

“True Stories”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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My friend was annoyed.

She had gotten together with a few friends online to talk about an amazing program they had all just seen—

A modern-day magic show, interspersed with wonderful stories by a gifted storyteller named Derek Del Gaudio.

At the end of the one-man show called “In and Of Itself” the illusionist performed an amazing trick.

The kind of thing that takes your breath away and transports you into a state of enchantment and wonder.

My friend loved it, and so, she was annoyed when one of her friends proceeded to explain step-by-step how the illusion was achieved.

With that, the bubble of enchantment went “poof!” and my friend crashed back down to earth.

Now, it may have been that the explanation was perfectly sound—absolutely “true” on one level and pointing out the “falsehood” of the illusion.

But in that moment, the insistence on rational facts eclipsed what may have been even more illuminating:

Wonder. Mystery.

And the blessing of unknowing,
what might be called “beginner’s mind.”

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When we are children, we’re often in a state of unknowing,
and we certainly don’t have a lot of control.

Somehow, we need to develop the inner resources to go out and contend
with the many challenges of the world.

In such a situation, stories can be very useful.

In the well-known book “The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and
Importance of Fairy Tales,” Bruno Bettelheim wrote:

“...It is important to provide the modern child with images of heroes who
have to go out into the world all by themselves and who...

although originally ignorant of the ultimate things,
find secure places in the world
by following their right way with deep inner confidence.”

Putting it even more simply (this from author G.K. Chesterton):

“Fairy tales are more than true; not because they tell us that dragons exist,
but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.”

Well, isn’t it true that at every stage of life, we hope that dragons can be
beaten?

And isn’t it true that in the face of big and scary unknowns,
we often feel as helpless as children?

At times like these, we might be wise to open up once again to the wisdom
of story, myth, symbol, dream.

All the elements of life that our rational mind may say are
“not true”...

But that are doorways to the “direct experience of transcending mystery
and wonder that leads to a renewal of the spirit”—as it is expressed in the
Unitarian Universalist tradition’s first source of wisdom.

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One of my favourite writers on the subject of story is Clarissa Pinkola
Estés, a Jungian psychoanalyst and writer well known for her 1992 book
“Women Who Run with the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild
Woman Archetype.”

In it, she writes:

“Stories set the inner life into motion, and this is particularly important
where the inner life is frightened, wedged, or cornered.”

(It seems to me some of us might feel that way right now.)

She writes:

“Story greases the hoists and the pulleys,
it causes adrenaline to surge,
shows us the way out, down, or up,
and for our trouble, cuts for us fine wide doors
in previously blank walls,
openings that lead to the dreamland,
that lead to love and learning,
that lead us back to our own real lives...”¹

¹ Clarissa Pinkola Estés, Ph.D., *Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*
(Ballentyne: New York, 1992), 20.

You'll notice that even her brief praise of story sounds like a story, or a poem or a dream. It's rich in imagery and symbol.

Storytellers, and artists of all kinds, know that often the best way to express a truth is to come at it indirectly.

As the poet Emily Dickenson wrote:

“Tell all the truth but tell it slant —
Success in Circuit lies

Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind

The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every [one] be blind.”

We know, intuitively, the value of that gradual dazzling.

We settle joyfully into it,
nestling into the embrace of a good story.

For example, if Norman had simply gotten up and said:

“You know, everyone has different perspectives.
Depending on our situation in life, we'll each have a different outlook, and none of us is able to see the whole picture.”

“End of story.”

Well, that wouldn't be very satisfying, would it?

In fact, I might go away feeling a bit cranky.

Because as often as I've been told that,
and I know those facts quite well,
I still find it hard to live with that reality.

I still find it hard to accept the differences of others' perspectives...and to
face the fact that there is so much I cannot understand—let alone control.

Much like a child, I can find that more than a little frightening.

And so, I find stories such as “The Tree of Truth” and the related “Blind
Men and the Elephant” deeply reassuring on a soul level.

They teach me,
as they have taught other human beings long before me,
that I can learn to live with the dragon
of the complexity of the world.

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As adults in the Western world, and in a largely secular society, many of us
may have outgrown our love for story.

Fortunately, the art of storytelling continues to be intentionally nurtured in
many circles.

Right now, the Toronto Storytelling Festival is taking place online through
the end of next week, with many tellers including some known to this
congregation, drawing on many wisdom traditions.

But, as is so often the case in our fragmented world, sometimes we relegate
“storytellers,” like “musicians” and “artists” and “writers” into silos of skill
and specialization.

Today my hope is to re-affirm the deep connection with story

that lives in every one of us—just like the child within.

Over the course of our lives, some of us (and I'm speaking of myself) may have deliberately turned away at times from story, myth and symbol, as we developed our intellect and reason.

This is, of course, a healthy and necessary thing to do as we human beings grow into maturity.

It allows us to make choices based on the very real circumstances of our lives.

To make practical decisions and effect change to create a more just and loving world.

In this worthy effort, to reject what is false and face the difficult realities of life, many modern people have dismissed wisdom stories, often overlooking their value.

I mentioned the Unitarian first source a few moments ago...the direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder.

Well, we also draw from “humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.”

That is our Fifth Source, out of six, which also include wisdom from the world's religions and Earth-centred traditions.

The humanist UU Minister Reverend Kendyll Gibbons wrote:

“Weave me no fairytales frosted with miracles,
give me a light I can see.

Spin me no promise of heavens and saviors,
teach me the truth that makes us free.”²

Some of us may have turned away from other religious traditions in part because of the stories that they told.

Stories that were presented as literal truth, rather than myth or wisdom story, thus leading to a form of idolatry.

One can only imagine how horrified an ancient storyteller would have been, to learn that a story told for teaching purposes was taken literally by people two thousand years later!

