

TRUER STORIES

A sermon given for the 'Touchstone of Formation' service by

The Rev. Dr. Kelly Murphy Mason at UU Wellesley Hills on

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Whenever I see that a book or film or show that I am starting is “based on a true story”, I experience a peculiar mix of emotions, specifically curiosity combined with skepticism. It feels inherently edifying, watching or reading something akin to a true story. First I get curious: what can I learn about this case study of a life? I begin to hope it can offer me unique perspective about how people manage themselves and their circumstances. Then I remember my skepticism. I wonder just how loosely or closely based this show or film or book is on said “true story”, how accurate a tale it will tell. Perhaps you have responses similar to mine.

The subtitle of Kate Braestrup’s memoir *Here I You Need Me* strikes me as bold: *A True Story*. That’s quite a claim. A Unitarian Universalist community minister serving as chaplain to the Maine Warden Service, she wrote a book-length account of her ministerial formation. Only this account does not launch with Braestrup’s own desire to enter the UU ministry; it opens with her deceased husband’s plans to make that his second career. He was a trooper with Maine State Police when he involved in a fatal accident in his squad car. Within a year of his death, Braestrup had enrolled in Bangor Theological Seminary. From at the outset of her chaplaincy, Braestrup already had a profound understanding of what it meant to

minister to people in law enforcement. She also appreciated the impact of both delivering and receiving very bad news.

When we speak of formative experiences, we usually flag ones that have had a positive influence on our lives, that have been beneficial in key ways to our overall development. But often, our formative experiences include deep disappointments, unforeseen setbacks, personal tragedies, and even our worst mistakes and keenest regrets. As Braestrup reveals, the causes of our personal pain can become transformative resources. In 2008, Braestrup was presented with Melcher Book Award by the Unitarian Universalist Association for her best-selling memoir. In its citation, the book award committee commended her book for serving as an important reminder that “an authentic spiritual life is indeed a ‘search and rescue’ enterprise”, whether or not one lives in the wilds of Maine.

This citation goes on to say: “Our vision of the sacred dimensions of life has been widened in the telling of your story. Given the choice, you would likely have sought a different story to tell. But this is the story into which Life has spun you,” the committee observed, and this “narrative... has given a source of hope to those who would wish to have chosen a different story for their own lives. You hold up the truth that we are never without choice—the choice of patience, the choice of faith, the choice of hope, the choice of gratitude.” Even when our preferred options are no longer available, we discover that there are choices left for us to make.

In her first public prayer before game wardens and other law enforcement officials, Braestrup recognizes that. She carefully avoids

a petitionary prayer for their safety, as tempting as it is for her to offer that, as much as she would like to for her own satisfaction. Having lost her trooper husband suddenly, Braestrup knows full well that their jobs are dangerous ones. As she notes in the memoir, “if safety were a police officer’s top priority, she would have doubtless chosen another profession.” It is partly through our continuous ordering of top priorities that lifelong formation occurs.

Throughout this month, we have been exploring the topic of formation here at UU Wellesley Hills as part of the Touchstones Project, which in 2018/2019 is dedicated to the common theme, “Let Your Life Speak.” If we never pen our memoirs, we can still become more intentional about naming our formative experiences, the painful as well as the positive, in ways that dignify our existence and give voice to our core values. Honoring Braestrup’s writing, the Melcher Book Award made mention of “chambers of the collective human heart where our brokenness is shared and our healing is forged”, and certainly, several of you form such chambers here in this congregation.

As the late UU minister Sophia Lyon Fahs wrote, “We gather in reverence before the wonder of the life... the wonder of being together, so close yet so far apart” in this Sanctuary. We come to have a collective experience of being ourselves. Increasingly, I’m convinced Sunday services are not something we offer, but something we perform. We practice being present for each other over time and across a tangle of life cycles. This encourages our ongoing spiritual formation, being in fellowship with people who are simultaneously attending to their own.

In comments she made accepting the Melcher Book Award, Braestrup stated that as much as she did not want to be characterized as “the plucky widow” of a fallen trooper, she was indeed that in many respects. She picked up the standard her husband bore while he was alive and then pressed on, carrying it aloft herself. Yet as she notes, very many standard bearers emerged from just such moments of necessity, when the plans they laid out for their lives no longer have much bearing on an in-breaking reality.

