Always an avid reader, I’m finding myself drawn more and more lately, to folklore, fantasy, and like I spoke about last week – Science Fiction – to help me sort through the challenges we as a people are facing. So many cultural and ethical norms seem to be at risk these days. In some ways, reading can be a form of escapism – to explore another person or another world’s problems – while getting to forget about our own for a few hours at a time. But good literature can have the opposite effect – bringing fresh light to our worldly challenges as we approach them from a new angle.

I want to thank Cathi Zillmann, who “won” this sermon topic at our annual services auction. We’ll begin talking about what it means to be caught between two worlds first through this idea of ‘story’, and then we’ll find our way to what that means in our own lives. Two central questions: how do we stay true to ourselves when being true means more than one thing? What do we risk with each choice?

Probably the most classic folk story about being caught between two worlds, is the tale of Rip Van Winkle. If I were talk about the parts of it that I remember from childhood telling’s, it’s a sort of fairy tale story where the male character gets drawn toward music from some strange musicians, only to wake 20 years in the future, his kids grown, his wife long deceased. I remember some versions of the story as a kid placing Rip Van Winkle lost in faerie land, but the original story was about a guy during pre-revolutionary America coming awake after the Revolutionary War was over. He left the world a loyal subject supporting King George, only to awaken to a new nation – one he wasn’t expecting the night before. I know it’s a feeling some of us are wrestling with these days, as so many cultural and ethical norms seem challenged to some of us. What world did we leave behind; what world did we awake to?
But that’s just the cleaner, less sexist version of the story. Rip Van Winkle was a Dutch villager who was beloved by all, except he always tried to avoid hard work, and the story tells of his “nagging wife” who never relented. This ultimately led him to getting lost listening to the music at the foot of the Catskills. The Washington Irving short story even went so far as to say that when he returned those 20 years later to learn that his wife had died, he wasn’t saddened by the news. The other “henpecked husbands” often wished they could get a sip of Van Winkle’s elixir so they too could disappear. It’s yet another folk tale that makes me wonder, why do we tell these stories to kids.

As we continue this month reflecting on Women’s History, it’s important to remember all the messages we raise our children with. They create the world we live in, again and again – for good or for ill. Even as the generally progressive people we strive to be, we too dip our feet into two worlds – creating equity in some places, and contributing to misogyny in others. Just being open to the possibility that we’re missing how we each contribute to these harmful messages, can be the first step in undoing the harm. Learning to name them, begins the practice of unlearning the negative story.

On the spiritual level though, this folk tale is pointing toward something else. Rip Van Winkle is beloved by the community. He’s good with kids, fun, and kind to the people around him (except for his wife.) He’s known in the tavern, and a good storyteller in some versions of the folk tale. But he’s unhappy because he doesn’t want to work hard around the house – I’m guessing it’s a farming community. Maybe he’s just lazy; or maybe Rip Van Winkle is caught between two worlds in his daily living. I think most of us can relate; working jobs that are unsatisfying, but we need to make ends
meet. You make due as best as you can, but you don’t feel like you’re really living until the workday is over.

As we heard Mary Oliver’s words earlier, “I don't know exactly what a prayer is. I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass, how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields, which is what I have been doing all day. Tell me, what else should I have done? Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon? Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” Now Rip Van Winkle’s falling down into the grass turns out to take away 20 years from his one wild and precious life. Though he did know how to be idle, he probably never really felt blessed.

Feeling caught between two worlds – living for our mundane needs, while striving for some deeper meaning that’s central to our story – is the bedrock to every mid-life crisis. It’s also essentially the story of our whole lives. How do we live into our full selves while we struggle with making ends meet, or being “a success” in our careers? What success means for each of us will be different, but we all probably share in a common anxiety over these life-long challenges. The Rip Van Winkle story is a sort of 1820s version of quitting your job, buying a red sports car and taking a cross-country road trip with the rock band. When you come back, your family’s probably not going to be waiting – as least not as you once knew it.

Most of us probably will, or already have, faced many versions of the classic mid-life crisis. Feeling like we’re caught between two worlds is at the core of that crisis. The existential question, “Is this all there is?” leads to radical changes – changes that may not actually solve our emotional crisis.

There’s an early John Mayer song that came out about 15 years ago that has a line in it where he’s singing about his “Quarter-Life Crisis.” It’s
basically “the new mid-life crisis” for Generation X, and later the Millennial generation, who would both feel it’s sting. For the early Boomers, mid-life crisis was something like how I described it before, or maybe it was some natural expression around being an Empty Nester, or being the age of an Empty Nester and never having had kids. How you’ve lived for a long time, doesn’t exactly work any longer, and you’re left wondering how do you stay true to yourself, when “being true” means more than one thing. Retirement, especially for those whose life revolved around one singular career, is a major shock to our sense of self. We might be eager to take a long-well deserved break from a lifetime of work, but one of the largest ways we’ve spent our lives has come to an end, and we sometimes can struggle through rebuilding our sense of self. The more we identified with our career, the more painful this may be.

