

“Telling Our Stories”

Rev. Kelly J. Crocker

First Unitarian Society of Madison

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In the fall of 1905, Albert Schweitzer sent a very strange letter to his parents and closest friends. At this time, Schweitzer was known as being a man of many talents and abilities. In addition to holding a doctorate in philosophy, being a well sought after preacher, and having written a now famous book on the historical study of Jesus, he was an internationally known concert organist who had also written a biography of Bach in French which he later rewrote in German. By all accounts, he was on a very successful path. That is why, when his family and friends received his letter, they, presumably, would have been completely shocked. The letter detailed Schweitzer's plans to leave his old life behind in order to study medicine and move to Africa, not as a pastor, preacher, or missionary, not as an author or musician, but rather as a doctor. In his autobiography he explained this seemingly abrupt change in the direction of his life by saying, “It struck me as inconceivable that I should be allowed to lead such a happy life while so many others around me were struggling with sorrow and suffering. I realized that I wanted to construct a different story of my life. I wanted my life's story to have a different meaning.”

The stories we tell about ourselves, the ones we use to define our lives are vital to who we are and what we believe about ourselves. It is in stories that we discover the meaning of our lives. Stories that we have lived and remember, that we have adopted as our own, that instruct us in the way the world works or teach us something about ourselves, all these have the power to bring richness, inspiration and wholeness to our lives.

Discovering our stories is no less than a spiritual quest. Without them, we cannot articulate or even begin to understand our deepest experiences. Yet many of us left story behind with our elementary schoolbooks and favorite stuffed fuzzy friends. Stories are read to children at night

before bed, adults live in the world of reason and logic, rational and scientific with not much time left over for the intuitive, imaginative dimensions of story.

During the New UU sessions we hold here, I facilitate an exercise with the participants around the seven UU principles. I used to ask them to pick one of the principles and tell us a story from their own life that illuminates the deeper meaning of that principle. I stopped asking this question at one point because it became clear to me that this was difficult and frustrating for the members of the class. They would talk about their belief in the value and integrity of the principle, the need for it in our world today, but I couldn't get them to move into the realm of story – I couldn't force them to share the narrative edge of their spiritual existence. I now question the decision to remove this exercise and think I need to put it back in, asking folks once again to reclaim the power of their own story.

“The inner story,” writes author Sue Monk Kidd, “creates identity, transforming our vision of who we are. Creating story is an act of self-knowing. Through the lens of story we see the mystery of ourselves more clearly. Knowing who I am hinges on remembering who I have been in the past and embracing the hope of who I may be in the future. Story allows me to enter the tension between memory and hope. When we enter our personal story, we embark on an odyssey of reconciliation, of reclaiming more of who we truly are, the selves that are dark and light, redeemed and unredeemed.”

What is your story? Which stories do you recall time and again and how do they inform your past and impact your present and future? In looking back over our lives, we ask “what is our defining story? What is the story that we use to restore to us our sense of purpose and worth and make our lives worth living?” And is it a story that brings hope and peace to our hearts or is a story which reopens a wound, which brings pain? What is your defining story? Do you recall sticking up to a much larger, fiercer neighborhood bully and therefore define your life as one of courage, strength and bravery, recalling the story to mind to remind yourself that you have always had a deep sense of justice? Do you recall reaching out to a friend or stranger in

need and tell that story to make kindness and compassion the meaning of your life? Or is your story one that recalls brokenness, failure, a story that brings you despair or hopelessness? What is the story of your life?

At a minister's conference several years ago, a colleague told the story of Nina and I was reminded of it as I contemplated the power of our life's story.

Nina had a passion for riding motorcycles. She was out riding in on a country road with her longtime boyfriend, Bill, and some friends. Bill's 11 year old nephew was on the back of Bill's bike. Coming from the opposite direction, a huge car crossed the yellow line and ran into them, narrowly missing Nina. Bill and his nephew were killed. When it came time for the sentencing, Nina's only request was to speak to the driver of the car.

They met with their attorneys present. It was Nina's opportunity to exact revenge, to dump all of her pain and anguish, her grief and rage onto the lap of the driver. But that's not what she did. She had hoped, she said, to see that the driver felt remorse for the two deaths he had caused. And she believed that he did and still does. He stated that he thought about that moment each and every day and for many hours in the middle of the night and that he voluntarily turned in his license and vowed to never drive again.

And Nina told him what she most deeply wanted to say and that was this: It was an accident. It's not like he saw them on the other side of the road and made a conscious decision to hit them that day. He had lost control of his car. It was an accident. Nina wanted the man to know that she knew that and she wanted to make sure that he knew it too. She told him that she realized that she didn't want her life to be defined and measured by her grief or to have her story be one of revenge and unending pain. She needed to fashion a story for herself that put this immense loss in a different context – one that brought her comfort and the courage to carry on each and every day. Everyone wept and Nina left that room feeling free.

For this is another way in which our stories can transform – by sustaining us in the midst of suffering. Our story can become a holy container in which we confront and overcome the pain, and the fear in our lives. What we choose to see within our story determines our reality. We can see brokenness, disconnection or an affirmation of human strength and enduring goodness.

