

“*The Story*”

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The first time I ever thought about the subject of this sermon was when I was 36 years old and attempting to go to seminary at Starr King School for the Ministry. A significant part of the application process was the requirement for me to tell my story. The way that worked was to answer the question, “Why do you want to go to this school?”

I must confess that I had not truly considered that question, and everything I was doing was based on unexplored assumptions about my life and the story of my life. It was time to do some exploring, time to tell the story—to identify the larger contours of my life which give it some kind of meaning.

Writing my autobiography became a daunting task—the most difficult exercise I had ever attempted. I forced myself to look closely into the details of my life in order to recognize plot line patterns.

The first requirement was to decide whether or not I was writing non-fiction book or fiction. Did I want to write the literal truth or did I want to write what I *wished* the truth was? And what would be the advantages of each of those approaches?

At age 36, I had only recently come out of the closet as a gay man. The central task of coming out is to tell the truth about yourself—to yourself and then to the world. That kind of truth-telling is very hard and it’s very risky, for you have to face things about yourself that will mean a radical alteration of your story and the meaning of it all.

And along the way, you are constantly challenged with questions about your motivations for doing such a thing in the first place. What will you gain by this thing? Will your life be better? Why not let the dead dogs lie?

Well, it took me 35 years to decide finally that my life would be better if I came out, even with all the inevitable consequences. So I came out and realized that truth-telling really does have its advantages. I decided that my story must be authentic and not a fairy tale.

I even came up with the title of my book: “*Struggling for Authenticity*”, and that’s what my life has always been about. *To be real*. To be truthful in all things and in all ways.

As I wrestled with the truth of my sexuality, I realized that there were other elements of my life which were unexplored. The most important of these was my religion.

I had been raised in a good old fundamentalist Christian environment. I realized that many parts of that world were false for me. Again, much of it was based on unexplored assumptions about human nature, about right and wrong, about the Bible and about God. *To tell the truth*, I had to look closely at all that and ask myself what was true and what wasn’t.

In other words, I looked at my religion’s *story*, the story which *explains* itself and *proclaims* itself. All religions have such a story—Christianity certainly does, although there are at least a million variations on the theme among Christians.

As I pored over my personal storybook, I realized that I was not, in fact, a Christian in the way my associates described themselves. I didn’t believe, for instance, that Jesus is the *only* child of God or that he *is* God—at least not anymore than we are all God’s offspring. I didn’t believe that unbelievers and believers of other faiths were all going to be consigned to eternal hell. And perhaps mostly, I didn’t believe that humankind is fundamentally and originally sinful.

So I had to put down that book and stop reading it. Trouble is, there didn’t seem to be a good replacement. My prayer book had yet to be written.

So it was that I came to understand that as I wrote my life storybook, I also had to write about the *meanings* of it. For me, meaning must come from my personal religion and spirituality.

I tried to identify exactly what that entailed. The first step was to do away with the stuff I *don’t* believe and began to name what I *do* believe.

First and foremost is my grounding faith that God is love. Period. Anything else to be said about God which doesn't come from that lead-statement is simply not the truth. Out of that beginning comes a profound sense of liberality, of freedom, of justice, and of hope.

"The right story is the one that helps me to love myself the most, to create the most, to love others and to support them in their creations."

"I started to change the basic stories of my life: that I'm bad, alienated from God, a freak of nature. I started to love myself and to believe the Divine did so as well. As that belief strengthened through the repetition of story, I began to love others and I was loved back. The racism I grew up with faded. The more I loved myself, the more beauty I saw in everyone else. The more I healed, the more I viewed the Bible and all of our great myths as stories told by others, and I looked more and more to my heart to find the right one for me." (—Greg Chapman from NPR broadcast, 10-3-05)

Along the way I discovered again and again that my life story and my spiritual story were entirely dependent on each other. It was at that moment that I knew my story would be one about ministry. That is to say, how I lived must come out of how I believed. Until then, there was a disconnect between those two important elements of the story.

For me, the disconnected parts became connected when I entered the world of Unitarian Universalism. Here is a faith which proclaims and celebrates the story of people's actual lives and how and why they live them the way they do. Our beliefs are important, but what is vastly more important is how we live out those beliefs. "Deeds not creeds" is the fundamental motto of our liberal, religious way.

One of my great pleasures in ministry here at Shoreline Church comes from our new member orientation gatherings. They provide an excellent opportunity to get to know a little about our new folks, plus I have the opening to explain how and why membership in our religious community is of value, and this reaffirms my own beliefs. In the old days, this was called the Confession of Faith, and sometimes it is very good simply to say out loud what I (and we) believe.

So now I am 60 years old and I am certainly writing (and reading) the last half of my book's chapters. In truth, I could be on the last chapter—who knows what tomorrow may bring?

As I have told this story to you all this morning, I sure do hope that you are following along according to your own storybook. I hope you have thought about these things, especially the part about your life as a plot line in a very important book—which is your life.

When we read a good book and tell others about it, often the first question is, "What's the book *about*?" Sometimes we ask that question at a beloved friend's memorial service. "What was he all about?" "What is the thread that runs through her life which gives it meaning and thereby gives meaning to those left behind?"

Then there's the question of what we want written on the tombstone as an epitaph? I usually ask people who want to speak at a memorial service what their eulogy is—what's *the good word*? Would it be a good idea for us to write that *before* the time comes for it to be read?

All of us in this room are living out the story. Everything we have done and everything we will do in the next minute, the next day or year is all part of the grand design, the saga which is our story.

Luckily, we can still alter the story line. We can even change the larger meaning of it. You know that the best books are those which have a surprise ending which ends up explaining all the previous parts. That's an exciting idea: We can change the story line, and we can make sense of all the parts, and we can even add our own epilogue. That's the part of the book which details the fate of the characters.

I want to write that part of my story book, for I cannot leave that monumental task to others. In truth (and that's what it's all about), it is my duty to say *what in the world* I have been doing all these years.

And what about you? What is the plot of your storybook? When someone asks, "What was the story about?" how do you respond? How would you like to respond?

May your next chapter be a good read, and even if there is no "happily ever after", may your days be full of rich and fascinating stories.