

South Fraser Unitarian Congregation

To See, To Do, To Be

Rev. Samaya Oakley

September 20, 2020

Sermon

We've all seen the posters listing out the major religions of the world. This service explores the similarities and differences in the religions of the world. This service invites each one of us to lean into the religions of the world in an attitude of cultural humility. Join us as we begin to delve deeply into the wisdom of the world's religions that inspire us in our ethical and spiritual life.

Please note that this is an approximation of the sermon delivered. Often Rev. Samaya will add or delete portions of the sermon in the moment.

Story for all Ages – Sky Woman's Basket

As many of you know, I attend Eliot Institute – a Unitarian Universalist family camp – each August. This is a family camp of about 250 UUs from the Pacific west coast that attend with morning program, worship, singing, worship, and plenty of play! This year it was held online like everything else. The speaker this summer was David Novak and on the first day, he shared the story of Sky Woman's Basket. I became entranced with the story and asked for permission to, which he graciously gave. There are many stories that come the very beginning of time that come from the creation mythologies of civilizations around the world.

This is a story that comes from Africa. There was once a man among the very first people who had cows that were marked black and white like day and night. He loved those cows because every morning they gave him ... hmmm.... sweet cream. So, every day he went far to find good sweet grass for his cows to graze. When they were full and fat and happy, he would bring them home and lock them safe in his carrell and then he would sleep. As he slept, he dreamt of all the sweet cream those cows would give him in the morning.

But one morning, he went to milk the cows, but he found they were dry. They had no milk. They had no cream. And he thought, I've not been a good enough master. I must find better grazing, greener pastures. And so, he searched far until he found sweet green grazing for those cows. And he watched them all day and at the end of the day when they were fat and happy, he brought them home and he locked them safe. And again, he slept and again he dreamed of all that sweet cream. But the next morning, again they were dry. Again, they had no cream.

So, he did as he had done before and again, and again, but again.

So, he became suspicious. And having done as he had done before that night he did not sleep. Instead he crept to the place where the cows were kept, and he watched them all night. He watched them all night.

He watched them

all night.

And late into the night he saw a bright star appear in the sky beyond and rise swiftly up into the heavens above and then it stopped directly above his cows. And then as he watched from his hiding place, amazed, down from that star there stretched a bright long ladder of light right down to his cows. And then as he watched, enchanted, down that long ladder of light came many beautiful women climbing out of the sky. Going to his cows. Milking then dry. He leapt from his hiding place. He cried, stop thieves! But they were swift, and they swiftly climbed the ladder away from him to escape. But he was fast enough to catch the last of the women from the sky by the ankle. He held her fast and would not let her go. Until at last, her sisters pulled the ladder up behind them and that one woman from the sky fell to the earth.

And the man said, woman, you have taken from me you owe me.

And the woman said, you're right. I'm sorry. I will stay here. I will work for you and repay this debt that my sisters and I owe to you.

And the man said that is fair. So, the woman from the sky and the man from the earth worked together side by side for many days caring for those cows and never again was he bothered by thieves in the night.

But ... the day came when the man came to the woman and he said woman. You have paid your debt to me and you are free to go. But if I could have my wish you would choose to stay, for I have grown very fond of you as we have worked together these many days. I would be most happy if you would agree to be my wife?

And the woman answered, I was hoping you would say something like that. You are a good man, and this is a good world and I could be happy here. I will be your wife if you will make me a promise. He said name it. She said, as you can see, I carry with me this basket that I bring from the sky. I keep the lid always firm upon it. You must promise me to never to look inside this basket unless I first bid you to do so. And the man thought, *laugh*, women! What a silly thing! What a simple thing! and the man said, I promise.

And so, the man from the earth and the woman from the sky were married. Oh! And they lived happily together. And soon, hmmm... they began to get fat on sweet cream.

