

“Forging a Path of Meaning: How Story Impacts Our Life”



Sermon by Rev. Rebecca Bryan

August 28, 2022

Tell me a story about when I was born, or when you and mom met for the first time, or how you became a doctor. Children love to hear stories, and they are not the only ones. We all love stories. Storytelling is an ancient art that has helped humans find meaning for thousands of years. Whether told in drawings on a cave wall, around a campfire, or at a child's bedside before sleep, stories make us believe. Stories help us understand and make meaning in life.

We all hold stories: told and untold, remembered and forgotten, treasured and hidden. We have stories in our minds. We have stories in our bodies. Many believe we have stories in our souls.

“Story is the biology of human interaction,” writes Adrea Peters.¹ And from Margaret Atwood, “You’re never going to kill storytelling, because it’s built in the human plan. We come with it.”

A study done at Stanford Graduate School of Business found that we remember information shared in stories twenty-two times more than information we learn in other ways.² Neuroscience shows that neural activity increases fivefold when we hear a story, as opposed to hearing facts or information.³ As well, the act of hearing, reading, or watching a story makes us more empathetic by releasing oxytocin into our bodies. A 2011 research study conducted in New Zealand showed that storytelling “fostered empathy, compassion, tolerance and respect for difference,” even when a

1 Adrea L. Peters, *The Science of Story* (Waikiki, WA: MMH Press, 2022), 3.

2 <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/11/the-psychological-comforts-of-storytelling/381964/> (<https://leanin.org/education/harnessing-the-power-of-stories>)

3 <https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/the-strange-thing-that-happens-in-you-brain-when-you-hear-a-good-story-and-how-to-use-it-to-your-advantage>

all data taken from: Joe Lazauskas and Shane Snow, *The Storytelling Edge: How to Transform Your Business, Stop Screaming into the Void, and Make People Love You* (Wiley, 1st edition, January 15, 2018).

person is telling someone else's story.⁴

It seems President John F. Kennedy was on to something when he wrote and published *Profiles in Courage* in 1956 while on a leave of absence from the Senate for back surgery.⁵ The book honors eight U.S. Congressmen who he believed demonstrated outstanding courage in the face of extreme political pressure. What better way to contend with personal hardship? I imagine it helped him to recover even as it inspires so many people to this day. We know that writing has medicinal qualities, supporting people in overcoming adversity and healing from trauma.

Stories have their downside, however. Their power is not diminished when used for harm. Stories perpetuate misunderstanding, cover oppression, and whitewash history. John F. Kennedy said in his 1961 commencement address to Yale University graduates: “The great enemy of truth is very often not the lie--deliberate, contrived and dishonest--but the myth--persistent, persuasive and unrealistic. Too often we hold fast to the cliches of our forebears. We subject all facts to a prefabricated set of interpretations.”

Thankfully there is a growing commitment in our country to know the truth of our nation's history. We look to Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*, David Silverman's *This Land is Their Land*, and Elizabeth Wilkerson's *Caste*, to highlight just a few. I encourage all of us to ensure that we are believing the actual story of history, be it in our country, our churches, or our families.

Sharing stories was one of the most powerful experiences my congregation and I shared when I started as their minister five years ago. “Story”

4 <https://blog.hubspot.com/marketing/the-strange-thing-that-happens-in-you-brain-when-you-hear-a-good-story-and-how-to-use-it-to-your-advantage>

5 <https://www.jfklibrary.org/events-and-awards/profile-in-courage-award/about-the-book#:~:text=%E2%80%9CWithout%20belittling%20the%20courage%20with,with%20which%20men%20have%20lived.%E2%80%9D>

“Forging a Path of Meaning: How Story Impacts Our Life”

August 28, 2022 page 2

was our very first monthly ministry theme. It made sense. I wanted to hear their stories, and the stories of the congregation. As it turned out, they wanted to hear mine as well. The mere act of highlighting that desire, and then hearing one another's stories, began to establish trust between us. I invited people to share their stories with me in writing and in person. I still have those stories and reread them to remember what they taught me.

My congregation also has a tradition of having people share their Journeys of Faith. One member stands in front of the congregation and tells their story – of growing up, how they came to our church, and what the church means to them. Woven into their stories is their journey of faith. We hear what they were raised to believe, what questions they had, what experiences they lived through, and where they are today. These stories are treasures.

I know that stories will be a critical part of how we celebrate our 300th anniversary in 2025, and we have already committed to those stories being extensions of reparations as well as celebrations of our achievements. “We are a people who see a future that is embracing of the past and who are open to the new,” I said to my congregation in September 2018. “We use and create patterns as a way to navigate life,” writes Judy Wilkins-Smith.⁶

It's important at this point that we take time to understand story from a structural perspective. Until a few years ago, I didn't realize that the structure of story is universal. You will hear it called the Hero or Heroine's Journey. Coming to understand this structure has made significant shifts in my approach to life as well as to my writing.

