I would invite you to imagine that you are not whatever age you are now in 2015, but that you are the age when, as a child, you watched cartoons. Close your eyes if you like, and imagine that place, whether movie theater or television. Look back in your mind's eye to a few of your favorite cartoons. In one of those cartoons, whether in color or black and white, imagine a surprise guest appears: Almighty God.

When God appears in your child-eyes cartoons, what does God look like? By show of hands or chuckles, how many people imagined God as looking rather like George Washington? How many as more like Santa Claus? By show of hands or chuckles, how many of you imagined God as a woman or as essentially ungendered? Now, open your eyes if you like. Even among UU's, that third set of hands is a definite minority. Why is that?

From the time we are children we are told stories and, as we age, those stories stay deep within us. As a foot-tall sapling may still stand embedded in the oldest heartwood of a century-old tree, early things shape and remain part of us, as unseen as the air we breathe. They shape who we are, what we believe, how we think things should be and much, much more. It would be nice if we found or took time to consider them, but mostly we don't. As they form us, unexamined. I'd like to invite us this morning, though, to consider some of those stories and examine them just a little.

Those of us who were in this room a month ago on July 5th may recall that the original topic for today's message was "Winter Wheat," a presentation by Laurie James about Elizabeth Cady Stanton's final work, The Woman's Bible of the 1890's. Laurie James chose to cancel, however, having been diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer. If you were here, you may recall hearing that Laurie James was fairly young. And a non-smoker. And she got lung cancer. How did or does that story sit with you?

Perhaps a story you tell yourself is that bad things only happen to bad people, or at least deserving ones. If we are good people, that childlike story goes, we will always do and receive good things: Good people are rewarded with justice and mercy, for all of the days of their lives. It is a pretty story, and comforting for children. Not all pretty stories are true, however, and Laurie James is not here today. We are. What story do we tell ourselves now? Or our children? Or the children within us?

"When I was a child I spoke as a child, thought as a child," so says Paul in First Corinthians 13:11 of the Christian bible. "But when I became an adult," he continues, "I put childish things behind me."

Part of becoming a mature adult is to realize we tell stories, and to make them better ones. Truer ones. Wiser, more conscious, and more subtle.

For those unfamiliar with the story of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, she was a Unitarian. Born in the early 1800's. She was an activist, abolitionist and early proponent of voting rights for women. A young presenter at the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention, her "Declaration of Sentiments" is often credited as the start of national women's suffrage in the United States, along with others such as elder Lucretia Mott and their younger Quaker comrade, Susan B Anthony. This was before the US Civil War, of course, but Cady Stanton's career would extend almost to the 20th century. It largely ended, however, with her publication of The Woman's Bible in the 1890's.

In the nineteenth century, as today, a key problem was that many who supported slavery, war, patriarchy and other oppressions did so by citing bible verses and stories which they said "proved" such things were ordained by God. The full story of The Woman's Bible is a long one, but the short version is that The Woman's Bible was a response to the Church of England's "Revised Version" of the...
"King James Bible." It noted ways that the Revised Version was arguably still a mistranslation, perpetuating patriarchal theology not present in the Hebrew and Greek texts it claimed to translate.

The Woman's Bible was published in two parts, shortly after the official Revised Version, and to call it controversial would be an understatement. Roundly denounced from many pulpits and strongly debated among suffragists, controversy around The Woman's Bible led to Elizabeth Cady Stanton's marginalization from the very suffrage movement she had helped found. Cady Stanton objected to the way that some bible stories were told, and paid for that objection dearly.

To question common stories or the most commonly palatable versions of them is to risk estrangement, ruin or even death. By almost any measure, Cady Stanton was a hero who spent her entire life moving the human condition forward, right up to the end, when she was mostly made a martyr. Perhaps a story you tell yourself is that life is full of such heroines, fighting for the oppressed against villains and other evil-doers on the wrong side of history. UU's have often been abolitionists and activists, on the side of the angels and so usually admirable. That is a pretty story too. But is it always true? And is it true in all ways?

