

**Tense Times, Part I: Past Imperfect**  
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*“Be not the slave of your own past - plunge into the sublime seas, dive deep, and swim far, so you shall come back with new self-respect, with new power, and with an advanced experience that shall explain and overlook the old.” (Ralph Waldo Emerson)*

*Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.*

*(The Road Not Taken by Robert Frost)*

*How would it be if you really created your life?  
Stories you told, the good and bad, that they come alive  
And how would it change if your words were like nails and wood?  
You build your house, but you forget that it's just a house  
You can rebuild it*

*(How Would It Be by Ellis)*

*“These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are; they exist ... today. There is no time to them. There is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment of its existence. Before a leaf-bud has burst, its whole life acts; in the full-blown flower there is no more, in the leafless root there is no less. Its nature is satisfied and it satisfies nature in all moments alike. But we postpone or remember. We do not live in the present, but with reverted eye lament the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround us, stand on tiptoe to foresee the future. We cannot be happy or strong until we too live with nature in the present, above time.” (adapted from Ralph Waldo Emerson from his essay “Self-Reliance”)*

On March 11, 1978, comedian Andy Kaufman stood on stage before a crowd of eager fans, and after a short introduction, he pulled out a novel, and began to read.

*Chapter One:*

*In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since. “Whenever you feel like criticizing any one,” he told me, “just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had.”*

*He didn't say any more, but we've always been unusually communicative in a reserved way, and I understood that he meant a great deal more than that.*

*In consequence, I'm inclined to reserve all judgments, a habit that has opened up many curious natures to me and also made me the victim of not a few veteran bores.*

The audience waited, twittering with anticipation for the punchline, but Kaufman continued to read . . .

*Reserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope. [Though] after boasting this way of my tolerance, I come to the admission that it has a limit....When I came back from the East last autumn I felt that I wanted the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever; I wanted no more riotous excursions with privileged glimpses into the human heart. Only Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book, was exempt from my reaction —*

*[Gatsby had] an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it is not likely I shall ever find again. ...*

The audience began heckling Andy Kaufman, booing, and shouting . . . and still the comedian read on and on . . . until at last the comedian relented and gave the audience a choice – he could revert to one of his well-loved comedy routines featuring a phonograph, or he could continue reading The Great Gatsby.

The audience chose the turntable and Kaufman immediately complied by placing the needle on a record . . .

And the hall filled with the sound of the comedian's recorded voice, picking up the story of The Great Gatsby where he'd left off.

I remembered the odd story of Andy Kaufman's performance  
Or rather MISremembered it  
five years ago, trapped in the.worst.seat.ever on a long overseas flight to Amsterdam,  
where the in-flight movie was a modern manic remake of The Great Gatsby . . .

I couldn't really see the screen except in bits and pieces when I craned my neck either directly up or away over the heads of dozens of taller passengers (I may have mentioned it was the *worst.seat.ever*), and I couldn't really hear the dialogue over the drunken passengers lined up at the washroom next to my seat (did I mention : *worst.seat.ever*), so I filled the hours in reverie about what I thought I *remembered* of the classic American novel and the old Robert Redford version of the movie from years and years and years ago.  
I filled my notebook with ideas, with connections, with half-remembered quotes from the text I tried to match with the movie in pantomime in glimpses. I've studied the book a half dozen times, but the memories I hold are more about how I felt about the book than remembering its plot. . . so mostly I reflected on the story of Andy Kaufman reading The Great Gatsby to an unruly audience.

And I thought: that's a great idea for a sermon.  
I'll read The Great Gatsby one Sunday morning.

You'll be happy to know that two things happened between that great idea and this morning.

First and foremost, once released from the trauma of hours spent trapped in the *worst.seat.ever*, I did realize that as great as the novel is, reading it is just not a great idea for a sermon. And secondly, after a bit of research I was stunned to discover that what I thought I remembered about Andy Kaufman wasn't true at all. I had 'remembered' that he had read the whole text.

He didn't.

Rather, it was a performance piece that he did a few times and while the bit DID try his audiences' patience, the entire bit was about 8 minutes long. Eight minutes . . . not eight hours.

But because of all those memories, I decided to revisit this book from my past after all these years –

How many of you have read The Great Gatsby?

Published in 1925, the novel was a failure in its time even though author F. Scott Fitzgerald was already well known and much acclaimed. The story of its canonization is complicated but I believe this text has increased in its appeal because besides its beautiful poetic prose about unlikeable people, the book is a poignant testament to our complicated relationship with the past, the present and with our possible futures – Our relationships to these ‘tense times’ can trap or release, free or confound us.

This book, forgotten and scorned in its time is widely considered one of the top novels ever written and still sells a half million copies every year; worldwide it has been translated into 42 languages with over 25 million copies sold<sup>1</sup> (Corrigan 12).

And the novel, a scant 50,000 words long, breaks major rules of novel writing -- nothing in the book happens in the present moment. Told as a reminiscence by our unreliable narrator, Nick, “Nothing happens in the present of Gatsby except remembering” (Corrigan 10).

