

**First Parish in Milton**  
**Sermon and Story for January 29, 2012**  
**Rev. Parisa Parsa**

**Story**

**Getting the Message**  
**A Mullah Nasruddin Story**

*This morning's reading is a story from a beloved figure known throughout the Middle East and South Asia, a holy fool named Nasruddin (pronounced NAS-rude-EEN). I grew up with stories of Nasruddin, and share this one with you on the eve of sabbatical:*

As part of his duties as a Mulla, Nasruddin had to give weekly speeches to his community. We would call them sermons. But as you can imagine, finding something to say week after week can become a little tedious. Greatly bored of the routine, Nasruddin looked for a way out of this task. One day, after going up to the pulpit and beginning his speech, he asked his congregation, "Do you know what I am about to teach you?"

"No," they responded.

"Well then," Nasruddin said, "Since you don't have enough background information, there's no point in me trying to teach it to you."

And with that statement, Nasruddin emphatically gathered up his robes, descended the pulpit, and left.

The next week, he went up to the pulpit and asked his audience, "OK—do you know what I am about to teach you?"

Thinking that they were on to his trick, they responded, "Yes, we know."

Nasruddin replied, "Well, then, if you already know, there is no point in me telling you!"

And with that, Nasruddin triumphantly gathered up his robes, descended the pulpit, and left.

The next week, he went up to the pulpit and once again asked, "Do you know what I am about to teach you, or don't you know?"

The people, once again thinking that they were on to his trick, replied, "Half of us do, and half of us don't."

Nasruddin smiled broadly at this news.

"OK, fantastic—now the half of you that do know can tell the other half that you that don't!"

And with that, Nasruddin once again gathered his robes around him, descended the pulpit, and left.

**Sermon**

**"Waking Dreams"**

**Parisa Parsa**

Do you know what I am about to teach you?

Believe me, especially after preaching yesterday at Erik Resly's ordination, I was more than a little tempted to pull a Mullah Nasruddin this morning with you all. On my last Sunday with you before my sabbatical, I do feel – not bored with the routine, as the Mullah did, because Sunday worship is one of the greatest joys of my ministry – but rather spent when it comes to finding words and stories and putting them in order and then praying they connect.

You see, except for pauses to have my two sons, I have been at this work of ministry – sometimes with two or three positions at once – nonstop for fourteen years. The last seven and a half have been spent here with you, and they have been rich and rewarding as were my first six years in ministry beyond the church. And it is high time I took some time to take stock, to fill my own well, and to listen for the calling of the future. Which, of course, it's impossible to do without remembering a bit of the past.

In his book *A Dresser of Sycamore Trees*, pastor Garrett Keiser describes his own travel down this road: "Often my sense of my own ministry is nothing more than an awareness of missed opportunities, of gains that might have been won but for my being too blind, timid, forgetful, or otherwise employed to seize the moment. In spite of all the friends I've made here, I often wish that I had never come to Island Pond. The thought that I shall one day be called to account for what I have done in this place often seizes me like the realization that I've failed to turn off an iron or stove, and that it was hours and miles ago. I can smell the smoke."

For my own part, last few weeks I've been haunted by that same feeling as I have come to realize that for some reason Newt Gingrich keeps emerging as a significant figure in my ministry. You see, I first felt the undeniability of my call to ministry during his days as Speaker of the House in the early '90's.

He was almost daily appearing in speeches, ranting, red-faced, attributing every social ill to unwed mothers and railing against the irresponsibility of the government providing any kind of support to them. I was having daily encounters with the sacred as I witnessed the heartbreaking and sometimes life-affirming choices of women – of every age, class, ethnicity and faith – in my work as a counselor and medical assistant at an abortion clinic.

My grief at the fact that my Unitarian Universalist faith had not equipped me with the language to meet the public rhetoric of blame and intolerance in the name of a God I could never believe in, with the compassion and trust that had been offered and taught to me in our faith tradition.

And so I enrolled in Harvard Divinity School to learn that language, to be able to fight fire with fire and learn feminist Biblical interpretation and then bring it, and so much other hopeful, inclusive, compassionate theology back into the world.

That path has taken me through flirtations with doctoral studies to directing a domestic violence shelter,

to being a consultant with edgy urban social justice ministries,

to fundraising for Faithful Fools and spending time living on the streets of San Francisco

to bear witness to the lives of people without homes.

