

Theodore Parker Church
Once Upon a Time
May 2, 2021

OPENING WORDS

“Who are you?” someone asks.

“I am the story of myself,” comes the answer.

- M. Scott Momaday

Come, then, bring your story.

Let us worship together -

INTRO TO SERVICE AND THE THEME OF STORY Patty Digh, from *Life Is a Verb*

This month is recognized as both Jewish American Heritage Month, and Asian/Pacific American Heritage Month. For us, it is the month of Story - our theme for May.

One morning not too long ago, I heard a plaintive voice near my head. “Mama?” “Mama!” “MAMA!” I reached for my happy red plastic bifocals and looked at the clock: 5:56 a.m.

“Mama?” four-year-old Tess asked, peering at me from her eye level an inch above the mattress on which – until oh so very recently – I had been sweetly dreaming of a small glass house in which to write southern gothic novels . . .

“Yes, honey?” I answered, not knowing where I was, but knowing full-on that it wasn’t a small glass house . . .

“Mama? Mama? What makes you *you*?”

Good Lord. I usually need at least one cup of strong, black, free-trade coffee and the corner of an organic spelt scone before we start a conversation about quiddity.

In philosophy, *quiddity* is identity or “whatness,” something’s “what it is.” . . . Quiddity describes properties that a particular substance – like a person – shares with others of its kind. . .

I leaned up on one elbow. “Tessie, do you remember where I keep you when I go away on an airplane?”

“You keep me in your heart,” she said, pointing at my chest, smiling.

“And where do you keep me?” I asked.

“Always in my heart.” She pointed to her own chest.

“Everything that we keep in our hearts,” I said. “that’s what makes you *you*.”

...

It is our stories of ourselves and of each other we keep in our hearts. That’s what makes us *us*.

Story for All Ages **The Broken Story Story** by Rev. Christina Leone-Tracy

This is a story about a person with a story.

A story about stories, if you will.

...

ROSE:

Once upon a time there was a person with a story.

This wasn’t any old “once upon a time story.” Not one you could find on a bookshelf or hear around the campfire. This was THEIR story, and no one else’s.

This story had been carefully crafted. It began before they were born, and this story told of their loves and fears, their dreams realized, and their dreams yet to come. This story was complete. It told their whole life, including those bits that still existed in their imagination. In fact, this story was so complete, and they were so happy with their story, that they carried it around to make sure it was safe. It was somewhat bulky and unwieldy, but they didn’t mind. It was their story.

MICHAEL: [begin this hymn . . . Come, Come, Whoever you are . . . \(instrumental\)](#)

RUTH:

The thing about this story was... it was very fragile, made up of many pieces, and held together by only their own imagination. They were worried it might break apart at any minute. And so they grew more and more protective of their story. They held it even closer. As they went about their life, they checked on the story to make sure they were following it correctly.

They avoided adventure and unknowns because, well, they might break their story.

ROSE:

And then one day, the inevitable happened. Without warning, their story broke. It was unforeseen, and they hadn't done anything wrong at all. But there it was, laying in a thousand shattered pieces on the ground, with the sunlight glinting off the bits of story they had so carefully protected for all those years.

They were heartbroken.

And since their story hadn't said to "put the pieces back together" they were at a loss... what now? They sat down next to the pile of pieces, and cried.

MICHAEL: wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving . . .

RUTH:

A while later... Maybe it was minutes, maybe it was hours...

A group of people came out of the nearby building and saw them sitting on the sidewalk, surrounded by a pile of broken pieces, clearly in need of help.

"What happened here?" a woman asked.

"My story. It's gone. I worked so hard to build it, to protect it, to keep it from harm, and now it's gone! GONE!" They wailed.

ROSE:

"Is this the story, here?" a man asked.

"Yes. Look at it! There's nothing left of it!"

"It looks like it's here... not gone," said a child. "We just have to put it back together."

"Put it back TOGETHER!? There's no way! You don't even know what it looked like! How will you put it back together if you don't even know me!"

The child was tenacious... "Don't worry. With all of us here to help, we'll put it back together in a way that you would never even expect. You never know, it might be more beautiful than before."

MICHAEL: ours is no caravan of despair. Come, yet again, come.

RUTH:

And so they swept up the pieces of this person's story, carefully, and went together into the building from which they had emerged. They poured them some hot coffee, and sang a song the person had never heard before... Something about coming, again and again, though you've broken your vows a thousand times... The song was soothing, and the coffee was warm. They began to feel hope again, that their story could be put back together.

ROSE:

And it took a long time... Maybe it was days, maybe it was years... But they got it all back together, and they added new parts and some old parts didn't fit anymore. But that was ok. The child had been right. It was more beautiful than before.

