

Soul Matters, July 2013

**What Does It Mean To Live
A Life of Story?**

The worship and Soul Matters theme for the month of July is STORY. Our lives are made up of stories. Some of our stories are a part of the inheritance we talked about last month. Other stories change over time.

The stories we tell about ourselves, or just believe, without ever speaking out loud, are strong determining factors in our present and future lives.

There was a time when I thought I would never have my deepest longing fulfilled; I would never have a baby. My daughter Elizabeth was born when I was forty years old, and that change in my story gave me such deep confidence in life, and my ability to make my dreams come true, that the next year, Jim and Elizabeth and I took a trip to Scotland. Scotland had been on my wish list for more than twenty years, but it took a change in my story to make it happen.

Two of my favorite books when I was growing up were *Little Women* and *Little Men*, by (Unitarian) Louisa May Alcott. I saw myself in Jo, the tomboy heroine, and Meg, the loving young wife. Before my Elizabeth was born, I envisioned her as Beth, the sweet one, always thinking of others. I was surprised to find that she was more like a cross between Jo and Amy. I had the wrong story-line for her, and I had to adjust my thinking accordingly, in order to be a good a parent.

Our religious inheritance as heretics is because of our ability to see a different story. When the church fathers decided on the doctrine of the trinity in 325 CE, they made all other stories heretical. And the early Christian belief in God as a single unity and Jesus as the son of God, which is the basis of Unitarianism, was denounced. But seekers through the centuries have found this same story in the pages of the Christian scriptures, whether the Church approved of it or not.

The same thing is true of Universalist beliefs. Many early Christians believed in a loving God who would not condemn anyone to perpetuity in hell. The Roman Catholic Church declared this belief to be heretical in 544 CE, but it resurfaced again and again, and following the Protestant Revolution, universal salvation became the basis for the Universalist religion. Today even the Roman Catholic Church allows for the possibility that all may be saved.

Of course, Unitarians and Universalists, and now, Unitarian Universalists, have changed their beliefs and stories many times over the years. This is what makes up our living tradition – the ability to keep what is good and true in our stories, and revise them as we add knowledge and understanding of the ever-changing world in which we live. So this month, in sermons and in Soul Matters, you'll look at your own stories – those that have stayed the same, those that have changed over time, and those that need to change.

May you be the creators of your own blessed stories.

Beatrice

Soul Matters is the creation of the Rev. Scott Taylor. Materials in this packet are from Scott, Rev. Beatrice Hitchcock, participants in Soul Matters sharing circles, and members and friends of High Plains Church.

Our Spiritual Exercise: What's Your Wizard of Oz?

When she talks about the lion, she lights up. No, not a child. A grown woman. She's a teacher, with a keen awareness of how stories are our greatest teachers, and companions. That's where the Wizard of Oz and the lion comes in. And Dorothy, the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodsman, and Toto, too. This mythic tale isn't just "a favorite story;" it is one of those "made-up" stories that have long helped her make sense of the "real" world. It's led her to courage when fear left her blind. It's framed real life problems. It's guided her choices. Even warned her about types of people to look out for. And maybe most of all, it's reminded her that answers are often found by having the courage to return home rather than running away. It's a "made up" story that's been essential to helping her see and navigate her "real life" story. (Visit <http://swoodward62.wordpress.com/2011/10/22/lessons-from-the-yellow-brick-road/> for a first hand account of how this woman honors the wisdom of Oz.)

And who of us doesn't have a favorite story of our own?

What are the stories that inform your life? Treasure Island or Star Wars, Nancy Drew or Harry Potter, Anne of Green Gables or Indiana Jones, The Hunger Games or Shane... Books or movies or plays or video games, they're all stories that may help frame our own real lives. Heroes, heroines, anti-heroes – who are the fictional people you've turned to for guidance or courage or hope?.

We all have at least one.

So this month's spiritual exercise is to...