A stubborn fallacy in our contemporary culture holds that individuals can choose to fashion lives that nicely fit their specifications. Let’s admit that this is a consumerist myth and an obvious falsehood. Much of our lives are shaped by factors outside our control, and attempts to deny that make us alternately fragile and agitated. The fullest measure of personal freedom lies in the attitudes we adopt towards those outside factors and how adaptable we remain when we are confronted with them. “We are all practicing all the time for the test,” Braestrup said in one discussion of her book, “and we don't know what the test is going to be.” Or when.

Such tests can be hugely revelatory - they can show us who we are capable of becoming or perhaps called to be. The person you may discover within is likely the self-same person that is required by this world. Understand, too, that theses tests can be public or private. Those of you here today, I suspect, have already faced a series of them. You never forget the results, and they always have spiritual implications. In her work as a chaplain, Braestrup was often a first-hand witness to what she describes as “hinges of human experience,

moments where some lives are altered or ended and others swung in wholly unpredicted directions”. She believes that these moments are intensely religious ones, and I am inclined to agree.

Her prayer for those Maine game wardens was a prayer that they find the strength sufficient to reckon with such moments. “May you be granted respite from what you must know of human evil, and refuge from what you must know of human pain,” Braestrup prayed. “May God defend the goodness in your heart. May God defend the sweetness in your souls...” She reminded them of all there was to protect, not only from external affront, but also from internal defeat. Braestrup called on them to acts as stewards of their spirits, even as they upheld their oaths. She reminded them of the precious work of formation. She turned them, all together, toward what the great theologian Howard Thurmans dubbed “the growing edge”, where our ability to cope and to care expand.

The Touchstone Reflection this morning asked us all to consider if we were looking to the growing edge of life. “Such is the growing edge! It is the extra breath from the exhausted lung, the one more thing to try when all else has failed, the upward reach of life when weariness closes in upon all endeavor,” Thurman explained. “This is the basis of all hope in moments of despair, the incentive to carry on when times are out of joint... Look well to the growing edge!” These days, when times seem very much out of joint, we cannot allow ourselves to neglect the growing edge.

Braestrup explains, “[t]he longer I work and live the simpler my theology gets... God is love.” In *Here If You Need Me*, she tells one of

the survivors in a grieving family she comforts, “if there is one things I am sure of — one thing I am very, very sure of... it is that God is not any less kind, less committed, or less merciful than a Maine game warden”. Yet she admits that it has also been impossible for her to “make those two realities — what I’ve lost and what I’ve found — fit together in some tidy pattern of divine causality.” She no longer attempts to, preferring an authentic messiness to any neat self-deceit.

At one point, Braestrup calls herself “a mere understudy for this God gig”, noting, “I have inherited the bulk of my late husband’s... story”. That seems as profound an insight as any about both the nature and the process of formation. Our life stories are so endlessly and intimately intertwined that it’s often difficult to determine where ours ends and others’ begins. Most faith communities and religious traditions do not quibble on these points. As I look to those holidays soon to come - All Hallow’s Eve, which asks us to confront our fears about death, and All Soul’s Day, which asks us to recall loved ones we have lost - I recognize that we are inheritors of all sorts of histories, be they collective or individual, and that we are touched by fortune and misfortune in exceedingly uneven measure.

So I want to be careful with here, on the record and with all of you, not to overstate the merits of pluck. Braestrup would much rather have not raised four bereaved children without a father, as capably as she did that, as plucky as they all turned out to be. In her latest memoir, Braestrup recounts her daughter starting preparations for a career enforcement, and no doubt the prayers she offers for her grown child are now particularly fervent. But Braestrup’s daughter

has made a choice to be brave instead of safe, like her father before her, and increasingly, I think that this era ask us to model that.

In time, our progeny will almost assuredly have individual experiences and historical moments we wish they were spared. They will likely become resilient in ways we wish they hadn't. Nevertheless, we are asked to consider their "search and rescue" operations as matters of spiritual necessity. We may even been asked to share what we have salvaged from our time alive, what we have preserved as precious.

The so-called true stories that seem most compelling to me now are not composites of isolated incidents. Truer stories acknowledge the degree of our elaborate interconnectedness and the extent to which others' stories have shaped our own. The most hopeful of these communicate an awareness about what possibilities our stories might hold for those following us, the prompts they might provide to the those who are cynical or despairing. Any commitment to spiritual formation eventually brings us to that growing edge. Once you've arrived there, security cannot be your top priority, yet certain things are worth your careful safeguarding: the goodness in your heart, for instance, and the sweetness in your soul.

Our potential selves will call us to account for those. They're there if we need them. Believe me, we do.