

## The Name of the Tree

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Stories are important things. It matters what stories we tell each other and our children. Stories have a power that other ways of communication do not. Philip Pullman, author of *The Golden Compass* and its sequels, *The Subtle Knife* and *The Amber Spyglass* says, “We don’t need lists of rights and wrongs, tables of do’s and don’ts: we need books, time, and silence. ‘Thou shalt not is soon forgotten,’ but ‘Once upon a time’ lasts forever.” Well-crafted stories have ways of creeping into our hearts and minds and showing us new things and new ways to see old things. And so, it matters what stories we tell.

When we tell stories of fear and hatred of all that is not us, we build a world of fear and hatred. In this country we seem to be increasingly unable to relate others as equals—as subjects with whom to be in relationship rather than as objects upon whom to act. This inability is engendered, encouraged, and exacerbated by systems, organizations, and individuals who inspire fear, paranoia, and hatred in us because they benefit from keeping us unstable and scared and demand that we not actually *think* about the world we live in. Think about the increasingly shrill and deeply disturbing to me debates on health care reform over the past few weeks. What stories have been told to the people calling out “Nazi” and what stories have they not been told? Our task as liberal religious people is not to shout these people down, though the temptation is there. Our task is to tell a different story—a story of love, relationship, understanding, and collaborative power rather than one of fear, paranoia, and alienation—to model a different way of living in relationship and community, and to engage in conversation and collaboration with all around us—whether they agree or not. To show that sharing this life on this world is necessary, rather than merely living side by side.

And so, what about *The Name of the Tree*?

When I was a child, I had an orange plastic record player. I loved my record player and was constantly plugging it in and listening to the Disney records I shared with my brother and to my disco Star Wars record. But my favorite record was “Danny Kaye Tells Stories from Around the World.” Kaye told stories like “Master of all Masters” and “Nail Soup”—but my favorite story was “The Name of the Tree,” a version of the story I told earlier this morning. Kaye’s version of the story had several differences, the biggest being that the tree had a different name: Oowongaleyma. I listened to this story over and over again. Eventually, I outgrew my little orange plastic record player and started using my dad’s stereo—and at some point, my Danny Kaye record broke or disappeared, but the story stuck with me.

Years later, when I was about to begin my first practicum as a student teacher on Salt Spring Island in British Columbia, I was searching through a children’s bookstore for resources and came across Celia Barker Lottridge’s version. I took it with me into my kindergarten class that spring and it has travelled with me ever since: into other classrooms, into bedtime stories with my niece, nephews, and goddaughter, into storytime at Barnes and Noble when I ran the children’s department. It did more than travel with me, though, it became scripture to me. It became a story I could return to again and again and constantly find new and deeper meaning and metaphor. Like any scripture, any good story, it said as much about my life as it did about its own characters.

So, what lessons can the name of the tree teach us? We could explore the power structures that give some knowledge and power that others have to ask for on bended knee. We could

explore just what it is that the fruit represents. We could explore what it means that the knowledge reaches the animals because the king made a mistake. And what about that darn rabbit hole?

And all of those things are important to the story and what it might mean to us, but what I'd like to focus on today is the three animals—the gazelle, the elephant, and the small, slow tortoise—their different approaches to gaining the knowledge and power of the name of the tree and their differing success.

The things we seek in life can come to us for many reasons. Many of the things we value in society—wealth, power, influence, fame—can come to us because of who we are—because we are born to them, because they are granted to us by our status. We can be the elephant, proud of who we are, secure in our status, and unaware and not paying attention. But the deeper things we seek and need in life cannot come to us through heredity or privilege.

The gazelle has great talent and ability—and knows it—things come easily to him. Many of our successes in life can come to us through raw, basic talent—unasked for and unearned. I know what has happened to me in my own life when things like school came easily to me and I ran into something that I couldn't do easily. I was lost. How do I learn what I can't already easily do? When I was a freshman at the University of Toronto, I signed up for a t'ai chi class. I only lasted a couple of lessons because it was very hard and very different from anything I'd done before and I had no frame of reference for how to do something new and difficult—other things had come easily to me. And so I dropped out of t'ai chi class and didn't try again for years.

