# Children’s story

The story I would like to tell you today is in a book that my **children** loved, many many years ago. It is a book of pictures, but the pictures are very small. They look just like dots. They are dots. But there are lots of them. In fact, a million of them.

They are arranged in **lines**. With **fifty** dots on each line, and a hundred lines on each page, so that gives us **five thousand** dots on each page. And there are 200 pages with 5000 dots on each page, so that gives us a **million** dots. And that’s the name of the book. One Million

You can use the dots to **count** anything you want. People, or flowers, or inches, or days. My son Randy (that gray haired man the third row) wrote in it on his bar mitzvah that he was **4,747** days old. (that’s near the bottom of the first page in the book). But we don’t usually count birthdays by the day, but by the year: which would put him very near the beginning of the first line.

I’m an old man, one of the oldest in the congregation, I’m **90** years old, fairly close to the end of the second line of the first page. If we go back in history, we get a bit further in the book. **Canada** became a country **147** years ago, near the top of the 3rd line

Not very far back yet? OK. The **French Revolution** took place a bit over **200** years ago, about the 5th line. **Columbus** discovered America in 1492, over 500 years ago. Still **first page**. **10th** line down.

**Jesus** was born over 2000 years ago, almost half way down the first page. **Moses** was born, according to the bible, 5800 years ago. Aha, we’re finally through the first page. Only **199** pages to go.

But of course we don’t have to read all of this book. Only the first few pages really interest us.

But it’s still fun to think of earlier days. According to our present **scientific** picture – the creation story of our days – our solar system started 4.6 billion years ago – that would take **46,000** books like this – a pretty big pile. Too many for us to even picture, I think.

**CONTINGENCY, IRONY, SOLIDARITY**

There’s a kind of cute **aphorism** that I remember reading somewhere. “*the society that values its philosophers more than its plumbers is in trouble. Neither its theories or its pipes will hold water*”.

This is a pretty **dismissive** observation, but there is a big difference between talking and doing. We can help those in need help by acting, not by talking. Thinking is no substitute for action.

We **are what we do**, not what we think. Another way of putting it is that we are what we **pretend** to be, no matter how we think. If we act kindly, we are kind; if we act cruelly, we are cruel. Doing is important. If we do nothing, nothing gets done.

But what we do is usually determined by the way we **think**. And so we should think about the way we think, and the way we talk. Doing something is not always the right thing to do.

I was an **obstetrician**, a doer. I was well trained in how to use forceps to deliver a baby, or how to do a caesarean section. I knew how to use the sophisticated tools of modern technology – or at least the ones that were available while I was still in practice.

But I was fortunate enough to get the message while I was young, from a wise **old obstetrician** who told me “*when you’ve got a problem, the best obstetrical instrument is a good* ***cigar****. Go out and smoke it, and when you are done the problem may be solved, or at least you’ll know what to do.*  (I never took the advice too literally, but at least metaphorically it was good advice). A **midwife**, long before midwifery became a respected profession put it more succinctly: “*don’t just do something. Stand there!*”.

If we are going to do something, we should do the **right thing**. But, as Hamlet said in his famous ‘To be or not to be’ soliloquy, “***Aye, there’s the rub***”. How do we know what is the right thing?

I once heard about a professor in medical school who told this students “***half the things*** *I am telling you are wrong. The problem is, I don’t know which half”.* I would love to have met that professor. All the professors I’ve met seemed pretty sure that they were telling us the right thing.

This brings me to the title of this homily. **Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity**. It’s the title of a book by Richard Rorty. It was not an easy book to read. It contained a lot of allusions to novels, poems, and philosophers that I had never read. But it was worth struggling through, because it influenced my thinking about life, truth, and a lot of other things. It said what I wanted to say.

First the **words** in the title. They are familiar words, but it may be worthwhile to review what they mean.

**Contingency**: means that something is not inevitable, but **depends** on something else. Something else that came before, or is happening at the same time.

**Irony’s** dictionary definition is *the use of words to express something different from, and often opposite to, their literal meaning*. More generally, it means ideas that are contradictory to themselves, confusing, perplexing.

**Solidarity** means togetherness with our community. It says nothing about who are in our community.

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**Rorty** himself was my **contemporary**. He was born seven years after I was born, and died at least seven years before I will die. He was **professor** of Philosophy at Princeton University, so must have been reasonably traditional at one time. He **thought**, and became an iconoclast, and many of his colleagues thought (and many still think) he was a **kook**. Many of my colleagues said that about me too. I took it as a compliment.

