

“To See Ourselves Clearly”
Rev. Ann Kadlecek
First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
April 6, 2025

Story *Hidden Treasure*, a retelling of a traditional Eastern European story by Margaret Silf¹

Sermon

Many years ago, I enrolled my son Michael in a preschool karate class. The room had big floor-to-ceiling mirrors, and I watched him spend the entire class posing in those mirrors as a Tyrannosaurus Rex. He had little arms with big claws and scary teeth, and he clomped around like you might imagine for a T-Rex.

In another moment from his ‘dinosaur phase’ – it was bedtime, when I suddenly heard loud sobbing from his room. I ran in and learned that the problem was that his tail was too long to fit under the blankets. This was clearly not the moment to share my perspective that he was not, in fact, a dinosaur with a long tail. So, we spent several minutes figuring out how to coil up his tail so it could fit on his bed along with the rest of his dinosaur body.

And one last memory – not about dinosaurs, but it’s a personal favorite. He was 3, maybe 4, when he told me one day that - he was the Gronger. I asked for clarification, and learned that meant he was a big tall man, who was very strong. And for several months, as he shifted back and forth between small boy and Gronger, I could always tell which he was. As the Gronger, he stood taller, his voice deepened, his behavior and even his language changed. He saw himself and his place in the world differently – he was different – when the story in his head was that he was the Gronger.

Well, OK, he was in preschool. Those of us who are a little older have outgrown stuff like that, right? Yeah. No.

We all perceive ourselves through stories, in our heads. Stories that emphasize some aspects of who we are, and downplay others. Stories that sometimes contradict objective reality; stories that can change how we are in the world. The very young often share their stories about themselves freely – as we get older, we get better at hiding them, even from ourselves. But we’ve still got them.

Our stories may not be about dinosaurs – or the Gronger - but they often go just as deep into our identity: who we are, who we’re supposed to be, what we’re entitled to, what our life is about, what it takes to survive. Often these stories about ourselves are deeply ingrained and below our awareness. They’re useful - they help us respond to what is around us, and live our lives. They also get in the way of seeing ourselves clearly.

We sometimes carry stories about our motivations, or impact, or limitations. A story that highlights the things about ourselves that we’re not proud of and our mistakes can make it hard to notice the good we bring to the world. A story of entitlement can distort our perception so we can’t see the ways we hurt others.

Or we might carry a story that highlights all that’s out of our control, our helplessness, our loss, our victimhood. That’s hard on us, and those around us, and it limits us.

Or ... if our story is that “I am the Gronger,” we might make bolder choices, and possibly stretch in new ways and even become more Gronger-like.

¹ Margaret Silf, *One Hundred Wisdom Stories from Around the World* (Lion Books, 2011)

I'm not suggesting that we can have or be or achieve whatever we want if we just tell ourselves the right stories. That's not my experience. But the stories we carry about ourselves shape the way we perceive ourselves, the decisions we make and ultimately our life. And if we can become aware of them, we can – sometimes – see beyond them – see ourselves, as we really are, more clearly.

The saying “Know Thyself” has been around for at least 2500 years. It's said to have been inscribed on the Temple of Apollo in Delphi, and achieved lasting fame when the 4th century BCE philosopher Plato attributed conversations about the phrase to Socrates. There were debates back then (and ever since) about how to “know thyself,” but there has been general agreement that seeing ourselves clearly matters.

Early Christians picked up the idea. It's in the gospel of Thomas (which is a collection sayings and parables attributed to Jesus, believed to have been written in the first or second century CE). In that gospel, Jesus says, “When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living father. But if you will not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty.”²

And it wasn't just the west. Before Plato, the Chinese philosopher Lao Tze said – more succinctly - “He who knows others is wise, but he who knows himself is enlightened.”

And think of all the traditional stories and fairy tales that are about self-discovery. Ugly ducklings, commoners who are really royalty ... a Rabbi who travels far seeking the treasure that is actually at home.

We've known for a long time that there is value in knowing who we are, and that it's hard, with lots of distractions and paths that seem promising but actually take us on a really roundabout journey. With all the stories that we carry, we can spend a lot of time thinking we're someone else.

These days, rather than “knowing thyself,” we might speak of self-awareness. And these days, there's research showing that people who are self-aware are “more fulfilled, have stronger relationships, communicate better and are better leaders, among other things.”³ There's also research showing that nearly all of us think we're self-aware, and a large majority of us are wrong about that.⁴

And that has consequences for our own well-being, for our communities, and for our country. Our world has always provided plenty of seductive and misleading messages about who we are. In our current slide toward authoritarianism, those messages are particularly dangerous. Tyrant wanna-bees offer stories that we are weak and helpless, and that our safety demands a leader who is powerful and cruel. They rewrite history so we don't have to reckon with, or learn from, the mistakes of the past. In time, if we are not clear about who we are, they will lead us to believe that we are something else all together, and we will find ourselves doing things, and acquiescing to things, that we could never imagine.

