

Mining Stories and the Meaning of Life

Guest sermon November 12, 2006

First Church in Belmont (MA) Unitarian Universalist

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SUMMARY

When we talk to each other about our lives—what moves us—we tell stories. Newspapers, television, literature, culture, and the Bible bathe us in stories. Stories tell us what it means to be an American, a religious person, a Unitarian Universalist, a human being. But every story necessarily shows only a piece of life, and every story teller has a conscious or unconscious motive for creating a particular story. So although stories are inevitable in our lives, a story can mislead us. The freedom and community of our Unitarian Universalist church provides a unique setting to which we can bring stories that move us, listen to each other's stories, and deepen our understanding of the human condition. What would our church program look like if we took seriously the centrality of stories in our lives?

READING from the book *Creationists* by E. L. Doctorow [edited]:¹

Stories connect the visible with the invisible, the present with the past. They propose life as something of moral consequence. They distribute the suffering so that it can be borne. There was a time when there was nothing but stories and no sharper distinction between what was fact and what was invented. Religion, science, simple urgent communication and poetry were fused together. Stories were the first repositories of human knowledge. They were as important to survival as a spear or a hoe. The modern storyteller practices the ancient way of knowing, the total discourse that came before all the special vocabularies of modern intelligence.

SERMON

Mining Stories and the Meaning of Life. This sermon is about the special relation between stories and our Unitarian-Universalist (UU) community. We search for meaning through sharing stories. Our UU church provides a uniquely free community in which we can examine the full range of stories in which our lives are immersed, a process I will call "mining stories." We *dig up* stories; we *dig into* stories; we *unearth* stories from all over the wide world.

We swim in a sea of stories: a joke is a little story; most newspaper and magazine articles tell stories; TV news and sitcoms are stories; movies, plays, novels, histories, biographies are stories. In our everyday conversations we tell each other stories. Our Bible brims over with stories about God and humanity, about action and responsibility and sacrifice. Stories! I am advising Joy Hakim, the author of junior high school science textbooks that teach science by telling stories.² I did not think it possible, but Joy does it—even relativity and quantum physics. Joy Hakim calls her three-volume series *The Story of Science*.

I am a scientist, so you probably expect me to limit our attention to stories that can be called true. Far from it! Our lives are bathed in imagination and fantasy—and should be. Einstein attributed his scientific creativity to fantasy. He said, *When I examine myself and my methods of thought, I come to the conclusion that the gift of fantasy has meant more to me than my talent for abstract thought.* Harry Potter does no harm to children, enriches their fantasy lives (probably making them better scientists!), and motivates them to read 800-page books.

When my sister Ruth was young, she said to our mother, "Now, when Santa Claus comes . . ." Mother, who was a literalist, interrupted her: "You know, Ruth, Santa Claus is just a story; he represents our family and friends who love us." Ruth replied, "Yes, I know, I know. Now, when

Santa Claus comes . . ." A wise child, a wise child! There is no limit to the kinds of stories we can and should examine.

In our church service Edmund Robinson's sermons contain stories; Dan Glenn has just told us what he calls a Story for All Ages (the elephant and the three blind men); candles of concern bring us touching personal stories; the scripture or other reading is often a story. Music embodies stories and adds a deep emotional resonance in its universal language. Alfa Radford's musicals are definitely stories. Folk songs in the Second Friday Coffee House are stories. In small group ministries people share their life stories as they reflect on their faith. In my church men's group we bring each other up to date weekly, installments on seven ongoing life stories.

Now we are ready for my first thesis:

FIRST: Inevitably we grapple with life's meanings through stories.

My second thesis is a little more complicated:

SECOND: Every story is necessarily partial and incomplete, therefore in danger of misleading us.

Our minister Edmund Robinson says it clearly: *In order to tell a story, the teller has to select a beginning and an end in the swirl of events, and has to concentrate on one or a few characters and events to the exclusion of every other person and event in the real world and all the worlds one can imagine. This selection is done to make the story coherent and intelligible, but by selecting, the author biases the story and diminishes its ability to represent all that is.*

Edmund is onto something: Every story *necessarily* excerpts, manipulates, and rearranges the stuff of actual or possible experience. Therefore every story is *inescapably* incomplete, inexact, partial. Worse than that, the story teller may be lying or giving us political spin. Even an honest story teller has a motive for composing the story, an intended audience, and some goal in mind such as informing or convincing or inspiring that audience. For all these reasons every story is in danger of misleading us.

