

Tell Me a Story
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Reading: from *Invisible Lines of Connection* by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner

The stories in our lives are like pages of a stamp album. We find ourselves collecting and reassembling ordinary, even trivial, pieces of our childhood, trying, through different rearrangements, to comprehend their meaning. Perhaps if I put these on this page and move those to another, then add one from the stock book, the page will look right and finally make sense. That's what we do. We take memories which are only distilled stories, add new ones, and, in so doing, redefine their meaning and the shape of our lives.

Professor Moshe Idel of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem has observed that, when recited in the proper manner, ancient text becomes an invocation, a conjuration, that brings about the experience it describes. It is no longer ancient history nor a metaphor for something else, but its re-creation; when performed enthusiastically, the text includes the experience itself.

I'll tell you a story. It's only the memory of a question and about where the question first hit me. I was in high school. My mother was driving me over to Northland Shopping Center. We were going south on Greenfield Highway just across from the old Marathon gas station on Nine Mile Road when it dawned on me that there was an ultimate question: What is the meaning of life? For a moment, I actually considered the possibility that I was the first one ever to have asked it.

My friends, however, had reached identical conclusions for themselves. The same question apparently teased everyone. It could take many forms: What am I doing here? Or: What am I supposed to be doing here? Or: Why am I able to ask this question? Or: Why am I unable to answer it? . . . I suppose that one of the main reasons I became a rabbi is because rabbis have permission to be with people during the most transformative moments of their lives and are even expected to help them make those moments coherent and meaningful.

Sermon

When I started working on this sermon, my working title, "Tell Me a Story," seemed innocuous enough. It seemed pretty descriptive of what I wanted to do: share a few little snippets of my story, and invite a few little snippets of yours. But at some point the recollection dawned on me that I had a history with that particular phrase: "tell me a story."

As I approached and entered into my teenage years, my relationship with my father became, if not strained, at least increasingly uncomfortable and even awkward. I wasn't an especially communicative kid anyway, and when it came to my parents, I was a lot more comfortable interacting with my mother. After all, with my father working two and three jobs through much of my childhood, I really didn't spend that much time with him.

I know my father sensed the lack of communication and rapport between us, and I think it troubled him. He did try. For instance, on numerous occasions, when we would be in the car together, just him and me, on our way to this or that activity or just going shopping, out of the blue, he would hit me with it: "Tell me a story." As I recall, he didn't get much response. After all, when you're dealing with a shy introvert who's already self-conscious about not having

anything to say, probably the least effective way to get them talking is to ask them straight out to talk.

So for me, such incidents were just another agonizing experience to get through. But looking back, I appreciate what my father was trying to do. When he said “tell me a story,” what he was really saying was “Who are you? I want to get to know you. I want to find a way to connect with you.”

Indeed, one of the best ways to get to know another person is by sharing your stories. Once you get to know one another, moving forward and sharing a common unfolding story may be how the strongest and deepest connections are made. But it’s the sharing of your individual stories that helps to get to that point, that lays the foundation for authentic connection.

Many of us have experienced this here at the Fellowship in UU101 classes. In these all-day Saturday get-togethers, designed to orient newcomers to what we are about, and to help them to begin making connections, a good half of the session is devoted to people telling their stories. How they got from there to here. And almost without fail, two things jump out in that experience. First, there are those details that make each person’s story unique and special. But then there are those recurring themes, those commonalities of life experience that reassure us that we are not alone. And so we discover that we are alike enough to be able to relate with one another’s experience, and yet unique and distinctive enough to be interesting to one another. What a great basis for an ongoing connection and a continually developing relationship.

I would like to point out, however, that articulating your story – or your stories – does more than help someone else figure out who you are. It can also help *you* figure out who you are. In her book, *Maps to Ecstasy*, Gabrielle Roth devotes a chapter to the process of uncovering your authentic self, of figuring out who you are. For her, that process involves writing your story. She says “When you dance, you ritualize how you move. When you sing, you ritualize how you feel. In writing, you ritualize how you think.”

As she lays out her process, she makes a point similar to that I made about UU101 stories: the blending of the common and the unique. The way she does that is by laying out five common movements in the dance of life: birth, childhood, puberty, maturity, death. But then, she writes:

I’ll be outlining my angle on the basic cycles of life. But my words will be empty unless you fill in the picture with your own distinctive experience. What matters is *your* mother, *your* father, *your* birth, *your* life, *your* death. Analyze and articulate *your* myths, *your* conditioning, *your* patterns, the play *you’re* acting out every day, the novel that is unfolding as *your* life.

