

# “The Wisdom in Our Stories”

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August 1, 2021

Everyone has a story.

It was morning, just after breakfast, when my son revealed he hadn't quite finished all of his homework. It was math; a subject in which he is proficient, and I didn't think it would take more than 5 minutes.

I was wrong.

Perhaps he too was feeling the exhaustion of the pandemic that morning because he appeared frustrated with the questions before him. He grumbled...loudly! He said he couldn't do it. I could see how the frustration he was feeling was getting in the way of thinking through the work at hand.

I had a choice to make in that moment - let the homework slide - it really is a stressful time for all of us, children included, or see if I can help him navigate these emotions. I chose the later. As I sat down next to him with gentle encouragement, trying to model for him by best non-anxious presence, nothing was changing - in fact, he may have become even more angry.

At the same time, I was just about to start my unit of Clinical Pastoral Education - a period of formation for Unitarian Universalist ministers to be, where we learn pastoral care in an experiential setting - for me, it was the local hospital. We use therapeutic skills to help us in this work and my supervisor selected something called “narrative therapy” pioneered by Dr. Michael White from Australia.

I had started reading the assigned book in which chapter one was all about externalizing the problem - where the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem.

And so, when my non-anxious presence alone was failing to make a difference, I tried a completely different approach on a whim. I took a piece of paper and drew a little monster with a smiley face and said to my son that it seemed to me that this frustration monster was really getting in the

way of him being able to do the work. He looked at the drawing, then back at me, and after a moment of silence said: he doesn't look like that! He is much angrier!

He took the pencil, erased the smiley face, added sharp pointy teeth, narrow eyes, and an eye above it's head that has the power of mind control. Now, that frustration monster sure was powerful! And the frustration was now something he had visually represented outside of himself. I also got a better understanding of this frustration and just how strong its influence was and how it was affecting his life in that moment. This allowed us to have a new relationship with Mr. Frustration. We made up some stories about him and laughed, then decided we would close the book he was in so he couldn't get out and interrupt his work anymore. We even took a favourite stuffed animal to help keep it shut.

Minutes later, the homework was done and we were ready to get out the door for the walk to school.

But no - there as one more thing he just HAD to do before we left. He decided to erase every. single. Line. Of that frustration monster so that he couldn't follow him to school that day.

It was this precious moment that opened my heart to the powerful techniques we would be learning and practicing during this time of ministerial formation. What could really happen when we get to know the stories of our own lives and that of others.

Everyone has a story.

At the hospital, I would join with patients and staff in open hearted conversation. I heard parts of their life stories - what brought them in, stories of loss and grief, stories of struggle and pain, sometimes even stories of joy and celebration. They shared these stories openly with a mere stranger with an ID badge. And I was honoured to hear them and to journey with them for that short time.

As I listened to their stories - patients often shared multiple stories - I noticed there was often a theme which tied them together. A recurring theme was multiple stories of loss and grief - the death of many loved ones in a short period of time, loss of housing, loss of a job. And our stories are

more complicated than that. I also listened intently for exceptions in that theme, something that didn't fit the pattern. Sometimes I even asked directly about it. Was there a time in your life when this was different?

I wanted to make sure we didn't miss these exceptions - which are like seeds which could be planted and nurtured, and sometimes so small we might even miss them all together. I do it too - I tell my own life story much in the same way every time. Thankfully, we practiced with telling and listening to one another's life stories at the beginning of our unit together - we listened for strengths and areas where we were holding some "wondering questions," which we do with some of our own youngest ones in Religious Education. When we risk sharing our own story, others can pick up on these exceptions more easily than we do ourself. As they come to our conscious awareness, this is something we can nurture, it opens the door to new possibilities. In the wording of narrative therapy, we "re-author" our own narrative. And this is work best done together.

I received a referral from a social worker indicating someone who could use some emotional support. When I arrived, I met a black woman who shared she was waiting to undergo a procedure and had a long hospital stay ahead of her. She was feeling anxious which had been part of her story for a long time. She experienced the hospital as drab and lacking of colour, she missed the familial connections due to visitor restrictions, she missed her church community, and she was missing all the people who made her feel alive. As you can imagine, it is taxing on anyone to be away from home for so long, in an environment where you must advocate for yourself day and night, and you meet new staff every day. During our second visit, she shared she missed God. It was her daily spiritual practice to pray and carry on a conversation with the God of her understanding. She asked me to pray for her, and so behind the curtain, we bowed our heads in prayer and I asked for her to know deeply of that eternal loving presence in her days.

I returned to see her the next week and there was a new energy about her. She told me about these little glimpses of peace in her day, moments where she felt that even here, everything was okay. That was new! This woman who said changes made her feel anxious, not knowing the answers made the anxiety worsen, was living through little moments of joy and peace and her setting had not changed. I didn't want her to miss this exception in her story. It could have been so small that she could ignore it as a few good days but with a little care and attention, we could nurture it

and learn from it. And so I pointed out that this was radically different from the anxiety that seemed present at most times of the day - and I asked her a wondering question: we wondered about the possibilities that this would have in her life as she stays connected to these experiences of peace and joy. At first, she said she wasn't there yet but then she paused - in that silence, something was happening - and then she said she may be able to meet new situations with less anxiety.