But. You know what it's like with a secret. Every day that basket stood there. Every night that basket stood there. Never was it opened. Never was it mentioned. And the man began to think, what's with this basket. What is her secret? What is she keeping from me? Why doesn't she trust me? Why should I trust her?

And you know how it goes. And then he began to think, she is my wife. This is my house. This is my basket.

And one day, when she was out and he was in, he took the basket from its hiding place, lifted its lid and peered inside. *Bahahaha! Bahahaha! Bahahaha! Bahahaha!* And he began to laugh. And

the sound of his laughter, his wife came in and said, Husband, you have broken your promise. And he said, wife, *laughing*, what was this ... what was this great promise you had me make? What was this terrible thing that had you in fear: Yes, that's true, I looked inside the basket, that is true. But wife, there is nothing to fear. I have looked inside this basket and there is nothing here as far as I can see. This basket is empty. *laugh*. You are so silly – you are so silly – women are so silly.

The woman said nothing but replacing the lid upon the basket turned and walked away. And ever after that, that man wandered sleepless at night, staring at the sky, looking for something he lost.

To See, To Do, To Be Part I

Dear ones, what a delight it is to be together with you this afternoon. Let us breathe together. Isn't it good to breathe in that clean, sweet air?

And as we breathe, we become one in our breathing and our being. Even though we are connected through technology, when we take the time to breathe together like this, we become one.

Thank you. Thank you for breathing with me just now. Since COVID hit, I've learned that I need to take the time to breathe. It helps me to be calm. There have been so many events that continue to happen that it's hard to know even where to begin to pick up my thoughts. Right now, like many around the world, my mind is on the death of Ruth Bader Ginsberg and also now with the recent news of John Turner, and I'm sure many of you are feeling much the same way.

I think that it is through stories that we can begin to get a sense of the magnitude of what we are facing and begin to make meaning out of our lives. It's for this reason that I like to go to stories from the beginning of time from other cultures and traditions. There's so much we have to learn from them.

And I love the Sky Woman's Basket story because it helps me begin to make sense of what I'm seeing in the world right now – it helps me to gain clarity on what is going on and what is ours to do.

I want to take you back into that story and ask you, why do you suppose Sky Woman left? If you remember, she didn't even bother to speak a word to this person she had lived with for many years. She simply put the lid on her basket and left.

Now some say that she left because the man, her husband, had broken a promise to her – and after all, a promise is a promise. And that certainly makes sense now, doesn't it?

Others say that Sky Woman left *because* he saw nothing in the basket. I mean after all; this was a basket that came from the sky world with Sky Woman. And it does sometimes happen this way. We are all sometimes blind to the treasures and experiences of others.

You see, in that moment of looking into the basket, everything that the man had been taught about how the world operated came into play. It was here that the man in the story was at a choosing point in determining his relationship with the basket – and, perhaps, a new one with Sky Woman. But he doesn't – he simply looks into the basket, and having seen nothing in the basket, concludes that there must be nothing there and dismisses any importance the basket had for Sky Woman.

Now, aren't we in our modern culture, the world in which we live in, very much like the man in many ways? Blind to the treasures and experiences of others – forgetting that we are one joined together in love as a central unifying force. And you know it's not our fault! It wasn't anything we did that causes us to be blind in this way.

Here's the thing, from the time we were young we were given certain perspectives or points of view. To put it another way, we were given a worldview about how the world operates. And for us who have been raised in North America, these stories come to us from our European cultures. We have been shaped and influenced by European concepts of immigration, colonization, and race just to name a few. It is this culture that provides us with the stories that have been passed down from generation to generation so that this worldview continues on.¹

I can't help but think of what happened in Canada when the first settlers came over to the land and how they treated the First Peoples? Isn't it the way when we look at other world religions?

We experience the world through our physical senses, scientific equipment and experiments. This is really all we have to understand the big questions that have faced human beings for centuries – what is life's meaning? What is the Universe? What is the nature of time?

