

A Story Worth Telling
A Sermon offered to the All Souls Church, NYC
Sunday, January 12, 2025

In the beginning...It was the best of times...it was the worst of times...Once upon a time...All happy families are alike...each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. Call me Ishmael. What do all of these lines have in common? You will recognize them as the opening lines of a story.

In the beginning... when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. The Genesis story in the Bible describing the beginnings of the universe. "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times" – from "A Tale of Two Cities"; All happy families are alike – Anna Karenina. "Call me Ishmael" from Moby Dick.

Great opening lines don't always pre-figure great literature, however! Take the case of one of the most famous opening lines of all, "It was a dark and stormy night." written by one Edward George Bulwer-Lytton. Who knows anything about his novel -- for that one opening line? Professional writers know that creating an opening line for your novel is important, because it's the first opportunity to draw the reader in. It's true in film as well– the opening shot – the mood, the lighting, the focus, the camera work – all of that is the beginning of a story and if it's not compelling – then the audience may be tempted to let their minds wander to something else – their shopping list or the email they forgot to compose.

So – no pressure right? This is my very first Sunday with you All Souls in person and our on-line congregation. This marks the beginning of a new chapter of the All Souls story – and a new chapter in mine too; one that has the bones of every narrative that was ever written about us; and one that is being written right now – in this moment. This is the place where various stories intersect; my story – All Souls story – New York City and our national and global stories intersect, connect, inform and co-create one another. This is the place where, as theologian Frederic Buechner once observed: "at its heart, most theology, like most fiction, is essentially autobiography. Aquinas, Calvin, Barth, Tillich, (and I would add to Buechner's list Guengerich, Church,

Kring , and Bellows) all working out their own theologies in their own ways and in their own language, are all telling us the stories of their lives, and if you press them hard enough, even at their most cerebral and forbidding, you find the experience of flesh and blood, a human face smiling or frowning or weeping or covering its eyes before something that happened...I cannot talk about God or sin or grace, for example, without at the same time talking about those parts of my own experience where these ideas become compelling and real.” (Buechner, *The Alphabet of Grace*.) This autobiographical understanding of theology is the idea that your own personal experience is at the foundation of your belief system – and that our theological and spiritual yearnings are not created ex nihilo – but out of the very woof and warp of the fabric that composes our lives.

This faith of ours is not rooted in ideological abstractions. It is rooted in reason, yes; but one of the reasons Unitarian Universalism has continued to resonate so strongly with the writings of the New England Transcendentalists, is because of Emerson’s insistence on an embodied experience of religion. Corpse cold Unitarianism, conceived in stratospheric arguments of the one-ness of God or debated about whether all souls will be saved was a very compelling theological exercise for the Boston Brahms of the 19th century. It doesn’t make for a very good story to tell your neighbor over coffee. What does make a good story? -- that yesterday I somehow felt the presence of the holy while sitting underneath a cathedral of trees; that I am most with what I know to be God when the world is vibrating before me in leaves of grass, in hills of stone and in the eyes of a child. A story that’s worth telling is one that’s compelling.

We know from *Literature 101* that there are a few narrative templates that form the basis for most novels, plays, films, and television series – and yes, perhaps our church life as well. The classical templates are of course, comedy and tragedy, and almost any narrative can be seen through one of those two lenses. But there’s many more – here’s a quick refresher of some of the best known. As I name them, think of the stories you have read or the movies you have seen that correlate to these major themes. There’s the story of *Overcoming the Monster* – when the hero must battle a monster or monstrous force; the stakes are so very high – usually nothing less than the survival of a people, a planet or the Universe. Then there’s the *Rags to Riches* story – the protagonist has humble beginnings; but despite those humble beginnings, rise

through determination, pluckiness, luck, magical intervention, is transformed; moral lessons about the value of hard work, virtue, kindness and others. How about The Quest – the famous Hero’s Journey described by Joseph Campbell, where the examples in popular culture are too numerous to name: from Lord of the Rings to Monty Python and the Holy Grail. Then there’s the Voyage and Return, found in Alice in Wonderland and Lovecraft Country; and a particularly appropriate story line for the beginning of my time with you: The Stranger Comes to Town and Shakes Everything Up. All of these story templates are tropes that reveal something of the truth that we find in ourselves and in our larger world – the narrative arc where we can identify ourselves in the story. These narratives are by no means an exhaustive list; but they are the ones most commonly depicted in novels and film, in politics and yes, even in church.