But the tortoise, the poor, small, slow, unassuming tortoise who brings the animals the knowledge they need to access life. How does he do it? Not just hard work—the elephant and the gazelle both work as well. The tortoise has discipline and practice. He has a plan. He has a habit he develops to allow him to gain what he needs most deeply, what his community needs most deeply. A little chant, over and over again. “Ungalli, Ungalli, the name of the tree is Ungalli.” When I returned to the practice of t'ai chi six years ago, I was much humbler and acknowledged ahead of time that this would be hard for me and that I'd have to commit to practicing regularly if I was to gain any benefit from the t'ai chi form. In fact, that's specifically why I returned to t'ai chi. And while I haven't been perfect—my t'ai chi teacher will attest to that—it's been a much more deep learning I've done because I've committed to the process. I also understand, like anything important, I'm not going to have learned it for good one day. It's a life-long commitment to a practice. In our attempt to access the benefits of a spiritually centered life, in our attempts at a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, in our desire to see each and every person as worthy of dignity, which animal is a more potent and powerful and useful guide? My money is on the tortoise.

This summer, I completed a twelve-week chaplaincy internship at a south-side hospital. Aside from our duties in dealing with crises in the ER and around the hospital, we spent time everyday visiting patients in our assigned wards. This meant we would see many different patients—one after another—often in a very short time, and often dealing with powerful issues around death, illness, acceptance, hope, and grieving. It is a challenging thing to move from patient to patient and be present and respectful to each without completely draining yourself in the process. One of my colleagues developed a small practice for herself—before she visited with a patient, she would pause outside their room, say the patient's

name several times, and invite God to enter the room before her. In this way she entered each room with the patient in her heart and mind and sacred presence as her goal. Saying a prayer or taking time for meditation in the morning were also important for many of us, but this small practice had a profound effect on my colleague's ability to minister to her patients. When she didn't do it regularly, she felt less present with her patients. When it was a regular practice, her presence was calm and centered on the patient.

I said earlier that this story has become scripture for me. Many Christians and those of other faiths interact with scripture through the practice of *Lectio Divina*. In *Lectio Divina*, the practitioner encounters a passage of scripture in four ways: by reading it, meditating on its meaning, praying from what has been stirred in their heart, and finally resting with the text, contemplating it.

In a posting on the spiritual discipline of *Lectio Divina*, the Unitarian Universalist blogger known as Chutney talks about the kinds of texts appropriate for *Lectio*, what he calls "wisdom literature":

"What is wisdom literature? Wisdom literature is literature that reads *you*. You may read *it*, well enough, but—if you're paying attention at all—it holds you in its gaze and mirrors you back to yourself. And yet you'll find something fuller and larger than yourself in it, something that will linger after you've put it down. That something will challenge you, and, if you devote time to it, even a little, it will change you. Promise. You don't need to believe that any particular piece of wisdom literature is divine writ for spiritual reading to work for you. . . . You just need something that will read you."

And this is what the story of the tortoise and the tree has become for me. And my most recent return to the story reflected back to me what I described earlier about spiritual practice and more. What lingered for me was a connection between spiritual practice, the disturbing rhetoric around the health care town halls, and what this all means to this liberal faith we all share and commit to.

This liberal faith of ours that is not mine because I was born to it—even if I was. The elephant can forget and stumble if she doesn't pay attention.

It is not mine just because it fits with the way I see the world—even if it does. The gazelle can be tripped up if he's distracted or thwarted.

This liberal faith of ours is mine (and I think ours) because I commit to it every day. Because I struggle with it every day. Because I practice it every day.

Our tradition has no creed, but it is, for me, guided and shaped in many ways by the principles we affirm and promote—principles listed inside each of the hymnals in front of you. In many ways, creeds are easy. For me, these principles are hard, complex, and challenging. They don't ask what I believe, they call me to test that belief daily, to live it out in community. They don't tell me what is holy, they call me to search for it constantly in humility. They don't ask me where I get my strength, they demand that I use that strength always in service.

This is not an easy task, friends. I have had conversations with those in other more conservative traditions who think we have it easy not having to be accountable to creeds and canon law. But it's hard work building a vital liberal faith. It is profoundly difficult day in and day out to find the name of our tree, to reach that fruit. And there are rabbit holes everywhere. It's daunting and we are never perfect. But, as Garrison Keillor so wisely said, "We do the best we can. We do the very best we can, and tomorrow, God willing, we get to wake up and try again."

Ungalli, Ungalli, the name of the tree is Ungalli.