The novel’s namesake, Jay Gatsby, is himself stuck in the past, aching to return to a turning point in his life where the love of his life ‘got away’ and their paths diverged.

Now rich and remade, Gatsby stands, nightly, at the water’s edge of his fabulous mansion, looking across at a green light that marks the end of the dock where he knows his old flame Daisy lives, a green light that beckons and promises, like the sight of dry land to a sea-weary sailor.

Nick cautions Gatsby: “You can’t repeat the past.”

“Can’t repeat the past?” [Gatsby] cried. “Why of course you can!”...“I’m going to fix everything just the way it was before,” ... It was as though Gatsby thought he’d lost something of himself in his quest to remake himself, “but if he could once return to a certain starting place and go over it all slowly, he could find out what that thing was” and be restored to wholeness again (*adapted from the text*).

Do you ever have this temptation, this thought experiment of ‘what if’ ... what if instead of turning left I turned right, what if I’d stayed home instead of attending the party where I’d met my partner, what if I’d gone to THIS school instead of THAT school, or taken THAT job instead of THIS one; what if I hadn’t missed that bus and caught the next one, what if I had taken that OTHER road, more or less travelled. But as the poet says, “way leads on to way” and we will never come back to that juncture, never able to hit rewind and start again and know if it might have all turned out differently. We can romanticize it, we can fantasize about alternative futures paved by our grateful or cursed crucial junctures – but we actually cannot start again from a point now past. We just can’t – because even if we could find where those ‘roads diverged’ our choices have changed us in the meantime. Our present reality is a product of the choices that have made us who we are.

But there IS one difference we can make in this present tense and tension in which we live, in considering our relationship to our past and our attitudes toward the future.

The potential gift of our past is held in *how we tell the story* of our past.

In this way, we may integrate our full being and becoming,

Letting go or de-emphasizing those stories that demean us

And embracing those stories that encourage our understanding of resilience and potential.

We humans are natural storytellers; with rare exception, we relate to one another through a narrative arc we've created for ourselves and others that explains how we came to be here, living this way in this present time. We are always creating stories and finding meaningful connections all the time, it's a natural human inclination and talent of relationship. We arrange the facts of our lives selectively, and create a narrative arc from the pieces that we have decided explain in some way who we are. "In telling the story of how you became who you are, and of who you're on your way to becoming, the story itself becomes a part of who you are."<sup>2</sup> (*The Atlantic*). Studies in developmental psychology show that the conclusions we draw from the habitual ways we tell our stories impact whether we see ourselves in a positive or a negative light; and the ways we organize the stories about our past and our present then impact the kinds of future we might imagine for ourselves (*but the future will have to wait for next week's Sunday service*). . .

The past lures us, seduces us with promises of how we *woulda coulda shoulda* done better . But looking for some kind of 'cure' in the past's allure prevents a full unfolding of our present potential. Besides . . . what we call 'memory' is overlaid with so much of our own bias, our outdated coping skills, our current lens and the opinions of others, that our recall is defective at best or even dangerously deceptive. It is a curious human condition that we falsely give more weight to our negative experiences than to our positive ones. It's a survival tactic that was really wise when we had to escape from sabre tooth tigers to stay alive. It's not so useful now. We think of the one criticism or unfair email, or unkind word or mistake we make and it weighs us down. No matter that one hundred other things went well, the harsh one or the wrong move is the one that yells loudest for our attention. We have to actually train ourselves to listen louder to the better parts of our day, and the finer things in our lives, and live with more gratitude than regret.

Keys to telling stories to keep ourselves healthier and wiser are to first be willing to take an honest audit of what we've edited out or over—emphasized. There are many more truths suggested beyond a collection of what we believe to be 'facts'. Unitarian Ralph Waldo Emerson<sup>3</sup> recommended journaling as a good way to let the current stream of thought sink in and encourage insights, as well as to release the past and not be beholden to it. Emerson called himself "an endless Seeker with no past at my back." We have the ability to reclaim our own narrative, to consider what meaning we might create from its pieces. What parts of the story that you tell yourself *about* yourself really are echoes of less-informed forces, or more naïve voices?

Second, we must be willing to share our stories – telling select stories from our past keeps our memory flexible in the back and forth of a conversation with people who may ask questions, challenge assumptions, and react in surprising ways. The past can inform our present, but should not keep us trapped<sup>4</sup>

Third, as we audit and edit and share our stories to let fresh insights into musty habits of thought, consider the implications of their meaning in the context of your current life. For Unitarian Universalists, our theology IS our biography. That is, what we believe today in large part comes from the authority of the text of our own lived experiences. Our theology IS our biography. So for us, as a people who are influenced by many religious texts from the world's religions and from the exemplars of social justice throughout history, our lived experience is a 'sacred text' on which we base our 'search for truth and meaning.' So, yes, knowing your story and integrating its implications into your life is a Unitarian Universalist philosophical mandate for better living.

