



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Some Thoughts on Sacrifice,”
three reflections given by Jessica Woodard
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Some Thoughts on Mary Poppins

Who here is familiar with Mary Poppins? Just out of curiosity, which character do you think Mary Poppins is about? Who's the protagonist?

A lot of people said Mary Poppins, and that's a pretty good answer. After all, the story is named after her. Some other people might think the story is about Jane and Michael, the two children who have so many adventures with her, and a few of you die hard Dick Van Dyck fans might think the story is about the chimney sweep, Bert.

I'm a little weird. I happen to think the story is about George Banks. That rigid, tightly wound English Banker, who doesn't know how to relate to his family. The reason I think it's about George Banks, is that he's the person who changes the most, throughout the course of the story. He starts off not knowing how to deal with his children, or speak to his wife, or appreciate anything that isn't orderly, and strictly regimented. In fact, he's so far removed from his children, that when his son Michael asks to spend two pence to feed the birds on the steps of the Cathedral, George tells his son that he can't feed the birds, that he must invest his tuppence wisely in the bank. Michael's FIVE! Why would he want to invest tuppence in the bank?

Then, of course, they get to the bank, and there's such a fight over the tuppence that they eventually start a run on the bank, a calamitous thing, in the world of bankery.

The defining moment for Mr Banks comes after the run on the bank, when he's summoned to the bank, presumably to be sacked. Let's be clear; that's a serious thing. He's the breadwinner for his family. He has a wife, and children, and household servants, all of whom depend on him to bring in money so they can have food and clothes and a roof over their heads. So he gets to the bank, and he's called up before the board, and they punch out the top of his bowler hat, and they invert his umbrella, and then they ask him if he has anything to say.

And this is the big moment of choice. George Banks has to choose. Does he want to be the kind of man he thinks he needs to be, to have a job at a bank? Or does he want to give that up, and be the kind of man who understands why his son wants to give his tuppence away to the old bird lady, instead of investing it in the bank? Does he want to try to maintain his family's lifestyle, or does he want to be a part of that family?

Of course, we all know how it ends. Banks decides to sacrifice the man he was, in order to become the man he wants to be. And we, the audience, are all so pleased for him. Because we're not focused on what he's giving up. We're focused on what he's gaining. And it's easy to focus on the positive, when you're watching a movie. It's harder, when the sacrifice is your own, and the loss is your own. But it doesn't change the fact that every sacrifice is an exchange. When we sacrifice things, we are giving something up, but what we give up isn't the point. The point is what we're gaining.

Some Thoughts on the Hobbit

Did you guys see the Hobbit? If you haven't seen it, have you read the book? The story of Bilbo Baggins, an unassuming little guy, who likes to eat, and read, and live a calm, peaceful life, and instead gets swept up in an adventure he never imagined.

When I was a kid, and my parents used to read the book to me, I never could understand Bilbo's attitude. He spent so much time at the beginning, whining about being dragged out of his home, and how he didn't have a pocket handkerchief, and how he wasn't really a thief. And I just didn't get it. Here he was being invited on the greatest adventure anyone could ever dream of going on, and all he could talk about was how he was missing breakfast! Just for reference, I loathe breakfast, and always have, and could NOT figure out what he was going on about.

But then I got older. I started to understand the charms of having your own house, with your own things, and your own larder, which is full of your own food, and your own armchair to sit in while you read your own books. And I also started to understand that not every adventure ends in a triumphant return. Some of them end up with you being eaten, by a dragon, for breakfast. Which, of course, as far as I'm concerned, is TWO bad things. Breakfast, and being eaten by a dragon.

So, when I went to see the Hobbit movie, I had a totally different experience than when I read the story as a child. Suddenly, I GOT Bilbo. Which is probably why the end of the movie hit me the way that it did.

See, when Thorin asks Bilbo why he's there, this is what he says:

I know you doubt me, I know you always have, and you're right. I often think of Bag End. I miss my books, and my arm chair, and my garden. See, that's where I belong; that's home, and that's why I came cause you don't have one.. a home. It was taken from you, but I will help you take it back if I can.

And right there, Bilbo lays it out, in the most simple, hobbit-ey language you can imagine. He's sacrificing his home. He's left it behind, and may never see it again. And it's not because the dwarves have been so awesome, because frankly they're a little rough on him. And it's not because he was just longing for an adventure, because he wasn't. It's because he knows the value of home, and he is the kind of hobbit who will do the right thing, because that's who he is.

And being who he is, is more important than being home, in his comfortable chair, surrounded by all that he loves best.

The thing that Bilbo really drove home, for me, is that sometimes, a sacrifice doesn't gain you anything on the outside. Sometimes, it's just a choice, about who you want to be.

Just Some Thoughts

I'm not gonna lie. The past year has been pretty rough on me. As some of you may know, about a year ago my spouse told me she was trans, and our family has been going through some changes since then. You know, I was just like Bilbo. I had my little life, and it was cozy, and I was totally content with it. And then it pretty much got turned on its ear. Suddenly, I was off on an adventure I neither asked for nor wanted, and I didn't even have a pocket handkerchief. Or a clue. Or a clue about a pocket handkerchief.

All of a sudden my life was changing. And for a long time, I was fixated on what I was going to be giving up. It was this all consuming thing that I couldn't get past, or let go of, and I felt mired down in my own mind.

And then, I had this series of epiphanies. First I realized that I needed to stop thinking about what I was losing, and instead, start thinking about what I wanted to keep. It's hard, when you're giving something up, to just let it go, and I'm not claiming to be good at it in the slightest. But I knew that in order to move forward with my life, I had to stop focusing on what was lost, and start focusing on what I wanted to cling to.

Almost as soon as that had settled into my brain I had another lightbulb. This one was that every sacrifice, no matter how great or small, is a choice. Sometimes it's a hard choice, or sometimes it's intricate, and difficult to figure out, but it's still just a choice. Combined with that was the realization that the choice isn't always external. Sometimes it's just about you. About who you want to be. And it's not a movie, or a book, it's not always easy to pick the right path. It's not always clearcut. But the choice is there, if you can wade through all the noise in your brain, and just look at it.

I want to leave you with one more thought, because it was an epiphany that I had along with the rest of them. And, if you'll bear with me, I'm going to quote from the Hobbit one more time. Gandalf is speaking to Galadriel, and he says:

Saruman believes it is only great power that can hold evil in check, but that is not what I have found. I found it is the small everyday deeds of ordinary folk that keep the darkness at bay. Small acts of kindness and love.

When I heard that, coming out of the THX surround sound speakers of the theater, I felt like I'd been hit over the head by a brick. Because I knew what he was talking about. It was the same thing I'd been thinking about. He was talking about the choices we make, the everyday sacrifices, to be kinder, more loving people. Not all of us are going to give up our lives to destroy

the asteroid that's approaching earth. Not all of us are going to give up all our worldly possessions and go and work with the poor. But all of us are faced with choices every day, little tiny choices that add up to the people we are. The choice between compassion and anger, the choice between love and fear. The everyday choices of kindness and love, that keep the darkness at bay. And they're with us all the time. We just have to see them for what they are.