I never met Richard Rorty, but I learned a lot from him.

What did Rorty say about **contingency**? (I’ll use my words, not his.)

He wrote first about the contingency of **language**. Not of language in the narrow sense, of whether we talk in English, Italian, or Swahili, but in the broader sense of what kind of language we use. The metaphor, the pictures we describe in the way we communicate.

Language is what **differentiates** us from other animals. All animals communicate, but so far as we know we are the only animals that can communicate abstract thoughts or plans, or theories to be tested. It is a very powerful and useful tool. It has made us, at least so far, preeminent in the animal world.

The language we use, the words we use, the vocabulary we use to describe our world is **contingent**, depends on so many things: where we are born, when we were born, the environment in which we were raised, the language spoken around us. There are no absolute meanings to the words we use. They mean what we intend them to mean, and what those who hear them understand them to mean.

Unless we are lying, we use words to tell others about things we **believe** to be true. To us they are true. We think of truth to be tested by how close it is to the real world. But the **real world** is **neither** true nor false. It just is. It goes its merry way, not caring a bit what we think or say about it. It is only what we say about the world that can be true or false. The world is a whole, a continuum. The world does not divide itself up into neat little phrases that could be true or false. **We** divide it.

At this point I would like to **digress** for a moment and tell an old rabbinical tale, about two litigants who each had their own strong opinions about what was right or wrong. As they could not agree or compromise, they went to the ultimate authority, the rabbi. The rabbi listened to the first litigant carefully, weighed his argument, thought about it, and ruled “You are absolutely right”. He then listened to the second litigant, equally carefully, and ruled again “You are absolutely right”. The rabbi’s **wife**, who had been listening from the kitchen rushed into the room. “How could they both be absolutely right, when they are saying opposite things?” “You’re right too”, said the rabbi.

Most of the **descriptions** we make of the real world are **correct**, for all practical purposes. There are **no arguments** about them. When I drop something it falls. If I jump out of a high window I get hurt or die. But we do have **arguments** about many things: what is **beautiful**, what is ugly; what is **right,** what is wrong; what is **moral**, what immoral; what is **true** what is not, what is human, what is not. These are **not facts**, they are descriptions. Their meaning changes with the way we express them.

Our new insights let us explain things more effectively, to predict more accurately, to make better technology. They are **not necessarily** more **true**, but they are more **useful.**

Our **remote** ancestors described reality as ruled by **competing,** often **warring gods**. Their **creation myths** formed a coherent, satisfying narrative. They explained the important things, like night and day, summer and winter, good years and bad, good crops and famines. They were satisfying and useful.

In our Western world at least, the world we know best, our descriptions of reality, our language, what Rorty called our vocabulary, slowly evolved to one of **monotheism**, one God, one truth. Our Abrahamic God, the God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The one God who knew all, ruled all, with the aid, of course, of his spokespersons, his agents or subagents: our kings and nobility; our presidents or prime ministers with their parliaments and bureaucrats; our dictators and their police. **God** was our **authority**

Our **descriptions** of the world **evolve**, just as we do. Our language evolves with our evolving descriptions, just as did life on earth and all the various species of all living things.

**Vestiges** of our **ancient myths** continue in our language today, for example, in the names we give the days of the **week**: Monday, after the Norse god of the moon, **Mani**; Tuesday after the one handed Norse god of **single combat**; Wednesday after **Wodin**, the chief Norse god, Thursday after **Thor,** the god of thunder, Friday after **Freya**, the goddess of love and beauty, Saturday after **Saturn**, the god of wealth and plenty. It was only on **Sunday**, in English after the day of the Sun, in Italian and other romance languages variants of Domenica, the Lord’s day that we switched to the image of the Judeo-Christian one god.

It was only relatively recently, towards the end of the middle ages, with what we call the **enlightenmen**t, that **science** and reason started to replace revelation, began to capture our human imagination. We still think of **truth** as something out there, to be discovered, uncovered, approached, rather than made. Whether we express our descriptions of reality as divine or natural, whether we use religious or scientific terms to describe them, we tend to still think of truth, morality, good or bad, as being prescribed by some **external authority**, divine or secular, religion or science, rather than by ourselves. But **we**, ourselves, not the external authority, make the descriptions, true or false, by which we describe reality.

