November 2016

What Does It Mean

A Community Of Story?

Our lives are not just made up of stories; they are also made by stories. This might be the most important reminder of this month. Indeed, who of us hasn’t felt controlled by a story? Stuck in a story? Hopeless about the way our story will end up? Simply put, stories write us as much as we write them.

For instance, who can’t relate to the friend that tells us that her family “clings to the story about how I’m the clumsy one.” We’ve never seen our friend trip, not once. Or drop a thing, ever. And yet, somehow, when she goes to her parents’ home or back to a family reunion, she spills coffee on at least one outfit, stubs at least one toe and stumbles down at least one step. There it is: the power of story!

Or think about our current struggles with economic or racial justice. The incredible income gap is described as “natural” or “the result of complex global dynamics over which we have little control.” Similarly, the story of race in our country is told with an “entrenched” story arc. Talk about a debilitating way of telling the story.

So let’s tell a new story! This is the message of our faith: We have a choice. Our stories are not predetermined. Remember that old theological debate our UU fore-fathers and mothers gave their lives for? Some said that God had predestined not just the big story of humanity, but our individual stories too. Some of us were slotted for heaven and others for hell. And God had written the list in ink. Nothing any of us could do about it.

“Well,” said our spiritual ancestors, “that’s a bit harsh, don’t you think!” Forget this extreme fate-driven story, they said. Freedom has a much bigger role than we’re giving it credit for. God is not so much the author of the story as she is the magical muse that needles and nags us to put our own stamp on the narratives before us. In other words, we come from a long-line of spiritual relatives who agreed with Shakespeare that “All the world’s a stage,” but then went on to clarify that it’s an improv show to which we’ve all been invited.

So fate and freedom? This month is much more about the tension between these two than one might have thought, leaving us with questions like: Are you an actor conforming to the scripts handed to you? Or have you found your own way of becoming a director, a screenwriter, an author? How are you struggling right now to regain control of the storyline of your life? How are you and your friends working to regain control of the storyline of our community? Our country?

Or maybe control is not your work. Maybe your spiritual work is about finding a new storyline. Maybe retirement, divorce, illness or the empty-nest has closed the book on one story and is inviting you to leap into a whole new narrative. Does that leave you excited about what’s to come? Scared? A bit of both?

Whatever it is. Wherever you are at. Don’t give the storyline away. That’s the message of our faith. And hopefully the gift of this month.
QUESTIONS TO WALK WITH

Below is a list of questions to open the mind’s gateway to reveal the wisdom that is right below the surface of our ordinary, everyday lives. Pick one question, any, the one that grabs you and won’t let go, then walk with it. Let your mind wander and wonder. Let the question percolate. Listen curiously to what surfaces. Live into the answers. Be surprised by what is discovered. Share what you learn with someone meet along the way.

1. What genre is your current life’s story? Are you living a mystery? An adventure story? A romance? A thriller? Are you worried that your story is not interesting enough to be published? Is it a half-finished manuscript stuck in writer’s block? Are you in the midst of going back and re-writing the ending?

2. What stories did your “elders” pass down to you? Have you cared for them and passed them on as those elders hoped?

3. What story does your family of origin tell about you? Does that telling leave you feeling seen or misunderstood? Celebrated or unfairly characterized? If mischaracterized, what are your plans to get them to reshape their telling of you? Or is your true story better served by just letting go of trying to change their unfair one?

4. Who do you tell your secret stories to? If the answer is “no one,” might it be time to find someone? (“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.” ~ Maya Angelou)

5. When has re-telling or re-writing your story healed or saved you? How might re-examining or re-telling a part of your story offer you healing right now?

6. What current cultural or political “story” strikes you as dangerous? How might you step up your commitment and efforts to challenge that dangerously false story? How might you double down on making sure that the true story is known?

7. How do you use story? When you tell stories, what is most often the purpose? To connect? To entertain? To heal? To conceal? To remember? To pass on? To teach? To gain power? To say thanks? Were you surprised by your answer?

8. Are you hiding part of your story from the person you say you “trust the most”?

9. What story did you walk away from? All of us think about that other life — that other story — that we turned down for the one we have now. Whether you regret your past choice or not, that road not taken doesn’t ever really go away. It continues to be part of our story. Does that old road want you to return to it and give it another look?

Opening Words

This light we kindle is set in the lamp of our history [and beckons us toward our common story].

We inherit this free faith from the brave and gentle, fierce and outspoken hearts and minds that have come before us.

Let us be worthy inheritors of this faith and through our good works, pass it boldly to a new generation.