It is for this reason that “understanding how we perceive has become a critical element in theories of biology, psychology, epistemology, and cosmology.”² Biology tells us that “perception varies by species ... yet the process of perception is identical. The living being chooses what to notice and then decides how it will respond to what it just chose to pay attention to. This is the essential freedom of all living beings. ... A living system ‘brings forth a world,’ through what it chooses to notice ... Everything else disappears.”³ My professor the late Sallie McFague, a feminist Christian theologian, used to tell us to be careful how we see the world for it is that way.

When the man opened the basket, he came with all of that information and ways of seeing the world that shaped his automatic response. Each one of us responds to the world in that way as well.

I wonder though, what would have happened if the man had looked into the basket with what Eisenstein would call a holy curiosity – as he defines it, a spirit of humility, an open-minded search for truth, and a transcendental wonder. I wonder what would have happened if the man

¹ <https://teachingtreaties.wordpress.com/understanding-first-nations-and-british-western-historical-world-views/>

² Margaret Wheatley, *Who Do We Choose to Be? Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity*, p. 174

³ *Ibid.*, p. 174

had taken time to sit back and listen to that still, small voice within. In just a few moments Trevor is going to play a recording of our hymn 391, Voice Still and Small. As he does, I invite you to engage your holy curiosity before we look into the basket together. I'll also put the lyrics in the chat box. Trevor, are we ready?

Hymn No. 391 Voice Still and Small

*Voice still and small, deep inside all, I hear you call, singing.
In storm and rain, sorrow and pain, still we'll remain singing.
Calming my fears, quenching my tears, through all the years, singing.*

To See, To Do, To Be Part II

I've always said that we each walk our own path based on the cultural and societal perspectives on how to see the world. I can remember as a young child attending vacation bible school at a neighbour's home down the street. I had trouble with the idea that if you had not heard the word of Jesus then you would not go to heaven. It seemed absurd to me that if you lived around the world and lived a different life, that you would be denied heaven. I decided then and there this that was a heaven I did not want to be part of.

I do my best to come to the exploration of the world's religion with a holy curiosity – it's one of the things that attracted me to this faith to be entirely honest. I loved the idea that we could gather together and learn about how we each saw the world through our theological lens. I enjoy moving into the spaces where we remove the filters we have of the world and begin to see the world through another's eyes.

If the man had taken the time to wonder – to engage a holy curiosity that held at its core the central idea that he was one with and connected in love with Sky Woman what might have happened. I wonder if the story might have had a different ending.

As Canadian Unitarian Universalists we hold seven principles – and an eighth one is in the process of being studied. Our sixth principle, the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all is such an important principle when we start to look at exploring different worldviews. For me, if we are to achieve this, we are going to need to begin to use our intercultural muscles – to develop what is called intercultural competency or an even better term that I prefer is intercultural humility. What this means is figuratively speaking, is that we take off our shoes, enter the space in learning mode where we assume we know nothing, and enter into the experience with love in our heart.

And right now, Love is calling to us to look into that basket and call into question all that we have been taught about the world. Love is calling to us to look into that basket and begin to wonder why we can't see more – to begin to see anew – to open our eyes to the treasures of others, to the experiences of others.

What excites me about this church year is that we are being offered a couple of opportunities to take off the lenses that we have been shaped and formed by through our lives and begin to get a sense – a small taste perhaps – of what it's like to look at the world through different lenses.

The first is a reading of the *White Fragility* book by Robin D'Angelo. Here we'll have opportunities to delve into how living in a dominant culture where being white is the norm, shapes who we are and how we see the world. This is a three-part discussion series. Our first meeting is next Sunday at 3:00 where we'll explore dates to hold the three discussions. In January we'll hold a discussion circle based on Desmond Cole's book, *The Skin We're In*, an exploration of "the interlocking forces besieging Black life in Canada, ... bringing to light both historical and contemporary legacies of rebellion."⁴

Over the summer I had the opportunity to attend a program based out of Toronto called Exploring World Religions. This is a program that has been offered in Toronto and I had always heard wonderful things about it. This year it was held online and so I was able to attend it. We delved deep into five different world religions and it is the basis on which we are offering our second opportunity to begin use our intercultural humility muscles. It is the basis of the chart that you found attached to your order of service when you received it this morning in your inboxes.