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Perhaps it was with the French **revolution**, a short time, just over 200 years ago, that our confidence in this external authority began to be shaken. Almost overnight, it seemed, entire social institutions, monarchy, nobility, were overthrown and replaced. And about the **same time**, romantic **poets** and novelists used their imaginations to show and tell about new realities that could still be achieved; Utopias, made by humans, not by gods or God. We had the capacity to change our descriptions.

Which brings us to **Irony**. It is a very **uncomfortable** **paradox**. Like our ancestors were, we are sure that our present scientific approach, and our present interpretations of the scriptures, is true, or as close to truth as we can get with our present information. We are **sure**. I remember asking a colleague, Frank Krar, about whether he was sure about something he told me. I loved his answer. “*Of course I’m sure. I’m not always right, but I’m always sure*”. Frank was a doer.

To do anything, to accomplish anything, we have to be sure, at least sure enough to act. This is an **ironic, profound, but uncomfortable** insight. The things we are most sure of, our most firmly held convictions, our common sense, are all descriptions of what we believe to be reality rather than reality itself. And yet, we know that no matter how sure we are, we could be wrong. When we recognize the irony inherent in all of our certainties, in what we call common sense, we are open to the possibility of different, possibly more useful descriptions.

Aha! Useful to who? To ourselves? To our community? Who is our community?

**Solidarty:**

We are **individuals**, autonomous, with our own thoughts, desires, aspirations. We are also members of a **community**, of several communities at the same time. We have private as well as public lives. Sometimes they are in accord. Sometimes they are in conflict. How can we resolve that conflict?

**Ethicists** today phrase it scientifically, as the conflict between **autonomy** and **beneficence**. They argue, trying to find a **rational** answer to a non-rational question.

**Hillel**, in the first century before the Christian era asked “ *If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?*”

**Rorty**, in the 20th century AD replied. These are rhetorical, not answerable questions. If we **rephrase** the question, **from “which is right**”, to “**which is more useful**” we may be able to answer them. The descriptions we make are tools to help us answer questions. They are not reality, but descriptions, tools, sometimes as different from each other as a hammer and a paint brush. Each is more useful for a different purpose. What do we want to accomplish? There is **no one right** answer. Both of the litigants were right. The Rabbi’s wife was right. The Rabbi was right.

We feel a kinship with our community. Who is our community?

Perhaps this is the most important question of all. Mark, in the New Testament commanded “*Love thy neighbour as thyself. There is no commandment greater than the*se.”

Our sixth Unitarian Universalist principle is “*the goal of world community, with peace, liberty, and justice for all.*”

In these days of Internet and smart phones, with instant communication, is our community one world? It is technically possible. We have the **tools**

But the descriptions we make of our world are **not** of one community. We are divided into a number of countries (189 to 196, depending on which source you read) each fiercely proud of their national independence.

We have different **forms of government**: democracies, autocracies, monarchies, dictatorships, all certain that their format is the proper way to govern, for the greatest good.

We have different **economic sys**tems: capitalism, communism, socialism, all with their adherents, convinced that all should emulate them

We have a number of **religions**: Eastern, Western; Christian, Muslim, Jewish; Buddhism Hinduism. All convinced that theirs is the true god.

All these groupings have various degrees of cooperation, cooperation, or exclusivity. **Who is my community?**

**Rorty** asks: is it time for a new vocabulary? A new way, a more useful way, of describing our communities? The answer cannot be imposed, cannot come from above. Words mean what they mean in a community. Words mean what they mean to those who want to communicate, want to speak, want to listen. The words we use describe what we perceive as reality. The new vocabulary will only come when we recognize the need for it.

I would like to retell Bertold Brecht’s telling of the Buddha's **parable** of the burning house:

"Gautama the Buddha, to those who had not asked, addressed this parable:

`Lately I saw a house. It was burning. The flame licked at its roof. I went up close and observed that there were people still inside. I entered the doorway and called out to them that the roof was ablaze, so exhorting them to leave at once.

But those people seemed in no hurry. One of them, while the heat was already scorching his eyebrows, asked me what it was like outside, whether it wasn't raining, whether the wind wasn't blowing, perhaps, whether there was another house for them, and more of this kind.

Without answering I went out again. These people here, I thought, must burn to death before they stop asking questions.

And truly, friends, whoever does not yet feel such heat in the floor that he'll gladly exchange it for any other, rather than stay, to that man I have nothing to say……….

Let me conclude with two very short poems by Nabaneeta Dev Sen.

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The wisterias are gone

with their heady fragrance

and their kind abundance.

But when wisterias go

Azaleas come into bloom

No reason to hurry

things will remain

whether you are…..or not.