

Our Storied Selves
presented by the Worship Committee on November 27, 2016
Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church

Tell Me

by Rick Kimball

Tell me a story, tell me a story, and then I'll go to bed.

You may know that 1950s song by Frankie Laine and Jimmie Boyd, vocalizing the bedtime struggles of father and son. *Tell me a story, and then I'll go to bed.* A silly little song at first hearing, but more substantial on the repeats, for it contains and conveys essential pieces of humankind's own epic tale.

Our ancients lived in a terrifying, inscrutable world they struggled to fathom. Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going? Why life? Why disease and death? Why hunger and horror? Questions that gave birth to religion with its stories of creation and meaning and gods and salvation, stories of comfort and understanding for the frightened people huddled round the fire in the cave. *Tell me a story of exploring and solving the mystery, and then I'll go to bed.*

Today's children have the same need in their exciting but puzzling world. *Tell me a story, then I'll go to bed.* We adults may slide between the sheets with novels and poems and stories in hand to read ourselves to sleep. But we don't really need the books or the Kindles or the recordings, for we know the stories, we are the stories, we can define and describe ourselves as x stories high, y stories wide, z stories deep. *Tell me a story – or maybe I'll tell the story, and then I'll go to bed.*

I crawl into bed at night under a blanket of comforting reassurance, a blanket woven of the countless stories that shape and make up the larger book of my life. Some are strictly true, some probably just plain wrong, the details lost in time. Others are embellished, or rewritten through the years and decades, often to add a bit more warmth and comfort.

I dreamily relive the story of the time as a teen I drove out in a car with a girl for the first time. In a light snowstorm, I turned by mistake onto a railroad track, and drove bump, bump, bump until the car stopped. I relive the story without a trace of the fear and embarrassment I must have felt at the time. Amused by the memory, I curl up, and sink into sleep. *Tell me a story of yet another stupidity I survived and then I'll go to bed*

Some blanket panels are complete fiction. Did I take my evening pill? Of course. I remember standing in front of the mirror, water glass in hand. A reassuring story, but something feels not right. I crawl out of bed for a look and find the pill sitting next to the sink.

Parts of the blanket are woven of seasonal yarn. I relive the story of Tirrell's and my first Thanksgiving together, when I was serving in the air force and stationed in Italy. We were cooking for some friends, roasting a turkey until our propane tank exhausted itself. We could not refill it before the Italians' daily siesta ended. The gas ran out, but the wine did not, and the story had a happy end.

Other pieces of the blanket are ticklish. I recall the story of the day I arrived at church to meet with Dale. He glanced down at my feet, then looked up in wonder. "Your shoes don't match," he said. Did I have a clever response? I wonder. My story doesn't tell me that, so I mull several witty possibilities, and give way slowly to the night. *Tell me a story that makes me laugh at myself and then I'll go to bed.*

There are holes in the blanket, for more stories of tomorrow, other stories I have yet to write, like the story of my life in America's new political era. That's a story that keeps me awake until I recall the story of my UU faith with its thousands and thousands of members and friends struggling through the muck against what seem great odds toward a just and peaceful future. *Tell me the UU story, then I'll go to bed.*

And some panels of the blanket are weighty, warming me with memories of the people I have lost, through illness, through time, and through death, and warning me of other lives that I have still to lose, including my own. What will that be like? How will my storied self conclude? Who can say? That's the neat thing about stories. We don't know how they end until they do.

Rolling over in bed to avoid the weight of a cat, I try to imagine the final written story of my life, my obituary, a story with a date still unknown. Who will write it? Maybe I will prepare the first draft. But somebody else will have to finish it, to add at least a concluding date while I lie dead in my final bed.

Sadly, I won't get to read it. Sadly because I like obituaries. They tell interesting stories. But wait – maybe my obit will be part of my new spirit life. Maybe my soul will read the Press Herald on line. The thought calms me. Soothing spiritual fuzzies settle in and let me fall asleep. *Tell me a story, and then I'll go to bed.*

Stories For Our Future

by Michael Crosby

As I grew up my parents read many stories to me and, as I got older, I read many myself. Some stories were short such as the *Winnie the Pooh Stories* and the *Just So Stories*. Others were long such as the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

Most of the stories that inform my life and my outlook on the world are short. There is an extremely short story that is attributed to Ernest Hemingway that hits me painfully close to home. It is a six word story that can leave me in tears. For sale. Baby's shoes. Never worn.

The stories that most affect my outlook on the world are the stories of far sighted people who could plan for the far distant future. This sort of planning and this sort of story is particularly critical these days for as Edward O. Wilson writes "...our future is in our hands. Those hands, however, are tied tightly to our short-range thinking and planning. Added to that, our thinking and planning is based only on economic gain, territorial acquisition and selfishness."