Or, for that matter, that a story told *about* the storyteller would be presented as literal truth.

But of course that has happened, and often with tragic results.

Stories and symbols have been concretized into “facts” by some. Others have rightly objected.

And sometimes, the enchantment has gone “poof”—with a cost to our inner lives.

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The teachers of spiritual wisdom from the major world religions were experts at “telling the truth but telling it slant.”

² Kendyl Gibbons, *The Sources Cantata*, reprinted in *Sources of Our Faith: Inspirational Readings*, Kathleen Rolenz, ed. (Skinner House Books: Boston, 2012), 97.

Both Buddha and Jesus were known to be tellers of stories such as “The Lost Coin,” “The Lost Sheep,” “The Foolish Son,” “The Wise King.”

Interestingly, you can find stories titled “The Woman at the Well” “Walking on Water” and “The Mustard Seed” in both Christian and Buddhist sources.

If I had time or the expertise I might be able to find similar teaching stories in other religious traditions as well.

And, of course, the teachers themselves became heroes of story, given that they lived so long ago and were written about long after they died.

Wisdom traditions contain stories within stories within stories...

The symbols within them recur over and over in our own lives...

In our waking lives and our dream lives...

Whether we are consciously aware that we are storytellers...
or story-hearers...

Or not.

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In this time when we need to develop our inner resources to meet the dragons of injustice and the dangers of a radically changing earth...

It may be time to invite in again the voice of the Inner Storyteller—who can complement our abilities in rational thinking with the wisdom of the intuition and the imagination.

The two need not be opposed to one another.

As Bruno Bettelheim pointed out: “Even Aristotle, master of pure reason, said: “The friend of wisdom is also a friend of myth.”

In fact, it may be said that wisdom can only arise when both are present: both the rational and the intuitive.

This is the wholeness of life experience that we are called to live into, if not to ever fully understand.

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In the story Norman told earlier, we heard how human beings could have completely different experiences of “The Tree of Truth.”

Somehow, the tree, the story, is able to receive all of them, even the ones that seem to contradict each other.

Now, I don’t know about you, but this is something my rational mind does not like at all.

It goes against my ego’s perspective that there has to be a “right” way and a “wrong” way...and that it’s up to me to figure out which one’s which.

But the longer I live, the more I’m faced with paradoxes that are hard to live with.

I’m faced with, for example, the two truths of “I am enough, exactly as I am” and “I must strive to become a better person.”

Or how about this one. “Every person is inherently worthy,” and “I oppose everything that person stands for.”

Life presents us with these dualisms all the time,
and no matter how smart we are, it can be hard to make
peace with them.

But stories—and I would say any form of art—
put us in touch with our intuitive dimension,
showing us that Life is bigger than the small self that has to figure
everything out and be right and in control all the time.

Story, myth and symbol opens up space for what is larger than our ego's
perspective, connecting us with the much larger Tree of Truth which
includes everything,

Stories take us deeper, deep below the surface of our personal
understanding, to the deep ground of Life which contains all.

It is from that deeply rooted place of wisdom,
from the ground of collective unconscious and intuition,
that compassion and love can grow.

From the deep Self...
From the Source or the Divine...

Or any other name you may use,
or not.

So listen for the stories.

The ones arising within you
and the ones that come to you from many sources.

As Clarissa Pinkola Estes wrote:

“I hope you will go out and let stories, that is life, happen to you, and that
you will work with these stories...”

Water them with your blood and tears and your laughter till they bloom, till you yourself burst into bloom.

That is the work. The only work.”

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I'd like to finish with a musical story for you.

On one level, this is a story about parenthood, a “true” story if you will...and it was inspired by a real event.

But I hope it also points to the value of story, for all people, and whether or not we are biological parents.

This song is a reflection on how, as human beings, we too often fall under the spell that we are all-knowing or all-powerful.

But in fact, the magical beings of myth and wonder may be far more powerful than we realize...

And we may need them more than we know.

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The Tooth Fairy Forgot

She made you out of magic
She helped you make believe
With fairy tales and pixie dust
And tricks tucked up her sleeve

She wanted to be perfect
And omnipotent and kind

But late last night, the magic,
Well it must have slipped her mind, cause
The Tooth Fairy forgot
She wanted to remember
Her heart's in the right spot
But the tooth fairy forgot

She sees that you are growing up
She hopes you understand
That Mommy's just a woman, yeah,
And Daddy's just a man

But when she saw you crying there
With hope still in your eyes
She conjured up a morning story
Wrapped you in sweet lies

Cause the Tooth Fairy forgot
She thought she would remember
She gave it her best shot
But the tooth fairy forgot.

It was camouflaged beneath the sheets
Before the bed was made
She must have missed the time change
And her magic was delayed

I blurted out that it was me...
But surely made it up
Cause only a far greater power
Could make this strong a love.

Well, Santa Claus, he came today
The Easter Bunny too
And they gathered 'round the Tooth Fairy
They taught her what is true

They told her it will be alright
A greater God forgives
The shiny coin is found at last,
The child laughs and lives...

Cause the Tooth Fairy forgot
She wanted to remember
Her heart's in the right spot
But the Tooth Fairy forgot

Cause the Tooth Fairy forgot
She wanted to remember
Her heart's in the right spot
But the tooth fairy forgot

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Thank you for listening. It's been a privilege to be with you today.

I invite you all to stay for "virtual coffee hour" in breakout groups and share with each other how stories have shaped your life.

And I leave you with words from Kahlil Gibran:

Say not "I have found 'the' truth, but rather 'I have found a truth.'

Say not 'I have found the path to the soul.'

Say rather, 'I have met the soul [traveling] upon my path.'