

What's Your Story?

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delivered November 6, 2016 at

The Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley

Everyone has a story. Stories are necessary because stories are what give human lives meaning, and people need to have meaning in their lives. Meaning implies purpose and purpose helps us decide what is important and what is not.

We can't escape our need for stories, because we need to have meaning in our lives. I don't believe it's possible to live without meaning; meaning tells us why we get up in the morning. You'd think that a life without a story would be a life of loneliness, alienation and despair – but a life of loneliness, alienation and despair is even a story itself, if only a sad one.

Two weeks ago I spoke of my difficulty finding a way forward after suffering supposedly terminal cancer as a young adult. Beforehand, I had been living a rather conventional story of enthusiasm and hope, looking forward to a life of creativity and adventure. But when the terminal diagnosis shattered that vision, I found myself living without a real story to hold my life together. I did things, sure, but without any expectation that they would lead anywhere – the end of the story had already been written: I would die tragically young and unfulfilled. As the years unfolded, I lived bits and pieces of stories. I tried to create a family, build a business, but everything lacked an overarching theme. It all kind of boiled down to working hard and playing hard.

It wasn't until – two decades later – I encapsulated my cancer experience many years later by writing it down as a story that I was able to put it behind me and move forward, freed from the chaos of a narrative without hope, able to reframe my life through a story built around a life of creativity and service, enabling me to eventually become a Unitarian Universalist minister.

I've found that the Unitarian Universalist predilection for reason and fact can actually insulate us from experiencing the real power of story. As David Zahl wrote, "Research consistently shows that stories mold us. The more deeply we are cast under a story's spell, the more potent its influence. In fact, fiction seems to be more effective at changing beliefs than nonfiction, which is designed to persuade through

argument and evidence. Studies have shown that when we read nonfiction, we read with our shields up. But when we are absorbed in a story, we drop our intellectual guard. We are moved emotionally, and this seems to make us open to seeing each other and life anew.”

Stories shape individual lives, and they shape the lives of communities as well, as people live together in shared stories about the meaning of life. There’s an old Hopi proverb that says, “Those who tell the stories, rule the world.” Well, in our culture, currently there are competing stories about what will rule the world. Some years ago, the cognitive linguist, George Lakoff, spoke in several forums at our General Assembly in Fort Worth. He explained that the different worldviews of the progressive left and conservative right were based on radically different stories – different assumptions about human nature and the meaning of community.

He suggested that the difference between the worldviews of left and the right might best be described as the contrast between two very different stories about what constitutes a good family.

Lakoff pointed out that the conservative right sees the world as a dangerous place, and it always will be dangerous, because there is evil out there in the world. The world is also difficult because it is competitive. There will always be winners and losers. There is an absolute right and an absolute wrong. Children are born bad, in the sense that they just want to do what feels good, not what is right. Therefore, they have to be made good.

From this perspective, what is needed in this kind of a world is a strong, strict father who can:

- Protect the family in the dangerous world,
- Support the family in the difficult world, and
- Teach his children right from wrong.

What is required of the child is obedience, because the strict father is a moral authority who knows right from wrong. It is further assumed that the only way to teach kids obedience – that is, right from wrong – is through punishment – painful punishment, when they do wrong.

The rationale behind physical punishment is this: If children are physically disciplined when they do something wrong, they learn not to do it again. That

means that they will develop the internal discipline to keep themselves from doing wrong, so that in the future they will be obedient and act morally. Without such punishment, the world will go to hell. There will be no morality.

This internalized discipline is believed to have a secondary effect as well. It gives people what they need for success in the difficult, competitive world. That is, if people are self-disciplined and pursue their self-interest in this land of opportunity, they will become prosperous and self-reliant. Thus, the strict father model links morality with prosperity. The same discipline you need to be moral is what allows you to prosper. The link is the pursuit of self-interest. Given opportunity and discipline, pursuing your self-interest should enable you to prosper.

This story is very clear about the connection between the strict father model and free market capitalism. The link is the morality of self-interest, which is derived from Adam Smith's view of capitalism. In 1776, Adam Smith published a book entitled, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* – usually called, simply, *The Wealth of Nations* – which established the theoretical basis for free market capitalism. One of its basic themes is that if everyone pursues their own profit, then the profit of all would be maximized by the invisible hand – that is, by nature – just naturally. Go about pursuing your own profit, and you are helping everyone.

In this story, if everyone pursues her or his own self-interest, then the invisible hand will increase the welfare of all. That is, it is moral to pursue your self-interest, and there is a name for those people who do not do that. They are called do-gooders. A do-gooder is someone who is trying to help someone else rather than him- or herself and is getting in the way of those who are pursuing their self-interest. Do-gooders mess up the system.