Many people write about this. For today, I'm going to use the language of Christopher Vogler in *The Writer's Journey*.⁷ There is always a starting point in a story. Vogler calls this *Ordinary Reality*. Ordinary reality is what life is like just before the story begins. If you imagine your entire life, this

6 Judy Wilkins-Smith, *Decoding Your Emotional Blueprint* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2022), 67.

7 Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey* (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007).

is where you cut in on a specific time period or aspect of your life.

Next, there is always some call to adventure. This might be an idea or inspiration we have, someone inviting us to something, or a response we have to something happening around us.

Inevitably we refuse or resist the call. Common signs of resistance include *I couldn't possibly. That's ridiculous. Who, me?* Does this sound familiar yet? Think of Moses in the Hebrew Bible or think of yourself and a current internal battle you are experiencing.

After some period of resistance, help arrives. Vogler calls this “meeting with the mentor.” Something happens that moves us out of resistance and into action.

We make the decision, tell others about it, quit the job, sign up for the course. We hope, of course, that is the end of the story, but it never is! It wouldn't be story if it were that easy.

After we make our decision and begin moving forward, there are inevitably tests, allies, and enemies – again to use Vogler's terms. We take two steps forward and one step backward. We advance and then get sidetracked or pushed back. It is the walking of the labyrinth as we progress. Each time we get up again we are certain that is the final time. We will not fall, lose our resolve, or become despondent.

Both phases, resisting the call and experiencing the trials and tribulations, can go on for a very long time. Sometimes they don't. Sometimes we decide and move to completion very quickly. Those are generally not the stories we remember or tell, however. They are also not the stories that other people need to hear. Who among us needs to hear how easy something was for someone? We might even call that person a braggart.

At some point, things do turn the corner, and the challenge is over. We graduate, achieve the goal, or integrate the change in our lives. This is often considered the climax; there is often a ritual that accompanies it, though not always. And then, with diploma or recovery chip or new job in hand, there is a period of assimilation or denouement. Even when we can't imagine that the achievement will ever become the new normal, it will, and does, become our ordinary reality. And

“Forging a Path of Meaning: How Story Impacts Our Life”

August 28, 2022 page 3

then, the story starts over again.

Always a dream, Always rejection of it, Always help arrives, Always triumph, Always transition, Always a new dream begins, That. Is. Story. Every. Single. Time.

-Adrea Peters

Okay, you may be thinking, this is interesting, and what's the point?

The point is that no one ever told me this! I was under the impression that the goal in life is to achieve that one thing or get through that one time in our life and then things would be over. We will have arrived. I never knew that the story cycle will always start again, as long as we complete the cycle and don't become stuck in the resistance or trials and tribulations phase.

The most surprising experience for me was when I became a minister. I had resisted that call for seventeen years, and then spent eight years in formation. In other words, I spent twenty-five years completing this story.

Imagine my surprise when after “arriving” another story began. A new calling emerged that expands my ministry and illumines more of my true self. I began to write, which was a calling I had experienced since third grade.

I'm wiser this time though. I know the journey of my life doesn't end with completing the book or publication. There will be a new story or a continuation of my life story after that, even though I cannot know what that will be until I've completed this journey.

We all have many stories happening simultaneously, each at a different point in its process. It helps when we realize this and take the initiative to reflect on whether we like where we are in any particular story, or if perhaps we are living out an ancestral story or repeating a familial pattern that we would rather change.

If you do research into the family patterns, you may be amazed to see how many of your stories are not yours alone. They didn't begin with you. They may have begun with a parent, grandparents, or much further back in your history.

In the Hindu tradition our struggles may be understood as parabdha karma. This shows up

as experiences or patterns in our life that are the result of previous lives and that we cannot avoid. The only way to resolve parabdha karma is to go through it. The Nada Bindu Upanishad verse 21 reads “O intelligent man, spend your life always in the knowing of the supreme bliss, enjoying the whole of your Prarabdha (that portion of past Karma now being enjoyed) without making any complaint (of it).”⁸

As I said at the start of this sermon, we hold the stories of our lives and of our ancestors' lives in our minds, our bodies, and many believe, in our souls. We are interconnected with the stories of our country, difficult and victorious. We are connected and part of the stories of our families, our churches, and our communities.

We are not, however, victims to these stories. We can choose how we are in relationship with them and discern our steps along the journey. We cannot become who we are meant to be without first understanding who we've been and who we are today. This is true for groups as well as individuals. We can use our stories as teachers.

As Unitarian Universalists with a religious tradition founded on covenant, we need to learn the spiritual practice of storytelling – telling and listening to each other's stories until they do not need to be told anymore. As we listen and tell, keep in our hearts the words of Rev. Dr. Jaqui Lewis who tells us, “Keep your eyes on all that's good and beautiful and possible in the world because the stories we tell create the people we become.”⁹

Amen and blessed be.

8 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prarabdha_karma

9 Jacqueline Lewis, *Life Begins at the End of Your Comfort Zone: A Journal to Reignite, Renew, and Refuel Your Life* (Rock Point; Jou edition, 2016).