Elizabeth Cady Stanton was not lauded for The Woman's Bible, but ostracized, her work largely forgotten.

"When I was a child I spoke as a child, thought as a child, reasoned as a child." So says Paul in First Corinthians 13:11. "But when I became an adult," he continues, "I put childish things behind me."

Melodramatic narratives of villains and heroes who rescue the innocent are more sophisticated than the "good gets good" equation, but looking for such clean drama triangles in everything is probably not the wisest long-term road to deep understanding either.

Part of becoming a mature adult is to realize we tell stories, and to make them better ones. Truer ones. Wiser, more conscious, and more subtle.

Today is the one-year anniversary of Michael Brown's death at the hands of police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. What story shall we tell today: August 9, "the year of our lord," 2015?

Those of you who were in this room last week may recall that Christina Dodds invited us to re-examine ways that we think about racism as a binary moral issue. UU's and others may have spent our entire moral lives working toward equality and virtue as best we understand them. And yet under cognitive measures, such as those from Harvard's Project Implicit, we still show an enormous "implicit bias" that we did not expect and which may trouble us.

One story we might tell ourselves is that things are hopeless, but might there be a better path? A new way? Perhaps through better stories? As children and for most of our lives we have told and retold stories of heroes and villains where (it just so happens) we look pretty good. We may not be Mother Theresa or MLK exactly, but we are closer to them, we tell ourselves, than the sweatshop billionaires of WalMart, wife-beating klansmen or human traffickers. Around issues such as racism, classism or sexism, we are remarkably like the children of Lake Wobegone, all above average. Are those stories the best and most useful ones, though, if we are to think and reason as more than children?

In looking at systems of oppression and at myself, I have found it useful to move beyond simple pejoratives to understand my own story at multiple levels, building on ideas first set forward in a 2000 paper by Dr Camara Phyllis Jones about levels of racism. Rather than seeing myself as an essentially good person, choosing good over evil, as victim or heroic rescuer in a drama triangle, I came to see that there were multiple levels of oppression in our culture. Oppressive dynamics such as racism, sexism, ableism, ageism, classism and the rest were actually functioning on at least four separate levels: for everyone, all the time, even when we didn't know it. We were like those young fish in water, which Laura mentioned. I invite you to consider this story and hear it now.

Oppression is not a simple choice that people consciously make but an environmental condition into which we are all born.

We do NOT have to be carefully taught, as Christina told us last Sunday. "We're like frogs in a polluted waterway," she said: "The toxins come in
through our skin.” As the sins of the fathers are visited upon the sons, such social toxins were present even before we were born.

Oppression of all sorts works [constantly and simultaneously] on multiple levels: internalized, interpersonal, institutional and systemic. And all of us swim in a stew of not just one oppression but several, which we may or may not notice at various times and in various degrees.

The first level of oppression is internalized oppression. Internalized oppression takes the form of stories we tell ourselves about who we are and what we deserve in this world because we are women or white, old or rich, poor or fat. These are the sorts of things which Harvard’s implicit bias tests measure. When we think we deserve good things and are inherently better, that is called privilege, manifest as unearned advantage or self-worth. The flip side is usually poor self-image, shame, imposter syndrome or a sense that we are broken. Perhaps we may even believe God even made us that way, as by original sin. internalized oppression is a natural consequence of having been raised in a culture which clearly values and devalues some things over others, believing that such an arbitrary value is justified or absolute, however irrational. It is in us, like cancer.

When we believe in anyone's inherent superiority or inferiority, that may be internalized oppression.

A second level of oppression is interpersonal. Interpersonal oppression happens between people and takes the form of explicitly discriminatory acts or micro-aggressions we commit against others, knowingly or otherwise, mostly otherwise.

