**“The Power of Story”**

March 3, 2019

UU Church of Lancaster

Rev. Dr. Barbara Coeyman

**Reading: “Turning to One Another,” Margaret Wheatley**

There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about.

Ask “What’s possible?” not “What’s wrong?” Keep asking.

Notice what you care about.

Assume that many others share your dreams.

Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters.

Talk to people you know.

Talk to people you don’t know.

Talk to people you never talk to.

Be intrigued by the differences you hear.

Expect to be surprised.

Treasure curiosity more than certainty.

Invite in everybody who cares to work on what’s possible.

Acknowledge that everyone is an expert about something.

Know that creative solutions come from new connections.

Remember, you don’t fear people whose story you know.

Real listening always brings people closer together.

Trust that meaningful conversations can change your world.

Rely on human goodness. Stay together.

**Sermon: The Power of Story**

This service is the first of two when we consider the theme of “Story.” Today let’s look at the power of story. I hope to encourage you to think about story over the next week because next Sunday Rev. Larry Peers, my UU minister colleague and nationally-recognized church consultant, will be here. Rev. Larry will reflect on Story during the worship service and then lead this congregation in an important afternoon workshop on “Writing New Stories.” There is more information on the insert in the Order of Service: I urge you to attend both events.

Define Story

We hear the theme of “Story” often these days: in the media, in academic writing, in personal conversations. More and more I ground my writing as a UU historian in story. In this vein, this Tuesday as part of the UU History class, rather than a “lecture,” I will present the “story” of the woman who was first ordained to Universalist ministry whom I’ve been researching, Lydia Jenkins. The concept of “story” certainly enlivens and humanizes the academic discipline of history.

What do we mean by story? A story is a sequence of events connected in such a way as to have a shape: usually a beginning, a middle, and an end. Story usually has characters and a setting: in a geographic location, in a time period, in a social or political or artistic context. A good story is based on concrete people and experiences, not abstract concepts. A story can be real --- non-fiction --- or a product of the imagination --- fiction. A story has a creator or creators --- perhaps authors or artists, perhaps a collective community --- who infuse their inner voice into stories. There are also receivers --- readers, listeners, folks living the experience of the story --- each of whom filters the content and meaning of a story through their particular lenses. With both fiction and nonfiction, the more believable or relatable a story, the more it resonates with listeners as well as tellers of the story. A good story often has conflict or tension, which ultimately may resolve or at least progress to new conditions: I expect we are especially drawn to stories that end happily ever after, even as we refer to some of these as “fairly tales.”

Stories are not only prose: poetry has an amazing power to convey story. This week I attended a short Circles of Trust retreat, the theme of which was “Our Stories,” and during which the tool for deeper reflection and connection was poetry. As Mary Oliver wrote in one of her poems, she hopes her writing is so simple and direct that, while we know the poem is her story, as we read we begin to hear our own stories, as if the poem came from our own heart. Just like poetry, stories connect us, they bind us one to the other.

Stories are conveyed through many means and media. Stories may be written, and thus conveyed through publications: we read stories in books or newspapers or magazines, in brick-and-mortar format or online. Stories are also conveyed verbally and visually: we go to the movies, we watch UTube, or attend live story-telling. For instance, the Moth Storytelling radio show is growing in popularity. Stories are also becoming more integrated into ministers’ vocabulary: I notice that my colleagues include more story-telling in sermons these days. Several UU ministers are nationally recognized story tellers: my minister colleague in Austin, Rev. Meg Barnhouse, has a regular storytelling column in UU World online, for example.

There is power in stories. Stories can entertain us, or teach us new and different ways of living, or stimulate fantasy and fun in us. As Margaret Wheatley said in the reading I just offered, we don’t fear people whose story we know, because deep listening of another’s story brings us closer together. Stories can change who we are. Stories can create worlds we might never be able to travel to or live in in real time. Stories can be healing, reminding us that we are not alone: that we share experiences with other humans now and through history. I recently read the story of a man named Michael Bischoff, who on learning of his diagnosis of an aggressive brain cancer, came to realize the power in his telling his story of brokenness and vulnerability in the face of illness. Story telling helped move his cancer into remission and he started a storytelling project for others with serious illness. He discovered the power of human connection to help heal the body.

Story and narrative

Another recent way of talking about story is the concept of “narrative.” Narrative in some contexts is essentially a trendier way to refer to story: helps you sound post-modern! The two concepts --- story and narrative --- are often interchangeable, yet there are some differences which I want to unpack because it is particular qualities of “narrative” that Rev. Larry will work with you on next Sunday, even as he will often use the word “story.” To distinguish the two: a story more often is closed and predictable: that is, it has a beginning and an end, and each time the story is told it comes out the same way. How many readings of children’s stories are represented by us in this room right now: and how many times does any given story come out the same every time you read it. Over and over, I wager “Green Eggs and Ham” ends with “I do so like green eggs and ham, Thank you, Thank you, Sam-I-am!” Even live storytellers tell a given story the same way: same characters, same plot resolution.

In contrast, the concept of “narrative” is more open-ended. Narrative offers greater variety and flexibility, as it is more dependent on the lens through which we observe the story being told at any given point in time or location or personal condition. A narrative also can have a beginning, a middle, and an end, but we may jump into the flow at different points and as the narrative flows on, it adds chapters, it reaches new point of progress or resolution. A story is more localized, more contained, and there might be several stories within a broader narrative. The poet John O’Donohue used the image of narrative as being like a river, as we will sing about in our final hymn, which we can jump into at any point and on which we encounter surprises as the river carries us forward.