The poet Michael Blumenthal wrote these words:

*Say you finally invented a new story  
of your life. It is not the story of your defeat  
or of your impotence and powerlessness  
before the large forces of wind and accident.*

*It is not the sad story of your mother's death  
or of your abandoned childhood. It is not,  
even, a story that will win you the deep  
initial sympathies of the benevolent goddesses  
or the care of the generous, but it is a story  
that requires of you a large thrust  
into the difficult life, a sense of plenitude  
entirely your own. Whatever the story is,  
it goes as it goes, and there are unexpected changes  
in it, gardens that need to be planted,  
skills sown, the long hard labors  
of prose and enduring love. Deep down  
in some long-encumbered self,  
it is the story you have been writing  
all of your life, where no force holds you  
against your own willfulness,*

*where you can rise  
from the bleak island of your old story  
and tread your way home.*

The work of our lives is to submit our stories of who we are to the challenge of the story of who we yet might be. The word *story* actually means “to know.” In the act of creating and recreating our stories there is always a moment of coming to know – who we are and what we can be.

“In the story of Esther in the Hebrew Bible, Esther’s uncle Mordecai learns of a plot to destroy the Jews. Haman, an officer of King Ahasuerus, plots against the Jews because Mordecai, himself a Jew, will not bow down before him as did all the other servants of the king. When Mordecai, knowing that all will be lost if the king is not alerted, charges Esther with going to the king in her role as queen to plead on behalf of the Jews. Esther shrinks from the task because she has not been summoned to speak with the king, a considerable problem since those who speak uninvited are subject to death.

But Mordecai is not put off. He retells Esther’s own story in a way to empower and embolden her. “Who knows?” he says. “Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.” He shifts Esther’s understanding of herself from one of powerlessness as one of the servants of the king to a position of power in which she sees herself in a role of royal dignity. She is moved from fear to courage – all in the retelling of who she is.” (Gil Rendle, *Telling the Better Story*)

Our life story is our constant companion, the litany that guides our every move and thought. So we need to make of our lives a story we can live with, because we live the life our story makes possible. The story we make of the moments in our lives becomes the life we lead. So the day may come when we look back and realize that our life story may need a bit of re-visioning. Dan Wakefield, author of “The Story of Your Life,” once wrote “Since our past experience only exists now in our own mind – it only lives in our re-creation of it – our changed experience of it becomes the reality, and in that sense we really do have the power to change our own past.”

This re-visioning is not denial or wiping out of memory. Rather, through telling our stories, we re-experience our past from the perspective of who we are today. That knowledge and distance can give new meaning to who we once were.

For many years my defining story was one of rejection and self-doubt. You see, I felt rejected by the religious faith of my family and when I decided to leave that faith to seek another path, the rejection came from not only the church but from my family as well. For many years, when I would look for meaning in this story, I found only questions – did I take the “right” path? Was leaving that religion and searching for another the wrong thing to do? How would I handle the rejection and criticism of those I loved most? My family deeply believed that my leaving their faith caused my grandmother’s illnesses and ultimately, her death. They believed that I had literally broken her heart when I left that church and that she just wanted strong enough to deal with the disappointment and the pain. I defined myself through my story as an outsider, as one who rebelled, or alternately, as one who was cast off and no longer welcome. Through the years, I have told this story, many times, in different versions, to many of you – from this pulpit, in classes, in small groups, and in the telling and retelling I have begun to re-vision. Not the facts of the story – those remain the same – but the meaning that I find within it. In sharing my tale, and listening to the stories of others – I have come to see my story as one of redemption, not as someone who was rejected but as someone who was welcomed in. I was searching for a religious home in which I could bring all of me – my questions, my doubts, my fears, and my gifts – and you welcomed me in. I was no longer a cast off, I was home. So my story didn’t end with rejection, even though it would have been easy to stop there. In the re-telling of my story, I have faced my rejection and found courage, hope and a calling to serve our Unitarian Universalist faith.

I tell you this story because a key piece of our meaning making lies in sharing our stories with one another. For in telling our tales we can give and receive inspiration – how the story that gets one person through the darkest of nights lays out a map to get another person through – this is essential. We need the mirror of one another’s courage. “When we share our inner stories, we allow others to enter our lives and partake of our deepest truths. We discover that

we share the same joys and tragedies, the same ambiguities and struggles. In the end we are all one story.” (Sue Monk Kidd, *Firstlight*)

In the beginning is a baby and in the end is the story of a life. The defining story is humming along underneath all the other stories and the world’s noise and demands and we don’t often hear the narrative that shapes our lives. We are like a person who has grown accustomed to the ringing in his ears: it’s just there, accommodated as background noise until something cracks or pops. Its midnight on our birthday, or New Year’s Eve after the party ends and everyone has gone home, or a dear friend dies, and a moment of reflection sweeps over us. We check in and ask ourselves “So, how are you really? And what is this life all about?” And then, we listen. In those moments when you are listening to the story of yourself, what do you claim or reclaim, what do you hear? Start there. Tell one another that story.

That is what we need to remember – how to claim our stories, and how to share them with one another. Don’t wait to share them until you are no longer afraid, because that time will never come. Don’t wait until you have it all figured out and you finally feel wise, because telling and retelling your story is a path to making meaning, making sense out of your life, and finding your wisdom. As we tell and retell our stories, we order, we find meaning in our lives; we can find hope and move with more clarity and light. So in this New Year may we find ourselves turning toward one another and starting with the words, *let me tell you a story*.