My son Andrew recommends multiple points of view: *The exceptional individuals I know are able to tell multiple stories about the same thing—all of them true, each one of them unique. It's this ability to shift between honest perspectives of the world that strikes me as the ultimate gift—and in fact the gift of the artist. True, but even multiple stories cannot give a complete picture, as the story of the elephant and the three blind men reminds us.*

Do our first two theses contradict each other?

FIRST: Inevitably we grapple with life's meanings through stories.

BUT

SECOND: Every story is necessarily partial and incomplete, therefore in danger of misleading us.

We need to go further. Here is my third and final thesis:

THIRD: The combination of freedom and community in our UU church provides a unique setting in which we can share stories and integrate the resulting meaning in our lives. I call this process "mining stories".

What does it mean to *mine stories*? There is no better example of mining stories than the Jesus Seminar that our minister Edmund Robinson ran last spring. Stories about Jesus appear in Matthew, Mark, Luke, John; in the reconstructed source called Q; in the Gospels according to Judas and Thomas. During the Jesus Seminar we dug into all these stories, unearthed their historical settings, and guessed the motivations of those telling the stories. Some of us wanted to reach back through the stories to find the real Jesus and to discover his original message. Others were not so interested in the historical Jesus but were fascinated by the story-mining process itself.

The Jesus Seminar does more than illustrate the process of mining stories. It is also an example of our wonderful UU freedom to examine and analyze every kind of story. I expect that some members of orthodox, evangelical, or fundamentalist churches would object to the ways we mined stories in our Jesus Seminar, because we did not assign to any one story the authority of God.

Willa Cather writes, *There are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before, like the larks in this country that have been singing the same five notes over for thousands of years.*³ I would say there are more than Cather's two or three human stories but not more than a dozen or so primary ones: the hero whether virtuous or flawed, the coming-of-age story, star-crossed lovers, the inspirational story of struggling up from poverty, and a few others. The lives around us play out endless variations of stories in each category.

Classifying stories sounds like a literature class, doesn't it? That's what I used to think. My first teaching job was at Wesleyan University in Connecticut. At that time I was a serious, pompous religious stick-in-the-mud. At a Wesleyan party I proposed to a literature professor that the reason for studying literature is to discover the meaning of life. He exclaimed, *Oh GOD! I hope not!* He was right, of course; it is a perversion of literature to force it into the service of any one goal, even finding life's meaning. Moreover, literature is not primarily in the "meaning" business. Listen to Harold Bloom describing the Western Canon, his choice of what is great in the literature of the west [edited]: *The silliest way to defend the Western Canon is to insist that it incarnates moral virtues. This is palpably untrue. The Iliad teaches the surpassing glory of armed victory, while Dante rejoices in the eternal torments he visits upon his very personal enemies. Shakespeare's politics, insofar as we can pin them down, do not appear to be very different from those of his Roman general Coriolanus. The West's greatest writers are subversive of all values, both ours and their own.*⁴

So my Wesleyan colleague was right: literature does not tell us what is virtuous; therefore it cannot reveal the meaning of life. But he was also wrong. Harold Bloom entitles one of his books *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*. For Bloom, Shakespeare's writings were important in creating our present sense of humanity. In my view, literature (and drama and art, even music) at their best examine and illuminate the *human condition*.

So I have given up trying to find *the* meaning of life, not because life has no meaning but because every life, and every stage in each life, can seize multiple meanings. To me culture and religion as a whole, and stories in particular, represent and illuminate the infinite facets of the human condition. I feel that studying the human condition ever more deeply should be our underlying goal, the pedal tone under our efforts to mine stories in this church.