In this story there is also a definition of what it means to become a good person. A good person – a moral person – is someone who is disciplined enough to be obedient, to learn what is right, do what is right and not do what is wrong, and to pursue one's self-interest in order to become self-reliant and prosperous. A good child grows up to be like that. A bad child is one who does not learn discipline, does not function morally, does not do what is right, and therefore is not disciplined enough to become prosperous. This child cannot take care of him- or herself and thus becomes dependent.

When children grow up, they either have learned discipline and can prosper, or have failed to learn it. From this point on the strict father is not to meddle in their lives. This translates politically into no government meddling. This story says that social programs are immoral because they make people dependent. Promoting social programs is immoral.

You're waiting for me to change, aren't you?

The progressive left is working from a different kind of family story, one that Lakoff calls the nurturant parent model. Unlike the strict father model, this one is gender neutral.

In this story, both parents are equally responsible for raising the children. The assumption is that children are born good and can be made better. The parents' job is to nurture their children and to raise their children to be nurturers of others.

And what does nurturance mean? It means two things: empathy and responsibility. If you have a child, you have to know what every cry means. You have to know when the child is hungry, when she needs a diaper change, when he is having nightmares. And you have a responsibility – you have to take care of this child. Since you cannot take care of someone else if you are not taking care of yourself, you have to take care of yourself, too.

All this is not easy. Anyone who has ever raised a child knows that this is hard. You have to be strong. You have to work hard at it. You have to be very competent. You have to know a lot.

In addition, all sorts of other values immediately follow from empathy and responsibility. Think about it.

First, if you empathize with your child, you will provide protection. This comes into politics in many ways. What do you protect your child from? Crime and abuse, certainly. You also protect your child from cars without seat belts, from smoking, from poisonous additives in food. So progressive politics focuses on environmental protection, worker protection, consumer protection, and protection from disease. These are the things that progressives want the government to protect their citizens from. Protection is important. It is part of their moral system.

Secondly, if you empathize with your child, you want your child to be fulfilled in life, to be a happy person. And if you are an unhappy, unfulfilled person yourself, you are not going to want other people to be happier than you are. Therefore it is your moral responsibility to be a happy, fulfilled person. Your moral responsibility is to be happy. Further, it is your responsibility to teach your child to be a happy, fulfilled person who wants others to be happy and fulfilled. This is part of what a nurturing family life is about. It is a common precondition for caring about others.

There are some other nurturant values.

- If you want your child to be fulfilled in life, the child has to be free enough to do that. Therefore freedom is a value.
- You do not have very much freedom if there is no opportunity or prosperity. Therefore opportunity and prosperity are progressive values.
- If you really care about your child, you want your child to be treated fairly by you and by others. Therefore fairness is a value.
- If you are connecting with your child and you empathize with that child, you have to have open, two-way communication. Honest communication. That becomes a value.
- You live in a community, and that community will affect how your child grows up. Therefore, community-building, service to community, and cooperation in a community become values.
- To have cooperation, you must have trust, and to have trust you must have honesty and open two-way communication. Trust, honesty, and open communication are fundamental progressive values – in a community as well as in a family.

So, what's your story? Actually, we all have both of them. They're inherent parts of our culture. But about a third of Americans live from the strict father story almost all the time, and another third follow the nurturing parent story. The rest of us take a little from one or the other, as the situation seems to call for. When you choose your story, I want you all to remember that the strict father story is rooted in Calvinist assumptions about a strict and punishing God which Unitarians and Universalists have repudiated and rejected for centuries. We

affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. This is rooted in the belief that, although people may do bad things, they are, by and large, good. People are worth loving.

Our Unitarian Universalist religious tradition promotes empathy, responsibility, freedom, fairness, trust, honesty and open communication. But these are countercultural values in a society where the strict father story may in the ascendancy. Which story do you choose?

Our choice matters because the story we choose is what gives us the lives we live. A good story can give us a life of usefulness and connection. A bad story can give us a life of pain and empty of hope. In my story, hope is essential. It is what makes it possible to believe that our actions, our lives can make a difference.

A great story can help us live lives of love, compassion, and service. Many if not most Unitarian Universalists have rejected the stories of Christianity, either on the grounds of historical inaccuracy or their having been used as justification for oppression, abuse, intolerance and war. But we may be missing one of the greatest, most powerful stories of all.

Last week I did a memorial service for a woman I had never met. I learned about her from her siblings, children, grandchildren, and many others who knew her well. To a person, they described her as the kindest, gentlest, most compassionate person they ever knew. They said that, in her 96 years of life, they'd never seen her get angry even once; that she was always ready to lend a kind word or a helping hand. And what made her so good? She would tell you. She lived fully in the Christian story of the love of Jesus. She would explain, simply, that she knew that Jesus loved her, and that it was her responsibility to share that love with everyone she met, with absolutely no exceptions. And that it was absolutely important to live in the present moment, because that was the only place that love could be found and shared.

I hope we all can find our way to live in a story as beautiful as that.

May it be so.