~ Audette Fulbright Fulsion (adapted)

Closing Words

Listening is soul work. It can help the living find the meaning to go on in the midst of trying circumstances, and it can help the dying accept the brevity of their lives. Without listening, there can be no story. And without stories, we cannot complete the unfinished work of healing.

[Blessed be the listeners]

~ Richard Stone, The Healing Art of Storytelling
Spiritual Practice - Deepening Experiences
A new way of being for all ages

Option A:
What’s Your Wizard of Oz?

Stories companion us. Most of us fell in love with a “made up” story in our childhood without which navigating our real life story would have been a struggle. For instance, one soul matters members shares that *The Wizard of Oz* was that for her. That lion helped her see that courage comes from community not simply from inside of oneself. The witch and the wizard warned her about types of people to look out for. Dorothy helped her see that answers are found by returning home not just by leaving it. All of them — Dorothy, the Lion, the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodsman, Toto — weren’t just characters in a childhood fantasy but companions that accompanied her into and through real life adulthood.

What childhood story gave such companions and guidance to you? Our children would surely name *Harry Potter*. For us, other names likely emerge: *Little House on the Prairie, Nancy Drew, Sherlock Homes, Treasure Island, The Lion, The Witch & The Wardrobe,* maybe even *The Lord of the Flies or David and Goliath.*

This month bring that formative fiction back into your heart and head. Your assignment:

**Identify which childhood story served as your guiding tale**

&

**bring in a piece of proof about how it influenced your life**

Don’t make that second part of the exercise overly complicated. Your “proof” might simply be pulling the book or video right off your shelf and bringing it in. More than one of us are likely to pull out our Luke Skywalker or Princess Leia action figure from the attic. Some will surely bring in their video copy of *It’s a Wonderful Life.* Yet another of us might bring in riding boots and explain how she traces her love of horses and her deep self-love back to *Black Beauty.*

The point is to simply take the time to look around your life and find some trace of that “fictitious” children’s story in your literal adult world!

Option B:
Remembering the Wisdom of Your Plot Twist

No one gets through life without a plot twist. Unexpected events happen to us all: a death, illness, a divorce or loss of a job. And it’s not always something bad: we get a job offer out of nowhere, stumble into love or learn we are pregnant right away when we thought it would take awhile.

Good or bad, the unexpected event usually comes with an unexpected insight. An important value is clarified. A truth is written in neon lights. All those mundane worries and to do lists are put into perspective.

But over time, that moment of clarity often fades. The plot twist’s wisdom is forgotten. Our resolve to remember takes a back seat to those daily to do lists once again.

This assignment invites you to bring the clarity back:

- Reconstruct and remember the story of your plot twist.
- Make time to meditate on it, write about it or discuss it with a friend.
- Find an object that represents the insight of your plot twist.
- Place that object in a place you will see every day.

Come to your group, ready to share your plot twist story and the object that represents the insight it gave you. Most importantly, explain to your group why or why not you’ve decided to keep that object in view for longer than just this month.
**History's Road**
By Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley, Clyde Grubbs

The road of history is long, full of both hope and disappointment. In times past, there have been wars and rumors of wars, violence and exploitation, hunger and homelessness, and destruction of this earth, your creation.

We have become a global village, with a growing realization of how fragile this earth is, and how interconnected we are to each other and to all creation.

We cannot continue to live in the old way. We must make a change, see a new [story]. A [story of] peace and justice and a healthy planet.

O Great Creative Spirit: You have given a vision of the good, and we yearn for [a new story and] a new way. But where are we to find the courage to begin this work? We know that a different tomorrow is possible, but how can we build it?

We think of the prophets, women and men, who voiced unpopular opinions, who made personal sacrifices, and sometimes lost their lives, for the sake of justice.

We think of Isaiah, who called out to let those who are held in captivity go free, to give solace to the poor and homeless. Let us be inspired by all who work to overcome misery, poverty, and exploitation.

We think of Harriet Tubman, who called out to people of goodwill to join her on an underground railroad, to lift a dehumanized people from the bondage of slavery to the promise of freedom, even when it meant challenging unjust laws. Let us be inspired by those who are outlaws for freedom.

We think of Gandhi, whose belief in "Soul Force"—the witness to Love's Truth—helped to overthrow the oppression of an empire and gave witness to the way of nonviolent action. Let us be inspired to become witnesses for peace.

We think of Chief Seattle, who reminded us that we belong to the earth, not the earth to us. Let us be inspired by all those who work for the healing of creation, of Mother Earth and all her creatures.

Who are the prophets who inspire you? They may be well known, or known only to you, offering personal inspiration, courage, and hope.

May they join a great cloud of witnesses to a new way of life—the way of peace and justice, the way of justice lived according to the way of peace, the beloved community. So may it be. Amen.