

Grateful for Stories

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I remember when my nieces and nephews were gathered together telling each other “I remember when” stories. I have 4 nieces and nephews, two of each. The oldest three were telling each other stories. “Remember when we went to camp and ate the mega-dog hot dog?” “Remember when we went to the water safari?” “Remember when we went to Fair Haven and saw the turtle underneath the canoe?” One after another, the oldest three swapped story after story. The youngest, my nephew Ben, could see how much fun they were having. Perhaps he sensed how they were creating a sense of who they were and how they were family together. Ben was just four at the time and when an opening presented itself to him, he piped up: “Remember when I was little and I fell and I bumped my head at the park?”

I told him yes I did remember that. It happened yesterday.

We humans love stories. We are, it’s been said, the “storytelling animal.” Stories are how we understand who we are and who our family is, who our friends are and who our community is.

For example, my wife Kristin tells a story about her grandmother, Idella. Idella worked at a sandwich counter just before WWII in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. There was a shipyard worker named Spike — his real name was Harold, but people called him Spike. Whenever Spike came in for lunch, he asked, “Idella, when are you going to go out with me?”

She brushed him off, saying, “Some rainy Tuesday, Spike. Some rainy Tuesday.”

One day, Spike came into the lunch counter and said, “Well, Idella, it’s Tuesday. And it’s raining!”

And that’s how Kristin’s grandparents started dating.

It’s not a story that teaches a lesson, really. Although I guess we could admire Spike’s persistence. But mostly what Kristin enjoys about the story is just the sense she gets from their playful banter of who her grandparents were. It makes her feel connected to her grandma Idella whom she loved and her grandfather Spike whom she never met. So it’s also a story about who Kristin is. It’s part of her identity.

There are a couple stories about my own grandfather that I like to tell. One of them is how he was part of the first sit-down strike in Minneapolis. The workers occupied the plant where they worked for three days. And to help pass the time and keep their spirits up, my grandpa played his banjo.

At my grandfather’s memorial service, my dad told the story that when his dad worked at that plant, a couple of the other workers and union members were deaf. And my grandfather learned sign language so that he could communicate with them.

I love these stories. And there are lessons to be learned from them, but mostly I just like these stories. These stories help me to know who I am and who my family is.

Part of what makes me feel more and more that I am a Unitarian Universalist is by learning and telling stories of Unitarian Universalists. Becoming a Unitarian

Universalist means that I can be part of a whole set of stories. It means that I can feel connected to Henry David Thoreau in a way that I couldn't before. When I hear the story of how he tried to simplify his life and live in a little cabin he built himself that is a story of my Unitarian heritage. I think of the story of Clara Barton who was a Universalist and founded the American Red Cross. I became Unitarian Universalist when I got involved with the May Memorial Unitarian Universalist Society. The congregation is named after its second minister, a man named Samuel Joseph May. Stories about Rev. May get told a lot. He was an abolitionist and was the one who convinced the leading Unitarian of the time, William Ellery Channing, to take up the abolitionist cause. Rev. May, so I'm led to believe, was the first minister to preach women's suffrage from the pulpit.

So I'm led to believe. We need to be careful. We like some stories so much that we'll hang on to them even if they aren't true. I remember when on election night 2012, Republican Karl Rove just couldn't believe that Ohio was going to Obama. He kept saying how that's not the story, not how the math was going to work out. Fox News Anchor Megyn Kelly asked him, "Is this just math you do as a Republican to make yourself feel better?"

We like to tell stories that we can be the heroes of. We need to remember to check our stories with others, especially if our stories are about them because, always, our stories are about us.

Stories are important because through them we tell the story of who we are and who we hope to be. Jonathan Gottschall, an English professor, says that "The storytelling mind is a crucial evolutionary adaptation. It allows us to experience our lives as coherent, orderly, and meaningful. It is what makes life more than a blooming, buzzing confusion."

A couple weeks ago, from this pulpit, I was calling for us to hear the sound of many voices. I argued that the sound of many voices—I could have said many stories—can be a beautiful thing. Each one of us is made up of more than one story. All of us together are more stories still along with the story of who we are together.

The quilt in the story that Liz told carries the story of generations of a family. I carry reminders of stories with me all the time. My wedding ring, for example, was worn by my grandfather for his 64 years of marriage to my grandmother. I like that story. It inspires me in my own marriage.

What stories do you carry around with you that you are thankful for?

Maybe there's a story that you know about your parents or your grandparents. Maybe there's a story that you learned from someone younger than you are, like the story I told about my nieces and nephews "remembering when." Maybe there's a story from history or science or art that inspires you. Maybe there's a story of Valerie that you're thankful for -- please feel free to use this as an opportunity to honor and be thankful for her, too.

I have some tags here. Maybe some folks will help me hand these out. On your tag, write: "I am thankful for the story of..." and then fill in the blank.

The girl in the story Liz told is thankful for the story of her family's quilt. I am thankful for the story of my grandfather's banjo. I'm thankful for the story of Spike and

Idella and the rainy Tuesday. I'm thankful for the story of H. D. Thoreau and his cabin. I'm thankful for the story of how 'Reau Henry got his name.

These tags are the easiest thing to write on, so please help each other. When you're ready, come on up and hang your story on the tree. Help each other with this, too! Let's make a tree of stories!