Of all the UU Principals, the seventh requires the most long-range planning. It is the principle that calls us to affirm and promote "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." Western societies are not very good at planning for sustainability but some societies are much more attuned to the world. The Iroquois confederacy also has a 7th principle: The "7th generation" principle taught by the Iroquois says that in every decision, be it personal, governmental or corporate, we must consider how it will affect our descendants seven generations into the future.

One of my favorite stories comes from England. While English society is not particularly noted for far sighted planning, this story concerns is a superb example of the sort of foresight that we need.

New College, Oxford. Founded in 1379, New College, is one of the oldest Oxford colleges. It has, like other colleges, a great dining hall with huge oak beams across the top, as large as two feet square, and forty-five feet long each. A century ago, some busy entomologist went up into the roof of the dining hall with a penknife and poked at the beams and found that they were full of beetles. This was reported to the College Council, which met the news with some dismay, beams this large were now very hard, if not impossible to come by.

"Where would they get beams of that caliber?" they worried. One of the Junior Fellows suggested that there might be some worthy oaks on the College lands. These colleges are endowed with pieces of land scattered across the country which are run by a college Forester. They called in the College Forester and asked him if there were any oaks for possible use.

He pulled his hat off and said, "Well sirs, we *were* wonderin' when you'd be asking'." He told them that when the College was founded, a grove of oaks had been planted to replace the beams in the dining hall when they became beetly, because oak beams always become beetly in the end. This plan had been passed down from one Forester to the next for over five hundred years saying "You don't cut those oaks. They're for the College Hall."

Shouldn't we try to run our lives, our society, like this, considering our grandchildren to the seventh generation, leaving them a world that they can live in too?

The Stranger and the Tribe

by John Howard

The Stranger and the Tribe. That sounds like the title of a story, doesn't it? Or maybe a fable. I wonder how it turns out. But actually the title describes, for me, the tension between the

personal and the collective in stories. On one hand, we live in a culture that puts great value on individualism. On the other hand, we are social animals and need to belong. The course Rev. Myke is leading – Spiritual Journey into Earth Community – introduced us to the South African word “Ubuntu” which translates as “born to belonging”. This idea suggests that from the very start we are connected to others and that our individualism emerges out of first being in relationship. If this is so, though, why are so many of us haunted by the feeling of being strangers, outsiders?

This feeling is much more common than you might expect. During a break in the last class I was telling someone half-jokingly that I felt that I carried a stamp of strangeness, and immediately two other people turned to us and said they felt the same way. It surprised me. As a person who is gay and interested in spirituality, that seemed a good reason for me to feel like a stranger. I have a collection of books on Gay Christians. One is titled Our Tribe and another Embracing the Exile, which sort of says it all. But clearly, many people feel ill-fitted to the story told by the dominant culture. We feel somehow excluded and seek a new community of our own making.

I’m convinced there are places where the communal culture is deeply rooted, life affirming, healthy and capable of nurturing individuals with both a strong sense of self and a wealth of shared values and history. In those cultures, there is a give and take between collective and individual, and the community story grows organically with each new generation. Tragically, these are exactly the cultures most at risk in the current juggernaut of corporate greed and empire building. In America today we are taught to fear outsiders, if we even see them at all. I am coming to some conclusions about the part our national history of exploitation plays in this fear, but that is a dark thing to explore on a Sunday morning. No matter where it comes from or for what purpose, this fear must stop. We need to heal.

Our church mission is a challenge to keep the circle of belonging open until it ultimately includes everyone. This is not an easy mission to adopt, though it may sound lovely spoken on Sunday. I have to honestly acknowledge my own xenophobia and racism, and engage actively in stepping outside my comfort zone. I need strength to compassionately witness heartbreak and brokenness. I need to practice listening to stories that don’t always match my experiences. There are new truths in unfamiliar garb waiting to enhance and widen the story.

One insight can help, and that is the awareness that my personal history has both shadow and light, but that all of it must be owned and integrated if I am to understand the part I am playing in Life. I may never know the influence I have had on other lives by seemingly chance encounters, or appreciate the way encounters with others have enhanced and shaped my story. So the story of humanity, with its beautiful dreams and terrible nightmares has brought us exactly to where we are today. Everything we need is available to move us forward successfully and with honor. Every one of us is important and needed in getting us into the next century safely. Let love and wisdom be our guide.

Choosing Your Own Adventure

by Erica L. Bartlett

Growing up, I read a lot of choose your own adventure books, the ones where you decide what the characters will do next and then flip to the appropriate page. This means the book contains multiple possibilities, based on each combination of decisions. I always enjoyed them, but it wasn't until much later that I realized I could also choose my own story in life.

