talking, and suddenly they've got their arms around each other and are coming into the café for some pie.

A young husband and wife: the day before they're yelling in the front yard, the next day they're kissing beside the possum.

Two neighbors: the day before they're arguing about loud music, the next day the possum is watching them shake hands.

The story becomes even bigger when people start bringing food out of the Van Gogh Café, food for the possum. Half an English muffin here, two pieces of oven-fried potatoes there, a cup of milk. They can't help themselves; they want to give it some food.

The possum isn't hungry. But a stray dog from the other end of town is, and he starts stopping by for breakfast. So does a thin cat and two baby kittens. And a shy small mouse. Several sparrows. Even a deer.

And this goes on for a while until the biggest story happens. A story that will enter quietly into the walls of the café and become part of its magic.

For a man whose wife has died drives through Flowers, Kansas, one morning on his way to something new. He is sad. He really isn't sure where he's going.

But passing the Van Gogh Café, he sees the possum. He sees the possum and he sees all the hungry animals standing beneath it, eating the scraps of muffins and potatoes.

And the man sees something else there, too, something no one has seen until now. And because of what he sees, he turns his car around and drives back where he belongs, back to his farm, which he turns into a home for stray animals, animals who come to him and take away his loneliness.

Since that day the possum at the Van Gogh Café has disappeared. One minute it was there, the next minute it wasn't.

But the customers still bring food out of the café every morning, leaving scraps beneath the tree in case anyone hungry happens by. There is always a new stray dog, a new thin cat, sparrows.

Clara is not surprised the possum has gone away. Things are always changing at the Van Gogh Café, and something new is sure to happen soon. Perhaps when the silent movie star arrives...

Sermon *The Van Gogh Café*

Not surprisingly I was unpacking children's books at the time.

My principal, Jay Jordan, walked into my classroom and closed the door. He surveyed my room and shook his head, definitely a Keith Kron fourth grade classroom--a few books here (well, more than a few books), a few chairs there, two bulletin boards scattered all over the floor, my desk already swamped with papers. And school would not start for two days yet.

We looked at each other, and I knew I was at the OK Corral. I wasn't sure what I was about to be shot for, but I knew something was up.

Perhaps you have seen the face and fidgeting of a nine-year-old child who lied to you twenty minutes before about having to go to the rest room and now really needed to go. My principal looked somewhat less composed than that.

He asked me if I had gotten his message from the day before about wanting to talk to him about something. I told him I had. Silence. More fidgeting. I began to have an inkling about what this conversation was going to be about.

"I am glad we're on your turf," Jay said. He looked at me for a minute. I nodded. Silence. Jay took a breath.

"You know Tristan Burke is no longer on your class list." I nodded again.

"His mother made me take him out of your class." Jay looked down and then back up. I nodded again. Tristan's mother was president of the PTA that year. I only vaguely knew who Tristan was--and the only thing I knew about him was that he was the most effeminate boy I had encountered in five years of teaching.

"His mother made me take him out of your class because she says she knows you're a homosexual. I don't know how she knows it, but she knows it." Jay looked at me. I looked at him and could see the wheels spinning in his head. I would wonder later if he could see the wheels spinning in mine.

Fortunately, and sadly, I had prepared for this moment. I had no doubts it would come at some point. Years of thinking about it had almost kept me from going into teaching, but the call to teach had won out.

I knew to say nothing. I knew to wait to be asked, then I would answer yes, and only then. I raised my eyebrows back at him. More silence. Part of me was hoping he would ask, that I would be given an opportunity to tell him, that I could finally tell my story.

He didn't ask. He broke the silence. "This is ridiculous. You're not the type to harm children."

We looked at each other. I nodded quietly, realizing the support I was getting. It was a bittersweet moment for both of us. Jay finally mumbled, "I shouldn't have pulled him out of your class."

"She would have made your year horrible. Mine, too, for that matter." I paused. "It's okay."

Jay nodded quietly back at me.

"We did reading groups today. Tristan will be in my class for reading. It's an hour each day." My voice trailed off.

Jay was firmer now. "You'll get my backing. She'll just have to deal with it. There's another parent concerned too. I'll deal with him too. We won't talk about this again." Jay surveyed my room.

"Now get this room cleaned up. I don't know how you are going to be ready to teach in two days." He spun on his heels and turned toward the door. He opened it and turned to me.

"I'm glad we did this on your turf," he repeated.

He looked at me one last time, tried to smile, and left, closing the door behind him.

For the next four years, I never heard any of those complaints again. Tristan and I got along famously. I invited his mother into my reading class to help out when she could. She did, and we laughed a lot together. From me she learned the fine art of teasing children--and probably a few other things.

It occurs to me to tell you why I am here--why I do the work now as Director of the Transitions Office for our Unitarian Universalist Association, why I became a Unitarian Universalist minister--and am not teaching fourth grade anymore.

I left because I was afraid.

It is more than being found out and fired because I was a known homosexual, though that's certainly part of it. The longer I stuck around the greater the odds were that my private life would become public knowledge.

My parents, who have not used the words "gay" or "homosexual" in the 30 years I have been out to them, are a part of this story too. My dad was a principal in the same school system as I, and my mother taught first grade in Lexington as well. I never had the opportunity to think of fighting this battle alone, and my folks had given a lifetime of modeling to know how to overprotect people. Any public battle I chose there would have included them.