Many of us today are wondering how in just a scant eight days, the nation will inaugurate a President who is a convicted felon and whose familiar list of offenses against legality, morality, and civility are as familiar to most of us as the lyrics of the National Anthem. Many of us came prepared for the 2024 election with incontrovertible evidence that this person was unfit to lead this nation and its people into a better story. We may have resonated with Vice President Kamala Harris’ admonition that it is now time to “turn the page…” on this chapter of American history and start writing a new one. I too was eager and ready for that. Yet, here's another truth about stories that are told in our media and popular culture: It’s not just “if it bleeds it leads,” but also “if it spins, it wins.” If the story that is being spun is more relatable; more emotionally compelling than the other story, guess which one gets our attention – on the news – or – our in our votes.

In hindsight, we can identify the stories that were well spun this past fall. Probably the most compelling story that was spun this fall was founded on “overcoming the monster” For a majority of voting Americans, the monster took the form of the Economy that’s not working for them, or the undocumented immigrants changing their communities; or fears about queer or transgender children attending public school with your children. The monster represents all the fears we have writ large. So if there is anything I hope we all have learned from this result, it’s that progressives tend to believe if we only present enough facts and science, those who hold a different opinion will be instantly persuaded. We would do well to heed the insight

offered by Jack and Sara Gorman, who wrote “Denying to the Grave: Why We Ignore the Facts that Will Save Us.” In that book, the Gormans cite research that suggests people experience a rush of dopamine, when processing information that supports their beliefs. It feels good to ‘stick to our guns’ even if we are wrong, they observe. What persuades is a better story. A true story. A human story.

When I came to visit you in November, I picked up a copy of your Bicentennial book, (insert title here) which I have to say is an astonishingly beautiful collection of writing and images that reads like a really good novel. From the telling of that story, I – and perhaps you too – begin to see patterns emerge which shape the culture and identity of All Souls. It’s like studying a DNA double helix, seeing all the microscopic parts that compose a body.

But this is where this metaphor falls short, because naturally even in a well-researched book like (insert title here) there are stories which haven’t been told, which couldn’t be told. In every institution, whether a family or Congress or church - there are secrets in the walls and unrealized dreams that haunt the rooms. So one of the hopes I have in the short time we have together is to hear as many of your stories as possible. What you love about this place; what has inspired you, what frustrates you. It’s not my job to fix it; but nothing can be healed until it’s revealed. Towards the completion of our time together, I’ll write another narrative story – a companion piece to your great history – of what I’ve learned from the stories I’ve heard and what those stories might mean for the next chapter of the time of transition.

Of course, there will always be one more story about All Souls that will still need to be told. We will never arrive at the only story or the final one. As [Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie](#) reminds us in her brilliant Ted Talk “The Danger of a Single Story,” all of us – as human beings – as spiritual beings – contain more than one story; the good, the great, the bad and the painful. Adichie wrote:” All of these stories make me who I am. But to insist on only these negative stories is to flatten my experience and to overlook the many other stories that formed me. The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” Like an overlapping Venn diagram, the stories that make up who we are –are multifaceted. The story I am most interested in as one of your ministers – and as a pastor – is that of your spiritual life,

both personally and as a congregation. What is the state of your soul and what moral lessons have you learned from All Souls? As a result of your relationship with this church and its teachings have you felt better able to expand your capacity for curiosity, for appreciation, for gratitude and for wonder? And then, beyond the person, how do you take what you have learned and felt here out into this bruised and broken world of ours, strengthened by inspiration and the work of others?

The stories worth telling are not only the triumphs and successes; but the hard stories too – as we mine them for meaning and learn from them. I keep telling this myself as we grapple with a new presidency and a new administration. I'll be telling you the same thing about our congregation, as together this morning, we turn the page to one empty and waiting. Our shared story is yet to be written. As a writer, I know the terror of the blank page. All that stuff that roiling on the inside that wants to come out – and will it? Will it make sense to anybody but me? Will it challenge and inspire and offer hope all at the same time? What's gonna be written on that new page? We can't know for certain what words and stories emerge, but we can be sure that the story of this time – in our lives – and in the life of the nation – and the world is a story worth telling. And today, like everyday is a new dawn and a new day and All Souls - I want you to feel good about it. (transition to sung lyrics follows..) Because Birds flying high, you know how I feel Sun in the sky, you know how I feel, Breeze driftin' on by, you know how I fee--It's a new dawn--It's a new day--It's a new life for me, yeah