Additionally, a narrative also invites participation from listeners and observers, and the more swept up listeners are, the more likely they are to sign on to the theme or the cause. The narrative we tell today about the American political system is a different narrative from the one many were telling in the weeks leading up to the national election of November 2016, and the narratives of different political parties surely differ from one another, as candidates through their particular narratives create impressions of other candidates, whether true or not. Or consider the narrative you told about your child during a challenging period when she or he or they didn’t turn in homework. That narrative probably changed as that child began to find success in writing papers and taking tests.

As with a good story, a good narrative keeps us wondering what’s next and engages listeners in its unfolding. Narratives stimulate the emotions, perhaps more than set stories. I suggest that premise, even as I realize that I cry every time as the same point in some stories which I’ve heard over and over told in the exact same way with the exact same outcome. Still, the concept of “narrative” is more personal or “personalized.” We may carry narratives we’ve heard about ourselves for a long time, perhaps consciously, perhaps unconsciously. Those narratives may influence our actions, our feelings, our view on life, our image of ourselves. Shifting the narrative can shift the realities of our lives. I’ve read recently about a psychologist, Jim Loehr, who works with sports teams, the business world, and teachers to create positive narratives about their work, so to enhance their performance.

Did any of you as a child create a narrative about yourself, or hear about yourself from others, which influenced your actions or emotions or relationship? Early narratives can shape an entire outlook on life. Consider how different is it for a child, to receive a narrative of being loved and affirmed and told they are beautiful and creative and good, from a narrative of being unwanted or burdensome or less than beautiful or having less than adequate access to food and water and shelter, which unfortunately all too many children in the world experience.

I once worked with a woman named Elaine in my congregation in Austin, Texas. I organized a pick-up choir, which would practice for an hour before a service and then sing in the service. At that point, Elaine was in her mid-seventies and came to the practice. She confessed to not being a good singer, and indeed, as we warmed up, I quickly realized that her vocal range was all of three or four notes. Elaine acknowledged that when she was a kid, she was told that she had no singing voice and thus should not try to sing …. And she never did again, until that choir there in Austin. She loved the experience of singing --- all four of her notes --- as she took the risk of ridding herself of decades of her childhood narrative.

A single narrative like Elaine heard can cast long shadows. A 2009 TED talk offers a powerful reminder of this. With nearly 20 million views to date, the talk is by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a Nigerian storyteller. She addresses “The Danger of a Single Story.” She explores how impressionable people can be --- especially children --- in hearing or assuming a singular story, of themselves, of others. We especially tend to create single stories about people and cultures who are not like us. Single stories result in stereotyping of the other and telescope into a few words or images how we define the other. Often single stories arise from those in positions of power: As Adiche said in this TED talk, “Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.” She admits to holding single stories herself, even about her own Nigerian culture. Her upper middle class family could afford domestic help, and she felt pity for the poor family of a house boy they employed. When she visited the boy’s family in his own home she was shocked to realize that, though poor, several members of his family were very gifted at weaving colorful baskets. She had created a single story of the boy’s family that consisted only of their being poor: she didn’t remotely consider that they could also be creative. In turn, she experienced a single story about herself in college in the States. Her white roommate had a single story that Nigerians were an unfortunate people to be pitied. Single stories, single narratives, create stereotypes. It’s not that stereotypes are untrue: the issue is that they are usually incomplete. As Adiche noted, “A single story robs people of their dignity.”

Think on single stories which you have experienced: perhaps a narrative about you from childhold; or the current single story some people tell about humans who cross the Mexican border illegally; perhaps you carry a single story about life in this congregation or in other groups you are part of. There is danger in a Single Story. I encourage you to check out this TED talk.

Your personal narratives

Now I invite you to do a short hands-on exercise, to engage each of us more directly in our own stories and narratives. Our time will be not nearly long enough --- our stories deserve much more focused attention --- so I invite you to continue this exercise during social time, or later with family or friends.

Please see the other side of the yellow insert of the installation ceremony. I created space for you to reflect on narratives you carry with you. Let’s start with narratives about yourself. I invite you to think about and jot down briefly on the left side a title or phrase of a story about yourself which you have composed, long ago or recently: for example, my lifelong narrative about myself is that I am in pretty good physical shape. Or consider how others have added to that narrative: for example, a physio-therapist I worked with recently made me aware of how much more I can do to keep my body in tone. Also, if you wish, jot a note about what you could do to change that story going forward: “I will practice new workout exercises.“ Now turn to one person near you and very briefly tell each your story and how you might change it. Remember, you don’t fear people whose story you know.

Then, let’s do the same about this congregation …. Visitors and guests, this is not an “insider” exercise: you can think about another group or organization you are part of. What is the story you tell yourself about this group? What story about this group have you heard from others? If you want to, what can you do to re-write that story in the future? Turn to a different conversation partner and in a few words tell that person your reflection.

The role of narrative in ministerial search

For you as a congregation, this practice of reflecting on your current and future stories will be an integral part of going forward in ministerial search. I know the time now for this exercise was way too short, so I encourage you to continue reflecting on these questions after the service. Know also that both types of reflections --- the personal and the organizational --- will come in handy next Sunday when our guest, Rev. Larry Peers, will encourage you to write new stories. If nothing else, his workshop title, “Remembering our Future: Expeditions to What’s Possible,” should peak your curiosity to attend. Discerning your stories --- your narratives --- then will ground important conversations about mission which I will bring in the spring.

May the lives of each of us represent many stories, many narratives. May we all find joy and goodness in these stories. May our individual stories remind us how we need one another. May our stories form on-going narratives of connections as we share together this journey we call life.

MAY ALL THIS BE SO.

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