I lived four lives in Lexington, Kentucky. I lived a work life where I loved the work of teaching elementary school. I lived a family life where I had dinner with my folks once a week, visited my grandmother a lot, and overspent on my young relatives at Christmas. I lived a gay life where I hung out with friends, led a support group, and played volleyball. I lived a religious

life where I sat on every committee in my home UU congregation and moved on to district and denominational work beyond that.

I even managed to begin to see some overlapping. Certainly my work life and family life overlapped some. And as I came out in church, my gay life and my religious life began to merge. I worked very hard at making my church a welcoming place for gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. I worked very hard at bringing gays, lesbians, and bisexuals into my church. And it happened.

It happened in part because I started telling stories in church. I was able to tell the story about having a crush on Mr. Gardner, my high school drama teacher, and then telling him about it. I was able to tell the story of being in very Southern Baptist church as a teenager and having my "Anita Bryant" type Sunday school teacher ask me if I agreed with her that homosexuals were sick people.

I was able to tell the story of coming out to my parents and having my father ask me if I was going to molest children while my mother cried. I was able to tell the story of meeting a Unitarian Universalist minister in a gay bar and that's how I became a Unitarian Universalist.

I was becoming aware that not only could I be eleven and ten and nine and eight and seven and six and five and four and three and two and one, but I could talk about them as well. You see, my real fear was not that someone like my principal would ask me if I was gay, would ask me my story. My real fear is that I would never get to tell it.

This is what the radical right wants--to control our society so that only certain approved stories can be told. This is why the work we do this afternoon in the Beyond Categorical Thinking workshop is so vitally important as part of your search for a new minister.

I was afraid I would never get to have a life. I was afraid I would always have four of them.

My fear was not that my private life would become public knowledge. My fear was either that it never would, or it would happen only on someone else's terms.

When I hear people say they want to make sure they have a private life and a public life, I wonder, "Do they really want two lives?" Categories for human beings are really a bad idea.

I think I learned that during my conversation with my principal.

As an aside, I do understand that people are talking about control and choice when they make the point about having a private life. I'm all for that. I just believe human beings do better when they only have one life to juggle. It's more than enough to do.

So it was after this conversation with my principal when I began to know the need to make a change. I looked around me and became sadly aware of the number of people leading more than one life at a time.

My teaching colleague who had been married to a man with a sexual addiction for children.

My father who tried to pretend he never had a father and never talked, or talks, about him.

My friend Steve who quit playing the piano because he became a librarian. I still haven't figured that one out.

My friend Sandra who told no one about her live-in boyfriend, Dick.

All of these people and so many more who never got to be eleven. It was hardest for me to see in the children I taught. Children who came to school and then went home and cooked and cleaned for younger brothers and sisters. Children who knew they could not fail. Children who went home to wars. And by the time they were nine years old they knew to keep these lives quiet.

Religious Educator Maria Harris talks about implicit education--what is taught without saying it. I knew I was implicitly teaching these children to have more than one life. There had to be a better way.

I looked at how I might make it a better way. I learned of cities that had nondiscrimination policies for teachers. I did not trust that those were real.

I looked at the amount of work I had to do. And I thought about the fact that I often spent more time documenting what I taught and how I taught it and who was there to hear it, than I did actually getting to teach.

So I decided to look elsewhere. The person I saw doing the most teaching was my minister and the other ministers I knew. And they didn't have to fill out report cards either.

I remembered Jesus was a teacher in many ways. Rabbis consider themselves as teachers. I watched the UU ministers I knew and I watched the way they taught the people around them--by telling stories, often their stories.

At the same time I was leading homophobia workshops in UU congregations--not how to have more of it, mind you, but how to have less. I learned quickly three things about teaching adults.

1) They don't necessarily have longer attention spans than children. They just do a better job of faking. Usually engaging people on an emotional level increases their attentiveness.

2) Adult learning is as much about unlearning as it is about learning.

3) The product isn't nearly as important as the process.

So how do you teach people to be less homophobic? You are explicitly teaching them about homophobia. You are implicitly teaching them about vulnerability.

That's where the possum shows up. That's where the magic happens. As people let themselves become more vulnerable, they become stronger and less homophobic. I did this through telling stories--sometimes my stories. And I was blessed with the stories of others.

I saw the possibility for having one life.

A friend of mine from seminary and I were talking one day and she said you could learn a fair amount about a person by asking them these four questions:

- 1) When did you stop singing?
- 2) When did you stop dancing?
- 3) When did you stop playing?
- 4) When did you stop telling your story?

For the record, I stopped singing in third grade in music class when Mrs. Rice told me I couldn't sing--though I still hum to myself when I think no one is looking.

I still go dancing.

I still play.

And as I told my friend, "It's more a matter of when I started telling my story than when I stopped."

I stopped telling my story at fourteen. It would be ten years later that I started telling some of my stories again. It's only been since I've become a UU minister that I've not had to figure out what story I could tell where.

Like the story of the possum, one story leads to another. And when we hear our story in another's story, well, that's the magic. That's when we encounter mystery.

What are your stories? Have you stopped telling them? Do you only tell them in certain places, in certain lives? How well do you know the stories of those around you? The stories in this room--your stories--are magical. I hope you are not afraid to tell them. They are your life and they let you be fully eleven or whatever age you are.

Whatever forces are against you, whatever pain and suffering is yours, whatever joy you have, whatever your story is, my wish for you is that you share your story whenever and wherever you choose--whether you are 11 or 90 or somewhere in between.

Sing. Dance. Play. Tell your stories. Listen to the stories of others. Live your one life. And feel. Feel its magic.