But be prepared! Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his essay "Self-Reliance" warns that in such an examination (through journaling and conversation, both of which he recommended) we are bound to discover that we aren't terribly consistent.

Indeed, if our theology is based on experience, and we are all here, continuing to live and continuing to experience and continuing to examine with new information and increased understandings, so our beliefs are likely to change from one year to the next, or even from one hour to the next. Emerson wrote: “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen, philosophers, and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. . . . Speak what you think now in hard words and tomorrow speak what tomorrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict every thing you said today. ‘Ah, so you shall be sure to be misunderstood’ – Is it so bad then to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood.”

Being willing to revisit the habitual ways we edit and tell our stories and derive its meaning changes with our maturity, experience and understanding.

For all his alleged “Greatness”, Jay Gatsby goes wrong because he believes he can **erase** parts of the past. His longing for belonging and his need for affirmation from the idealized Love of His Life, his story of “what if” THIS instead of THAT – rather than owning his legitimate story of resilience and determination and ingenuity -- instead of recognizing his past story as part of a trajectory, using the past as momentum for a brilliant future, Gatsby constructs his present identity with NO foundation on his past. He misses the opportunity to delve into the “text” of his lived experience and integrate its richness and meaning. Gatsby – unwilling to examine (much less share) the story of his past, allows others – like the narrator Nick, like us – to define it for him; thus, The Great Jay Gatsby is doomed to forever symbolize the frivolity of falseness: all that glitters is not gold.

A healthy present and a promising future are made from integration .. and it’s those forward future bits that I’ll address in more depth next week , the personal practices that may help each of us integrate those inconsistencies of mind and habit into our fullness of being in the present moment.

In the way that art mirrors life, in the middle of reading *The Great Gatsby* – this classic about the past, my phone rang. It was a friend and sometime flame who, years ago, wronged me. The pain of our parting had been deep and lasting; it was abrupt and unkind. It had taken years for me to heal from the confusion and rejection, and . . . here she was, on the phone, crying, and asking for forgiveness. She said she owed me an explanation for what had happened all those years ago.

For years I had wondered “what if” I could relive those last days and change the ugly outcome. For years, I had hoped for an explanation from her that I believed would resolve my pain.

And here, it was offered.

But our painful past was already part of my story, part of my “present tense.”

The poet says ‘way leads on to way’ and I realized revisiting this road, well-travelled or no, Would NOT make all the difference.

My friend and I talked, with open hearts; our shared past had played its role and the best thing in the present was to consider the good and the odd and the hard parts of our paths crossing. Because whether or not we revisited the past we’d shared, we are different *now* because of our past and our subsequent stories about it.

We shared a peaceful and heartfelt goodbye on the phone that night and afterwards I sat for hours gazing into the fire and thinking of the path from the past to the present . . . and I turned, as do we all, to face the future.

I think again of Jay Gatsby, staring at the green light on Daisy's dock across the water –  
I think of that green light like the light of a star—  
When we gaze at starlight, we are seeing the past –  
The nearest star, our sun, is 8 light minutes away, so we never witness its present moments , but only see what happened 8 minutes ago , starlight that reaches our eyes today is our witnessing the past in present time, the farther we look into space the farther into the past we are seeing. So it is with *The Great Gatsby*, who stands at the pier, trapped by his insistence that he can recapture the past as though all the intervening time has never happened.

The narrator, Nick, reminiscing the strangest summer of his privileged life observes:

*Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter — to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. . . .  
And one fine morning —  
So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.*

- I've been borne back into the past revisiting family photographs after my brother's untimely death this summer. . .
- I've been borne back into the past last winter, rereading Gatsby once again, a book I read in as a teenager, then as a college student, then as a middle-aged high school teacher, and now again, (older) , experiencing it – again – for the first time;
- I've been borne back into the past by a phone call that ended years of unkind silence that began in tears and ended in the peace of forgiveness.
- I've been borne back into the past last spring as this congregation and I celebrated our 10 year anniversary and we reflected together on this decades' journey – *how far we've come!*
- I've been borne back into the past this past week contemplating the just-passed Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, where we are called to consider forgiveness and forgiving one another for all those missteps and mistakes and regrets of the past year, so that we may start the year anew together, forward into the future.
- I've been borne back into the past writing this service this week, thinking of the worst.seat.ever when I first conceived of this service and wondered:

What the hell was Andy Kaufman thinking?

And by these recollections we bring meaning to our present lives  
And find potential in our future selves.  
So we beat on . . .

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<sup>1</sup> Corrigan, Maureen. *So We Read On: How The Great Gatsby Came to Be and Why It Endures*. New York: Little Brown and Company, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Informed by two articles <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/08/life-stories-narrative-psychology-redemption-mental-health/400796/> and <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2012/jan/13/our-memories-tell-our-story>

<sup>3</sup> Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance" can be found at <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/16643/16643-h/16643-h.htm>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/08/life-stories-narrative-psychology-redemption-mental-health/400796/>