I don't just mean adventures, although I do have fun planning those, like trips to New Zealand and the Galapagos and recently Iceland. I can also choose how to approach life, if I want to make decisions out of fear or hope, be guided by ghosts from the past or the possibilities of the future. And here, too, I've found that I can take inspiration from stories, especially fantasy tales.

One example of this is when my mom died. I knew life would never be the same, but I didn't know how to move forward. Then I found inspiration from Schmendrik the magician in the book *The Last Unicorn*.

When they parted, the unicorn wondered what the magician would do with his life, what kind of magic he would practice, and he told her, "Oh, it will be the kind magic, undoubtedly, because you would like it more. I do not think I will ever see you again, but I will try to do what would please you if you knew." (p. 207)

It helped me make the deliberate choice to try to live in a way that would make my mom proud, even though she would never see it, and I've never regretted it.

Now, since the election, I have felt like I'm at a similar crossroads, where everything has changed, and I don't know quite what to do next. It's made me think a lot about *Star Wars* and one of Yoda's famous quotes: "Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering."

The path to hatred is all too easy to take, but if we're angry or afraid, it's not the only option. We always have a choice. Do I want to huddle in with my fear and anger, let them fester, thinking that if I just stay quiet, the worst will pass me by? Not really. Instead, when I get angry, I prefer to choose action, decide to make a stand, use my voice and do what I can to bring about positive change, even if it means greater risk to myself.

It can be scary, but it helps to remember that making choices based on courage, inclusiveness, and kindness can ripple out in ways I wouldn't expect. For instance, after my mom's death, I never thought that I would someday write about my self-imposed quest to lose weight so I could scatter some of her ashes from the top of Mt. Katahdin. Nor did I ever dream that sharing the story with others might, in turn, help them make their own choices, achieve their own goals. Looking back, it seems there is a kind of magic in that as well, in the interconnectedness of our smaller stories forming a larger whole.

This also reminds me of how, in *The Lord of the Rings*, Sam used stories to inspire Frodo when he was struggling during their quest to bring the one ring to Mount Doom: "It's like in the great stories, Mr. Frodo. The ones that really mattered. Full of darkness and danger they were. And sometimes you didn't want to know the end... because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad had happened? But in the end, it's only a passing thing... this shadow. Even darkness must pass."

That's what I focus on now when the hard times come my way – making choices based on hope instead of fear, and thinking about how those decisions will play out in my life and those of others. And in doing so, I have faith that I will choose a story for my life that both my mom and I would be proud of.

The Bearers of Light

by Molly Brewer

Once upon a time, there was a girl who loved stories. She devoured myths, folktales, ghost stories, fairy tales, novels and films alike. Sometimes even many different variations on the same tale. From these stories, she built her world: each was a new bloom in her garden, a pane of glass in her windows. The light by which she viewed all things--a light that emanated from within--was her own biography, and her own history. As she grew older, her world expanded with each new story she took into herself. Each time she learned something new about herself, the light grew brighter. She came to learn that every person, each community, each country, creates its own world in much the same way: from the stories it lives.

Not all these worlds look the same, she learned. Not everyone, nor every nation, knows itself well enough to gleam with light.

We are at a crisis moment in our country now. For too long, we have remained complacent within our story. And this shows no sign of stopping, at least not from institutional power. America, as we're still being reminded by the outgoing Presidential administration, is the greatest country on earth. If we apply some effort as individuals, we may learn about the horrors that lie in our shadowy past: the demons of genocide, slavery, and oppression. By contrast, the story we learn in school when we're very young has its fangs removed, its rough edges sanded down, but still, it is a creature of shadow.

Rev. Serene Jones writes, "we have a 'theological' national story we tell about our country. It begins with the Constitution and typically describes the constant progress that good people have made since the start. It's a relentlessly positive story. From a spiritual perspective, the problem is that this story has not incorporated a serious account of our wrongs." Coming to terms with the sins that stain our national conscience, she argues, is cathartic; in nearly every religious tradition on earth, there exist narratives of sin, redemption and forgiveness. Instead of fabricating a story of relentless growth and progress, how much more powerful would our

national story be, if instead of feeding the shadows of denial, we lit a beacon of acceptance, love, and grace, kindled by our own self-knowledge?

The gift of story is a talisman. As Frodo the hobbit was given the light of the star Elendil; as Obi-Wan Kenobi passed the gift of a lightsaber to Luke Skywalker; as Prometheus brought the gift of fire to humanity, we are now being gifted the chance to find the light of the story within. A story is a weapon; a tool; a salvation.

When the darkness closes around us, when it feels like the triumph of evil is imminent, hold up your own story of yourself and your nation, for we will need thousands. All around each of those will be the light of thousands of others. And with these thousand thousand flames of truth, each one borne by a loving soul, we will light up the world, and banish the darkness.