Many literature teachers think that knowledge of the Bible is important background to understanding western literature. I would claim more, that it is important background to understanding western civilization itself, including local Boston history. Suppose we take these

convictions seriously and set as one goal of our religious education program that our children have a wide, general, critical knowledge of Bible stories and their relation to stories of other great traditions.

Beyond Bible stories, how do we choose which stories to share in this church?

Simple: Each one of us brings *any* kind of story that *moves* us.

My wife Carla and I take advantage of retirement to attend a large number of plays, concerts, and museums—and we travel. We find that what moves us usually has little to do with what we believe. Our favorite city to visit is Florence Italy, where stories told by the magnificent art move us deeply, even though we have little sympathy for Renaissance Catholic theology that inspired these glorious works. When I hear Bach's B minor mass, which recounts the death and resurrection of Jesus, I have to struggle to avoid embarrassing myself by sobbing in public. Mind you, I do not believe *any* of the theology behind this music—I am a UU after all! Carla and I agree: Stories about the human condition transcend belief systems.

How would our church be different if we took seriously the mining of stories? First, we would be more mindful of the ways we already share stories, self-consciously bringing stories that move us to candles of concern, to study groups like our upcoming one on Jesus' parables, to men's and women's groups, to small group ministries, and even to the coffee hour. Then we would listen—really listen—to each other's stories with empathy, enriching our understanding with the immense treasury of stories that illuminate and deepen almost every personal story.

Whenever I attend a funeral at this church I am fascinated by the life story of the person who died. At the end I want to talk to that person and find out more—but it's too late. Maybe we need "pre-funerals" for our members so we can get better acquainted with each other on this side of the Great Divide. Who will volunteer for a pre-funeral? Actually our church did this in the past. Several decades ago there was a series of talks called "Reflections on a Lifetime" given in the hour before our single service, in which some older members of the church told the stories of their lives: Hal Babcock, Ruth Kriebal, Eleanor Witte, and others. A great idea, especially when younger lives are also recounted. And let each speaker compare and contrast his or her life story with those that have gone before. A similar program exists now: Carla has been interviewed in a current Sunday school program called Bridging the Gap in which eighth graders quiz older members about their lives and the evolution of their religious beliefs.

Mining stories can change the inner life of our church, but I believe it will be equally important looking outward. One of our greatest gifts to our children can be their skill in mining stories. They will be inoculated against the biases of advertising, political spin, and the thousand distortions and inevitable half-truths of stories in which we are all immersed daily. As they gain skill in mining stories, our children can join us as full participants as together we look not only inward but also outward. For example—

What is the difference between a Sunni Muslim and a Shia Muslim? Jeff Stein found in interviews that leaders of intelligence committees in Congress and FBI specialists could not tell him the difference between Sunni and Shia Muslims.⁵ This is like someone trying to be helpful in Northern Ireland without knowing the difference between Catholics and Protestants. There is a 1300 to 1400 year old story behind the Sunni-Shia division—just one example of the rich tapestry of stories about Islam which we need to hear, along with the central stories of Hinduism and Buddhism and other great traditions. It is not too much to say that understanding these narratives is a matter of life and death. Happily, Boston is ethnically diverse and rich in experts on many religions; they can help us in our story-assembling task. We

can invite the community around us to share in this public search for understanding through stories.

Thus abideth three theses, modified in the course of this sermon:

FIRST: Inevitably we grapple to understand the human condition through stories.

SECOND: Necessarily every story is partial and incomplete, therefore in danger of misleading us.

THIRD: The combination of freedom and community in our UU church provides a unique setting in which we share stories that move us, examine what is important to us, and deepen our understanding of the human condition, within our church and in the wide world outside.

Amen.

This sermon will be posted on <http://www.uubelmont.org/sermons/index.html>

Most quotations have been edited; original references below.

¹E. L. Doctorow, *Creationists*, Random House, 2006, Introduction, page x.

²<http://www.joyhakim.com/>

³Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* is divided into books and chapters.
The book and chapter reference for this quotation not found.

⁴Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon*, Harcourt Brace, 1995, page 29f.

⁵Jeff Stein, "Can You Tell a Sunni From a Shiite?" Op-Ed page *New York Times*, 17 October 2006.