Interpersonal oppression may manifest as the micro-aggressions and invalidations Christina talked about last week. Interpersonal oppression is what we are usually see and label as discrimination in others, almost always judging them as ignorant or malicious. When accused of it ourselves, though, almost all of us will claim to have meant no offense, perhaps hoping our positive intent or lack of awareness trump all claims of harmful impact.

When someone individually harms another person along a unidirectional demographic, whether through language or minor violence, that is often interpersonal oppression.

A third level of oppression is institutional. Institutional oppression happens within organizations, such as the workplace or courts. This kind of oppression is clearly demonstrated numerically by wage gaps, differentiated health outcomes or disproportionate incarceration. "Business as usual" always seems to create unequal results, in ways that are consistent within the institution. This is the sort of oppression that fair housing or equal-opportunity laws aim to end, but have not.

When we believe that an organization treats people of different demographics differently, and that this can be measured in clear outcomes, we usually mean institutional oppression.

A fourth level of oppression is systemic oppression: the wettest and most invisible of waters.

Systemic oppression almost seems universal within a given culture or country, emerging across multiple institutions, such that demography seems predestination and certain characteristics almost like a caste.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton clearly saw this, and others such as Mohandis Ghandi, James Baldwin and Audre Lord have spoken of it. One word which captures it best in today's vocabulary may be "intersectionality."

When we believe that multiple institutions create consistent results and that some kinds of internal and interpersonal oppression are more common than others, that aggregate level of oppression is systemic, and systems almost always embody and include multiple kinds of oppression.


Thinking on these four levels helps me to understand oppression more clearly, and to tell better stories.

I am not a bad person if I have a bad thought. I don't need to be a villain to do evil things. A lot of the banal evil in our culture is "baked into the system" and occurs without conscious malice. It’s just there, like sexist language.
Knowing that helps me to see it, more often and more cleanly, without a lot of distraction, blame and moralizing. Evil can happily happen without malice, obliviously perpetrated by "good people" of all kinds.

Oppression can be internal or interpersonal. It can be institutional and is almost always systemic. This way of thinking moves me out of moralistic, two-dimensional cartoons, beyond black and white binaries. It removes my need for moral judgement, allowing me to be kinder and less defensive. Thinking on these four levels helps me to be more compassionate, both with myself and others. It helps me and lets me understand my world in subtler and more helpful ways.

I do not believe that the King James Bible contains the exact words of Jesus Christ, and I do not believe that God is best understood as a woman or man, any more than I believe Abraham Lincoln freed all the black people or that a vote for Barack Obama absolves anyone of anything. I might let a child believe such things for a time, but my own needs are for richer narratives than that: Deeper narratives. Narratives more true.

Part of becoming a mature adult is to realize we tell stories, and to make them better ones. Truer ones. Wiser, more conscious, and more subtle.

Interestingly, Elizabeth Cady Stanton's Woman's Bible did not have any criticism of First Corinthians 13:11.

"When I was a child I spoke as a child, thought as a child, reasoned as a child. But when I became an adult, I put childish things behind me."

The stories I find most useful are the truest ones I can imagine, those hinted at in John 8:32. Those are stories whose truth may help to set me free: of ego and attachment, free from my own sense of righteousness.

"If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time," an aboriginal activist in Australia once said. "But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

Let us build a new way.

The stories we tell and retell ourselves are important, as William Stafford notes in his poem, "A Ritual to Read To Each Other."

If you don't know the kind of person I am and I don't know the kind of person you are a pattern that others made may prevail in the world and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.

For there is many a small betrayal in the mind, a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood storming out to play through the broken dyke.

And as elephants parade holding each elephant's tail, but if one wanders the circus won't find the park, I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty to know what occurs but not recognize the fact.

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy, a remote important region in all who talk: though we could fool each other, we should consider - lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.

For it is important that awake people be awake, or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep, the signals we give - yes or no, or maybe - should be clear; the darkness around us is deep.

Thank you.