And it has landed me in the last place I ever thought I would be doing ministry: a suburban New England congregation.

It seems noteworthy that I enter this sabbatical time of discernment as Mr. Gingrich is again a loud figure on the political scene,

again claiming a righteous hold on religious values that bear little resemblance to the life of faith that has called me,

again challenging me to make good on my promise to take my theological education and training and bring the good news of our faith into the world.

The point of me making this confession about Newt Gingrich's influence on my ministry is not a political one – I hope that everyone here will vote your conscience and values when you have the

opportunity, and whatever your choice, you are fully loved and welcome in the circle of this community. My point is that we all have external markers that remind us of where we came from, and help us return and assess the place where we are going based on that starting point. Mine just happens to come in the form of a political figure.

My time in ministry in this church, a call that I think was surprising to all of us when the vote was taken by the congregation, my time here has taught me even more deeply the urgency of the call of this faith, and the importance of covenanted community to carry it out. You have helped me to learn that church is not the stopping place but the starting place for discerning God's call to us in this world. The church offers a place where people can practice holy listening, dwell in community beyond family and neighborhood, offer prayers and show up at each other's times of need. In church, we practice tuning ourselves to some of the many ways that the sacred shows up, so that we can be ready to notice and mark it when we're not at church. We practice the ways we most want to be, and come to confess, if only in our hearts, the ways we have fallen short.

We understand the urgency of this faith best not within in the walls of the church, where we comfortably speak the same language, but when we encounter the depth of need *outside* the walls of the church, in the places where we ourselves might be strangers. And if we do it all well in church, if we learn to listen for grace, and to offer it when we are able, then we become more ready to see it and feel it and hear it when we're outside of church.

One of the things that has been sometimes challenging for me here is the constancy of translating across cultures. Of translating liberal religious principles to a world completely unaware of them; of being a multiethnic person at the forefront of a community that largely understands itself as monoethnic; of wondering how we truly do extend our welcome and live our love of neighbor both in and out of church.

We can't love our neighbors until we let ourselves know them, and we can't know them unless we know ourselves. So I enter my sabbatical time with the explicit learning goal of deepening my skills at intercultural ministry. I'll be doing two trainings in intercultural sensitivity and will be trained to train others in the path of intercultural understanding, and I'll be spending time with a couple of multicultural churches, one in New York and one in Washington, DC, to learn from experiencing it what effective multicultural ministry can look like. My hope for my time is that I can get insight and experience and fresh perspectives to bring back to our work together. And don't worry, I will be sure to take time in these four months to rest up for the next leg of our journey.

My hope for you all, my beloveds, all of you, who have taught me so much, who have held me through so much growth and learning, and shown me over and over again the miracles that a group of good people covenanted to love each other can do... my hope for you in my time away is that in the absence of my good words every week, you turn to one another and listen more deeply to the call coming from within this community, that you take full advantage of the many perspectives that will be shared in worship – from Rev. Molly, your worship committee, our excellent guest preachers, and that you keep asking yourselves: how will we take the saving message of our faith into our lives outside of church? How can we practice it in how we plan for our own future, what we talk about with our colleagues at work, how we prioritize the way we spend our family time and money?

I hope you will keep showing up for one another and this community faithfully, because in that you have been my greatest inspiration. I hope you will take time to find words for the ways this faith saves you, and share those stories and experiences with friends both in and out of church. I hope you will give from the depths of your knowledge that this faith can also be a saving force in the world, that funding the future of this congregation is an investment in a future extends far beyond us, and that our ministry is needed to transform both ourselves and our world. I hope you will understand that such a thing can't be accomplished by settling for a sum you won't notice coming out of your monthly income, but only by stretching to give an amount that will remind you as you balance your checkbook, what it means to order your life according to what you believe.

Most of all, I hope that each week, as you make your way through the joyful days and the cranky ones, the exalting moments and the mundane, you will carry with you the deep knowledge that goodness was born and dwells within you, and that a greater love holds you and everyone you meet. Return to worship together in celebration and affirmation of that, and all will be more than well. All will be blessed.

I will miss you, my dear ones. Each and every one of you. And I will carry you with me.

Amen.