What would that mean for you in your life? I asked. She replied that her life could be filled with more adventure and more love. And looking at me, she said that this all started because of our prayer; a prayer shared between a Unitarian Universalist and an Anglican. Because I risked praying for her aloud, in between our visits, she shared that she started to talk to God again, to that ongoing dialogue and support in her life.

In our last visit together, as I was about to leave, I thanked her sincerely for sharing these parts of her story and journey with me. She said that although it was a good idea to meet with her medical care team to review her medications for her anxiety, what made the difference in her care was that we tended to her spiritual health. This sincere meeting of two people held in it both wisdom and possibility.

And all the people I have seen, the people whose stories I have been honoured and privileged to hear and hold - they may not know it, but they have also changed me. They have helped me stay connected to the hope that abounds, created a better understanding of the multiple injustices in this world and only strengthened my resolve to stay engaged in the work of social justice, and helped me pay attention to the details that could just as easily be missed. One patient who has been in the hospital for the entire duration of my clinical unit, he shared that he missed the outdoors - he would give anything to feel the warm breeze on his face. And every day, as I left the hospital swiping my badge to make the doors slide open, the air would rush in and hit my face - I remembered this man. I breathed in the air with the scent of the blossoming trees. I could just as easily have rushed off to the car with thoughts of traffic and day camp pick up deadlines, and I knew that for even just a few moments, I needed to be present with creation.

Everyone has a story - and so does Unitarian Universalism.

For millennia, we as humans have turned to stories to guide our lives - everything from folk tales to religious wisdom sometimes in books and sometimes shared in the oral tradition. When we find ourselves in trouble or despair, in our search to make sense of it all, we turn to these stories for guidance and comfort. Sometimes our search is for answers. I believe that as Unitarian Universalists, we turn to one another, to connection, to our covenantal relationships to guide us on our way. When we risk sharing our story with one another - whether it is the story of our days or the story of our spiritual exploration, and we are met by others who are ready and willing to listen and be curious with us, we create together a holy place.

Grounded in my faith as I have been doing this work and incorporating a narrative approach into my practice of providing spiritual care, I have also been noticing the ties it has to our religious tradition: we describe Unitarian Universalism as “the living tradition.” This is a faith whose story continues to grow and change as we take in new information, as we become aware of exceptions in the story and choose to explore what can happen when we deviate from the way we had been doing things. We are doing some of that work right now in Canada as we come together to consider an 8th principle outlining our commitment to the work of anti-racism and anti-oppression. As we hear the stories and experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour within and beyond our congregations and communities, they are changing us. Stories from history books which had been told in one way and from one colonial perspective for far too long, there are many people whose voices are reminding us about all the missing stories that are part of this collective whole. We are re-authoring this collective story every time we centre the voices of the marginalised, when we question the assumptions, when we create space for the both-and to be true.

As I see it, this is our responsibility as Unitarian Universalists. As a tradition with many sources of wisdom, we draw the circle wider. We are ready and willing to make edits to what we know because we are willing to meet one another in the spirit of our free church: the spirit of love. This is our work in the world.

Knowing that we can change our stories is a powerful healing tool. Moreover, knowing that this work of changing our stories is something for which we truly need each other - that we are interdependent, means that we must commit ourselves to this work together. All of our voices and

perspectives are needed. Some of us will be asked some difficult questions and will be asked if we are ready and willing to change. Some of us will need to stop talking and take on the role of the open hearted listener. Some of us will need to risk telling their story from deep inside. Some of us will draw, paint, dance, sing, protest. All of us must participate in this work of re-authoring and creating the world in which we wish to live.

We can know both healing and wisdom through our stories. As someone preparing for ordained ministry as a military chaplain, hearing the stories of our lives will be part of the work I will be blessed to do. Behind the uniforms in my case, I will meet the real people with lives of loss and grief, with pain and suffering, and joy and celebration. As a Unitarian Universalist, I know that everyone has a story and that they are all intertwined in some way - we affirm this each week in our ritual of joys and sorrows: what touches the life of one of us, affects us all.

In providing spiritual care at the hospital, I experienced people telling me their deepest truths - this was the holy ground upon which I find myself setting out into the work of ministry. Most importantly - this work isn't for the ordained alone - this is the ministry we offer to one another. This is why our congregations have lay pastoral care teams, and small group ministries of all kinds. These are the ways in which we turn to each other. It is in the sharing of our own stories that we can help one another in their own individual searches for truth and meaning. We add new perspectives that may have never been considered. When we add our individual stories to the collective, we share with each other ideas that challenge us, explore what on the surface initially makes sense to us, and opens up a world of possibilities yet to be explored. This is the world in which I want to live.

And so I ask of you two things this week: to whom will you tell part of your story? And can you listen to another's story with your whole being?

To create a world where all know peace and justice, we can and we must continue to be the living tradition: authoring and re-authoring our stories personal and collective.

May it always be doing that holy work together.