The Quarter-life crisis is something different. There’s still the same sense of crisis of identity, but the world’s pressures are different. My generation and the one following me, are highly unlikely to stay in the same career for 30 years, or retire before we’re 70. Retiring at 65 is already almost impossible for the late-Boomer generation. My Dad worked till he was 70, and forced into retirement, or he would have probably chosen to work till he was 75. But after his time in the Navy, he worked in the same career (telecommunications) for just shy of 50 years. I’m not sure that’s possible for young adults going into the work world today – certainly not likely for staying in the same company. My husband has been working at the same not-for-profit for almost 20 years, and when our friends hear that, their eyes bug out like they’re looking at a unicorn. There are outliers, but our world is forming a new normal.
For the upcoming generation – being 25 seems to ask the question – “What will I do next?” It’s the natural response to uncertainty, lack of stability, and a future that appears to confuse all of us these days. Do we risk doing what we’ve done again and again, or do we risk starting over, not knowing what may come? Maybe that’s a challenge for all of us, at all stages of our lives.

For Rip Van Winkle, it was a fantasy solution of running off to hear the music and drink the night away. Fast forward 20 years and it’s all better. In reality, living with our feet in two worlds, takes a lot of work to make the transition. For me, it took about 7 years of serious effort, from the point where I knew I was going to leave Information Technology, to when I was finally able to go into the ministry. Maybe we make fun of the mid-life crisis in TV, and movies, because it’s a sort of running away – we laugh at what is tragic. I think we laugh at the Quarter-life crisis, because ‘those kids don’t know how hard it’s going to get.” When in reality, it’s a life-change that has us running toward something, rather than away from. Different life stages, different challenges – all something we all will likely face to some degree or another if we are fortunate enough to get the chance to face our struggles with options.

The Russian Nestling dolls we heard about in our story earlier in the service, remind me of one of the lessons I carry with me from seminary psychology graduate work. “We are all the ages we have ever been.” I’ll go into this in much more detail at the end of the month when I preach on “Adulthood” (if I still I have anything to say on the topic! So maybe expect a new topic at the end of the month, the more I think about it.) Maybe childhood, in a way, is a smaller doll nestled within a larger doll. Each developmental stage we (hopefully) mature in to, is a larger compartment for
what came before. For each of us, there will come adversity, that will return us to our helpless childhood. Likewise, there will be moments of wonder and newness that we’ll have to face with our child-like mind, in order to appreciate and properly face them with awe and joy. The lessons of adulthood are not always the appropriate way to face all things; just like the innocence of childhood sometimes sets us back. From a human development standpoint, we are all living in multiple worlds – far more than two – the older we get and (or so long as) the more we mature. As we age, or as we mature, or maybe both, we grow with more and more dolls nestled within our sense of self. Sometimes we live this way unaware; sometimes we knowingly can take out another doll for each thing we come across. What Russian nestling doll do you take out to face your kid being born? Which do you turn to when you lose your career, or get the horrible medical news? Which one do you show at the family reunion, or the retirement party?

In some ways, they get formed after or through every major life change. I have a story that’s vivid in my mind the first time I drove a car on my own; when I moved away from my childhood home; when I rented my first house, and ended my first long term partnership. Each person that’s died in my life has left another nested doll in my spirit, and each major success has built another.

The story of a lifetime, how we balance our internal life with the needs of our external world, is our great challenge. We all live in two worlds: *How things are, and how they might be; Our deepest yearnings, and our worldly needs; Our professional masks, with all their requirements and needs, and what we choose to do on a lazy Sunday afternoon* (for those, of course, that don’t work on Sundays.) We experience great pain, when our inner and external lives are not in sync. When our spiritual life is sacrificed
for worldly gain; or when worldly needs are so strong that we seem to need to sacrifice the questions of the spirit.

What does it mean to be a people of risk? Life is defined by risk; risks taken, and risks avoided. Each choice, even to stay on the “safe path”, is another risk. We can only be a people of risk, but we may not always realize it. The pain at the center of feeling like we’re living in two worlds, is the confusion that any of us ever live any other way. Yearning and satisfaction - are the perennial human struggle. What came before, and what may yet be – are possibly the two most terrifying yet poignant questions of any life. We each face them, day by day. There are moments that we feel those burning questions all the more, but they linger in the corners of our hearts silently everyday – left unacknowledged - they jump out when we’re catching our breaths.

As Mary Oliver asked, “Who made the grasshopper? This grasshopper, I mean- the one who has flung herself out of the grass…”. Who made this human, the one who had flung herself into the next stage of life, and the next challenge, and the next pain, and the next joy? I am uneasy, or I am satisfied, by all that has come and all that will be. I am moving into the next world of this one wild and precious life, step by step, fear by joy, uncertainly with risk and cautious abandon. We do so uneasy – caught between two worlds – when we think of our lives this way; always drawing our stories as tales of what was, and what will be, sleeping away twenty years to strange music and stranger drink. Or we risk our lives moving into the next moment; jostling all of our internal nestled dolls, knowing that our life may be welcoming one more layer to our souls.