That’s very similar to the process I use in working with people to write their spiritual memoirs or autobiography. It involves going back in your mind to early childhood, reminiscing about a favorite room in the house you grew up in, recalling memorable events or experiences from childhood, from adolescence, and on into adulthood. Reflecting on particular turning points in your life, on special teachers or mentors along the way. And finally, seeking out patterns that hold things together in a meaningful way, and mining your life experience for lessons that present themselves along the way.

Well, I promised some small snippets of my story, and since I want to have a chance to hear from you as well, I’d better get to it. Let me preface this by describing a process I went

through a couple of years ago. As I was putting together a list of events and incidents that I thought might become a part of my spiritual memoirs, I noticed that many of them had something to do with either water or fire. My mind being in a playful mood, I wondered what had happened to earth and air. While earth, air, water, fire don't exactly describe a theme for my life, they did provide a framework for retrieving some additional long-lost memories.

For instance, in the "earth" category, I recollected a couple of childhood experiences that helped impress on me how small I am in the face of the planet earth. One thing I remembered was that when my brother and I were quite young, we liked digging holes in the back yard. One day, in a fit of imagination and ambition, we decided that it would be really neat to dig all the way through the earth to China. After all, it might be the only way we'd ever get there. I'm sad to say that we fell short of our goal. We probably made it about five or six feet. But it did present us an opportunity to reflect on the size of the world, and on our limitations as mere human beings. And it did keep us out of trouble for a little while.

The other earth-related memory had to do with trekking across the Sleeping Bear Sand Dunes near my home in northern Michigan. The sand dunes was one of our favorite destinations for family outings. There was this huge mountain of sand that took about fifteen minutes to hike up, and about ten seconds to fly back down, often head-over-heels. But there wasn't just that one big hill. Once you got to the top, there was another hill off in the distance. And somewhere out there was Lake Michigan. The first time we hiked it, every time we'd approach the top of a sand hill, we'd expect to see the lake. But time after time, there was only more sand. There were times when we were tempted to give up and turn around. But we *knew* the lake was out there somewhere, and by this time we were so hot and sweaty that the lake sounded really good. So again and again we hiked up and down and up again – and finally, there it was. There was the bright blue water stretching as far as we could see, all the way to the horizon. And the seemingly endless trek was well worth it as we plunged into the cold, invigorating surf.

The last memories I want to share with you involve the grandeur of the world of nature as experienced through sight and sound. I was in my mid-twenties, recently discharged from the Army, and spending the winter in my best friend's non-winterized cottage on a medium-sized lake, again in northern Michigan. I was working a late shift in a factory in town, and I'd get home about two in the morning. The road to our cottage wasn't plowed, and so I had to trudge the last third of a mile or so through the snow.

On a number of occasions, making that trek through a cold, clear night, I was treated to spectacular performances of the aurora borealis, the northern lights. Those shimmering lights, streaming down out of the sky, sometimes pure white, sometimes with a tinge of rose, stopped me in my tracks. What a wonder! What a gift! Words can't do it justice.

And finally, there was the lake itself. There was a certain time, when the lake had begun to freeze over, but still had open water far out in the middle. I'm not sure what led us to do it, but for some reason we began throwing stones out as far as we could to land on the ice. Whatever our reasons, the result was the discovery of a huge, natural musical instrument. As the stones bounced on the ice, there was a natural resonance and reverberation that rang out like a great chime. We reveled for quite some time in the wonderful music that we were able to make in collaboration with the partially-frozen lake. But it was a one-time gift. No matter how often we tried again, it just wasn't the same. All we could do was remember with gratitude our being in the right place at the right time when conditions were just right for that musical miracle.

So those are a few experiences that have left an impression on me. I encourage you to spend some time in quiet reflection, and to bring to mind some small piece of *your* story, particularly something that made you feel really alive, or that made you feel connected to something beyond yourself. That might mean with nature, or with another person, or with a group or community of people. That's up to you; it's your story. And when you get a chance, share your story with someone else, and listen to some of their stories as well. Make a connection.

So may it be.