There are good reasons to become more self-aware. Each of us, and this congregation, and this country, holds treasures that we haven't been fully tending to, or sharing. Sometimes, we don't even know what we have. And each of us, and this congregation, and this country, have told ourselves stories about ourselves that hold us back and cause harm. “Knowing ourselves” involves looking honestly at both.

But how?

I don't pretend to have the definitive answer, but here's my sense of it.

² <https://www.marquette.edu/maqom/Gospel%20of%20Thomas%20Lambdin.pdf>

³ Tasha Eurich TED talk <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tGdsOXZpyWE>

⁴ *ibid*

I tend to be late to popular television shows. Often really late. And I recently watched some of “the Crown,” the slightly fictionalized series about the English monarchy during the reign of Elizabeth II. There’s an episode where prime minister Winston Churchill receives a painting of himself as a gift from the government on his 80th birthday. He hates it. Those around him believe it captures who he is, including the physical changes that are part of being 80. But it did not capture how he saw himself. He was insulted, he called it disgusting, he attributed political motivations to the painter and anyone who appreciated it. In the end, the painting was destroyed.

I get where Churchill was coming from. Seeing what other people see - can sometimes be just a little too real. Sometimes the story about the person we believe we are won’t let us do that.

In the series, Churchill eventually comes to appreciate that that depiction carries some truth. I don’t know whether that actually happened – our narratives about ourselves are powerful. But it was a fabulous opportunity to come to know himself better through the eyes of someone who was paying close attention. It was possible.

There’s more at stake here than one person’s understanding that his body has changed. Some of the wisest people I know are in their 80’s and beyond. If they were stuck imagining themselves as they were decades ago, what a loss that would be.

But whether or not Churchill ever got there, one way to pierce the narrative and come to embrace a larger understanding of ourselves is to pay attention to what others see in us. Like the guard at the bridge, they might point out gifts we have that we aren’t tending. Like Churchill’s artist, they might point out things we’d rather not know. We need both.

Not to become who others want us to be, or to uncritically accept other people’s perceptions. They can be way off base. But there is value in noticing how others perceive us – and considering whether there might be some truth there. Spiritual growth doesn’t get very far in isolation. We all benefit from people who speak truth to us about us, if we have the capacity to listen.

Cultivating those people in our lives and paying attention to how they see us can help us become more self aware. But alone, it’s not enough. It also takes reflection on those perceptions and on our past – looking at what has happened, and what we’ve done, in a way that sets us up to move forward. Psychologist Tasha Eurich, in her TED talk⁵ offers this advice. In reflecting, never ask why. At least not in the sense of human motivation. Don’t ask why someone else did this to me, or why I did what I did. She says we can’t figure out motives – even our own - as human beings, so much is always hidden from us. We aren’t really that rational, she says. As a former scientist and lawyer, it pains me to say that, but we aren’t really that rational. And so when we ask questions about our motives or our intent, we answer them with ... stories. Eurich says that reflecting on “why” questions just makes us depressed, overconfident and wrong.

She says the kind of reflection that helps us to know ourselves and move forward involves questions that begin with “what.” What happened? What is my contribution to what happened? What do I feel? What can I do to change this? What’s most important to me?

I’m not quite ready to give up all reflection on my personal motivations, but there’s something profound in that simple guidance – don’t ask why – or if we do, be aware that the answers are ... stories. Asking what brings much more clarity about who we have been, and who we are now.

We can ask the “what” questions about ourselves. We can ask them about our country. Or about this church. There are some really wonderful things about this church right now. There are also things that are getting in your way. I hope you can see some of both, as you reflect on what is

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tGdsOXZpyWE>

happening, what you feel, and what the past can tell us about ourselves, and what's most important.

The transition team is helping with this. And today, after the service, they will be inviting reflection as a community about what is happening now, here, that furthers our purpose, that we might build on as we move into the future?

All of these “what” questions are about looking at ourselves together, trying to paint an honest portrait and to look at the portrait that someone else paints, open to whatever truth is there.

When someone tells us what they appreciate in us, a treasure they notice within, can we be open to the possibility that there is something there? When someone tells us that they experienced a microaggression, or that (regardless of how we see our own intent) we've caused some harm, might there be an opportunity for us? A chance to reflect before responding – to reflect on “what” more than “why” and perhaps come to see ourselves just a little bit more clearly.

Listening, reflecting, and acting. Over and over.

So that we might, at least sometimes, let go of stories that obscure who we really are, and the treasure that is right here at home.

So that we might see ourselves more clearly.

So that we might change – authentic change that makes us more ourselves, more aligned with what matters in a chaotic world.

So that we might hold on to what in us is true in that chaotic world.

For each of us, and for all of us ...

May it be so.

Amen