One of our aspirations as Canadian Unitarian Universalists is to be radically inclusive, striving to create hospitable, diverse, multi-generational communities. For 70,000 years human beings have tried to make meaning out of life by asking big questions – who or what is the Ultimate? What and how is truth obtained? What is the cause of suffering and evil?

In the Western world, the world that shapes how you and I view the world, we have been shaped and formed by the Protestant lens. This means that our view of religion is defined by such things as belief, books, a focus on the individual, that is held apart and separate from medicine, law, and economics. This is not a view that is shared by other world religions. Their approach and understanding of these big questions vary, even though they are asking the same questions.

When we begin to develop our intercultural humility muscles, we gain a "respect for and appreciation of other cultures, worldviews and communication styles."⁵ We begin to understand "other people's behaviours, cultural customs and ways of thinking regardless of how unusual or strange they may appear."⁶ And as we do so, we gain "the ability and willingness to acknowledge and accept different behaviours and ideas in a nonjudgmental way, especially opinions and perspectives with which we do not necessarily agree."⁷ This leads to an "awareness of our own biases and behaviours in order to respond in a culturally appropriate manner."⁸ Leaving us with an ability to engage our "curiosity, flexibility and the willingness to adapt and be open to different ways of thinking and behaving."⁹

⁴ Desmond Cole, *The Skin We're In*, book jacket

⁵ <https://www.edcan.ca/articles/developing-intercultural-competence/>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

This program involves twice monthly meetings, with the first meeting exploring the historical and cultural events that have shaped that particular religion and its orientation to the Divine or the sacred. The second session of the month focuses on the experience of a common spiritual practice with time for reflection.

Participants are encouraged to engage in a spiritual practice during that month as well. These spiritual practices are included in our Soul Matters packets as well, so even if you are not taking the program, you can engage in this way. You can still sign up for the program – registration ends tonight. More information on it can be found in the Chalice Lighter and on our website.

And the other way we are going to be flexing our intercultural humility muscles is by having a speaker from that tradition at a Sunday service each month – usually on the last Sunday of the month, with some exceptions. Next week, our guest speaker is Rabbi Laura Kaplan. I first met her when she was the Rabbi at the Jewish Reform synagogue on Fraser and 13th. I know you'll enjoy her as our speaker.

These are the opportunities that we are being given to try on, or lean into, alternatives to how you can spiritually examine, shape, and care for your life and the life around you. I hope that by doing so, you can begin to experience the world through a lens that provides more wholeness, satisfaction, depth, and meaning. So, bring that chart with you to each of those services and see if you can discern how that tradition looks at those big questions of life that humanity as a whole wrestle with.

When we truly hold love in our hearts as we peer into that basket with curiosity and humility, we can obtain a clearer sense of reality – we begin to let go of what was and perhaps, just maybe, begin to see the world as it truly is.

We begin to shift our perspective and begin – merely begin – to unravel all that keeps us bound to the ways we've been taught how the world works and begin to see and honour that there are other ways of knowing – other ways of experiencing the world that have been harmful to those with black, brown, and red bodies. We adopt new perspectives about how the world works and our place in it. We learn how to become truly alive in this great turning and learn to truly see the world.

My dear ones, this is indeed doable! We can change our perspective and begin to see again with holy love in our hearts. This means that we need to learn how to slow down. To breathe. To think. To settle in. To stay present. To notice. To see clearly the treasures and experiences of others. To open the door with love in our hearts, listening for that still small voice so that we can truly welcome everyone into the circle of song, singing with one voice though we may sing different songs.

Amen. Namaste. Ashe. Blessed Be. May it be so.