

“Tell Me a Story”
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When I began writing this sermon, ironically enough at a café in Columbus, Ohio called Parable, I was at once overwhelmed by the many ways I could talk with you about the concept of stories, which is our theme this month. In a very real way, we are people made of stories: stories of our experiences, our families, our ancestors, our countries, our politics, our spiritual lives, our bodies: the list is near endless. As Unitarian Universalists we are called to pay attention not just to the way we would tell our own stories but to the stories of others; we are warned against falling for what writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie would call “the danger of a single story.” This means guarding against the assumption that because someone is working class or African American or queer or addicted we automatically know their story and can take ownership of it by telling it ourselves. Finally, and not unrelatedly, we are at a time in history when a particular story of the United States is being written by those about to be in power which to many of us is downright sinister. How do we create a counternarrative when we feel voiceless and defeated?

It's enough to paralyze any sermon writer. Quite literally as I sit here at my computer, I can feel the stories of everyone in the café and everything I have ever taught my students about stories and my own multiple stories swirling around me. It's hard to catch hold of anything, except this phrase that keeps repeating itself in my brain.

Tell me a story.

For me there is so much joy in that small request, and I think that joy is the place I want to start. Did anyone tell you stories when you were young? Can you remember what that felt like? Does anyone tell them to you now?

Tell me a story.

I believe one of the first sentences I strung together was this one. A request for something very basic and human: a distraction, a reflection, a lesson, and most importantly for this sermon, a comfort and a connection.

Tell me a story.

You see my beloved Aunt Honey was a fantastic storyteller. Her tales had talking crocodiles and thimble-sized dogs and faraway lands and exciting battles, yet they were also connected to my everyday life. When I was maybe four, we would lay out my clothes on the bed at night as if they were animated beings. She told stories of the summer people (my undershirt and pants) and the winter people (my outer clothes) and

how they drank tea and flew to Spain. However, my favorite stories were the ones about Princess Claire, my alter ego, and Platta (also my alter ego but ugly, green-skinned, and most importantly, naughty). Princess Claire had perfect adventures that matched her perfect hair and perfect clothes. Platta always tried to ruin everything, but she never succeeded. As I got older my auntie let me tell parts of the story myself. It was great fun to live vicariously through my little green Id; we broke things and played in the dirt in our good clothes and ate ice cream for breakfast.

Tell me a story.

If there is one sentence that describes my entire professional life, this is it. I am fairly certain that my auntie's early storytelling, and the fact that she was also an English teacher, made me into who I am today, a professional storyteller who also helps others create their own stories. For 25 years I have been inviting class after class, student after student to tell me a story. The tales I have heard over the years run the gamut from gorgeous to painful to shocking to epically sad. Some of them are memoirs and some of them are not but they are all personal and revealing. One of the most important things I have tried to teach young writers has always been "the only worthwhile thing to do with pain is to make it into art."

Tell me a story and I'll tell you one back.

My Auntie was born in Utah to my grandmother, who was a community leader that kept an obsessively clean house, and my grandfather who drank a little too much and traveled around the West developing mines. After college she taught in South San Francisco for 30 years. She moved there because the man she was engaged to cheated on her with someone else. She was brilliant, terribly funny, wildly creative, and very mentally ill. One of the saddest parts of her story was that she was born into a time and a family that refused to get her any help. Aunt Honey was 6 feet tall, and wore her dark hair pulled back in a ponytail. She modeled for a few years. After she passed, I read one of her yearbooks and found out that all of her high school students fell in love with her. She never married or had children of her own, so she was always mine. I held her hand up until half an hour before she died, which she did in privacy, as soon as I went home to take a shower.

When you heard my story what happened to you?

How many of you have had a troubled relative that you loved desperately? How many of you adored one of your teachers? Who has been to San Francisco? Who has helped someone die?

If your answer is yes to any of these questions, then you were in my story too. What I told you was true but even if it had been fiction, you would have still recognized yourself. I don't quite have words for this connection between writer and reader,

speaker and audience, but I know it is sacred. For me music isn't art without a listener, any more than a painting is art without a viewer. A story then IS a connection. That's its definition.

Thinking of a story as a connection opens up so much. Like the Sankofa bird if we share our past with someone, we are also in a way sharing our future. On its website Parable Café writes a story about revolutionizing the service industry by charging more for its products but paying its workers a living wage rather than hoping they can survive on tips. Even more importantly, the owners say, telling their parable also inspires others to do the same. Ah, that connection again.

So, tell me a story

I've been asking you to do this throughout my talk, but now I'm really going to ask it. This last part of my sermon is going to require a little bit of interaction on your part, but don't worry it's voluntary not mandatory. I'm going to ask you to do one of the favorite exercises from my nonfiction classes: write a six-word memoir.

The exercise is taken from the famous tale about Ernest Hemingway who supposedly when he was asked to write a novel in six words as a bar bet, replied with "For sale, baby shoes, never worn."

I'm sure you are all asking, how can I tell my whole life in six words? May I remind you that our lives are made up of many stories, and even if I gave you 10,000 words to write you probably wouldn't get it all in. So just give it a try?

Here are a few examples from the interwebs:

My life, lived inside my head.

I still make coffee for two.

Others seldom rose to my expectations.

Peer pressure made me do it

Learn to teach. Teach to learn.

And three of mine:

Storyteller makes art out of pain.

Taught for 25 years. Tired now.

Still punk. Just bought new Docs.

And so, beloved community, tell me a story, just a very small one.

I have some paper and pens for you or if you inhabit the 21st century you can do it in your phone notes. I'm going to be quiet for about 3 minutes to give you time to write. Then for that all important connection part, I'm going to ask you to share your six-word memoirs with me and other members of the congregation during coffee hour. If you're online you can type them in the chat.

I look forward to our time of sacred connection. May we be comforted and healed by our sharing. Blessed be.