And this time, the story was held together not only by their imagination, but the imagination and support of an entire community. It wasn't nearly so fragile. And it even allowed for adventure.

HYMN 188 Come, Come, Whoever you are - (one time through instrumental)

HOMILY the Rev. Anne Bancroft

Years ago I went to an event at the Bedford UU Church that I thought was going to be about climate change. It was during the time when lots of local folks in and out of the church were very involved in resisting the construction of the Metering and Regulating Station across the street from the quarry in West Roxbury - what was then a project of Spectrum Energy that came to be owned by Enbridge. Marla Marcum was one of the speakers at the Bedford event. Some of you may remember her as a very active organizer. She is co-founder of the Climate Disobedience Center. In her bio it says she is "passionate about leadership development and building supportive, principled communities of resistance among unlikely allies." Marla offered any number of the weekly civil disobedience trainings that took place in our Parish Hall for about a year and a half, and was a familiar face at the weekly actions to interrupt construction, as well.

So I went to this evening event expecting, I guess, more information about civil disobedience, or about the climate justice movement in general. I wasn't entirely sure. What it actually became was an opportunity to learn about story-telling - more accurately about telling our own stories and how we come to know what is important to us by what we choose to tell, those pieces or ourselves held in our hearts that make us *us*. Marla challenged us to consider how we go about sharing who we are and then

gave us a lovely example of how she had made the decision to commit her life to climate justice over and above other choices that might have made her life story quite different.

When someone asks you about yourself, she asked, do you start at the very beginning? For example, with a question like, “How did you come to be so involved with climate change?” one could begin with . . . “Well, I was born in a small hospital in Downhome, Wherever - I was the third of five children and when I was three we moved to the city.” It could take quite some time to get to the part where climate change even entered the equation, depending on how old you are and how much happened before then!

Her point was that within each of us there are many, many stories. What and how we choose to share will either help us to know each other, or not.

Patty Digh, who wrote the piece I shared earlier about waking up with her daughter’s question about what makes us *us*, about what we hold in our hearts, suggests that “the shortest distance between two people is a story.” So if Marla’s right - and I believe she is - and we have many many stories within us that - shared - would connect us to each other, one question might be how we choose what of ourselves to offer?

That evening in Bedford, those many years back, Marla’s goal was to tell us about her work in climate justice. But she started with her grandmother. I am the granddaughter of this woman, she offered, who loved me for this, who shared with me that. And I am the daughter of this woman, who wanted for me this, and longed for that. From them I learned A, B, and C, and here is what I wanted . . . to help save the world. And here is how I am living my choices, and why. They are not my grandmother’s choices. They are not my mother’s. They are mine. They are making me who I am.

It will not surprise you to know that what she shared was the setting of priorities that informed her decision to follow a trajectory that was not the one assumed or imagined for her. And she could have simply said to us “I made this decision,” but by framing it within the context of her life and her ancestry and what they had wanted for her and what she chose, we came to know HER differently. It was not information. It was a story - it was HER story - at least one of them.

Years earlier, at a teacher training for Sunday School volunteers, the woman leading the morning told us a story about her watch. It was just a plain old Timex that she bought at a local drugstore. But as the layers of its life on her arm unfolded, it became a way of understanding the counter-cultural choices she had made to live simply, on a farm, raising her own food and children; to forego status and income on behalf of time and attention to the people and experiences in her life and her connection to the earth. We learned so much about her through a story about her watch- the one she looked at over and

over again every day; the one her son got for her when he returned the scarf he had seen her admiring when they went window-shopping together - the scarf he had scrimped and saved to afford but that she knew she would wear so much less often and so she shared with us the watch, that reminded her of her child. And we knew so much more about her - her life, her choices - than we would have with info about where she bought her Timex and how much it cost.

She challenged us to find something on ourselves that morning - a piece of clothing, or jewelry, a shoe - anything - and tell a story about ourselves through that one item. It was a great exercise - I encourage you to try it!

The writer and storyteller, Isak Dinesen, said "To be a person is to have a story to tell." And as storyteller, Lani Peterson reminds us, "we build them as we go along." Our challenge is to be sure we share them, to keep our hearts wide open - not to hold our stories so tightly in the effort to protect them - or our tender hearts - from the pain of their breaking (as if we could), or even from the discomfort of the truth being something other - more adventurous, more daring - than what we had imagined.

Our stories - all that is *us* - are for sharing. And for building new ones together each and every day. And - of course - for helping each other put them back together again when we need it.

Because they're not finished - not yet. Let them shine.

CLOSING HYMN 128 For All That Is Our Life

BENEDICTION 684 (Duke T. Gray)

The blessing of truth be upon us,
the power of love direct us and sustain us,
and may the peace of this community preserve our going out
and our coming in,
from this time forth, until we meet again.