Make Yourself Aware of One of Your Formative "Mythic" Stories & Find a Piece of Proof About How It Still Lives in Your Life

Don't make that second part of the exercise overly complicated. Your "proof" might simply be pulling the book or video right off your shelf and keeping it on your coffee table for the month. You might have Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader figures to feature. Re-watch the movie you love or re-read the book.

The point is to simply take the time to look around your life and find some trace of the fictitious story in your literal world!

And that word "trace" is key in another way. For the ultimate point of this exercise is to make time this month to TRACE the influence of these mythic tales though our lives--honoring not simply what they've done for us, but noticing how they still might have some more guidance and gifts to give us!

Questions To Wrestle With:

You don't need to engage with all these questions. Read them through, and find the one that has the most meaning for you – the one that “hooks” you the most. Then let it take you on a ride. Copy it or cut it out and put it on your mirror, or refrigerator – anywhere where you can't forget about it. Live with it for the entire month. Allow it to regularly break into--and break open--your ordinary thoughts.

1. How do you use story?

In our “Recommended Resources” section there's a quote about how we sometimes use story as a way of saying "look at me" and other times use it to say, "look at all of us." It's a strikingly honest assessment. It also shines light on the fact that we use stories for different purposes. To connect. To heal. To conceal. To remember. To pass on. To teach. To gain power. And yes, to say, look at me. But also sometimes to just bring joy. Or say thanks. Or celebrate.

How do you most often use story?

2. What story did you walk away from?

All of us think about that other life--that other story--which we turned down for the one we have now. We became a teacher rather than a researcher. We stopped at two kids rather than have one more. We asked our spouse to give up their job and follow us rather than letting them start their career first. We bought a Honda civic rather than the Mustang convertible. It's not always about regret. Sometimes it's just about curiosity, about wondering “what if.” What role does “the story you walked away from” play in your life?

3. Who haven't you told your story to yet?

Is there a story of yours that your grandchild has yet to hear? Are you hiding part of your story from the person you say you “trust the

most”? Is there an un-actualized story in you that you need to say out loud to someone? Does someone in your life need the wisdom of your life story? And how should you present that? We share stories. Who have you been wanting to share a story with but haven’t, and why?

4. Are you faking a story right now?

Are you following a storyline that isn’t really you? That you dread? That makes you feel stuck? Or like a liar? Does anyone else notice? What’s your plan for bringing this story to an end?

5. Has it always been easy to find a new story?

Story lines end. Events like retirement, divorce, illness and the empty-nest close the book on one story and invite us to leap into a whole new adventure. But sometimes the next chapter is a blank page. And we have writer’s block. Have you ever had trouble finding a new story? And what got your writing again?

6. What stories won’t others let you leave?

Sometimes our families of origin retain an old story about us that no longer feels true, or that only feels true when we’re with them. Or no longer tells the whole truth. It’s remarkable the power that such stories have over us. And how we just can’t let it go; we need to get them to give up that story line. What “unfair stories” still have power over you? And what helps you “just let it go”? (Or maybe all this is wrong and the real question is: What stories are you not letting others leave?)

7. Do you understand the story you have?

Before we rush off to find a new story or create a new life. Before we convince ourselves that healing and hope and freedom lay in leaving our “old” worlds and stories behind. Before that, might it be good to ask do you understand the story you already are? Other

cultures are clear: “You don’t know where you are going unless you know where you come from.” Are there parts of your “old” story you need to reclaim or notice, before moving on?

Recommended Resources:

This is not “required reading.” You need not analyze or dissect these pieces as you read. They are simply meant to get your thinking started--and maybe to open you to new ways of thinking about what it means to “live a life of story.”

Wise Words:

Some of the quotes this month come from past Soul Matters Facilitators at other churches and a current Worship Team member at High Plains Church.

"All humans are storytellers with their own unique point of view.

When we understand this, we no longer feel the need to impose our story on others or to defend what we believe.

Instead, we are all of us artists with the right to create our own art."

- Don Miguel Ruiz

Stories are like atoms. We exist as physical beings because we are made of up of atoms and their subatomic parts. We exist as human beings because we are made up of stories. Stories give our

lives meaning, without which we could not be fully human. The kind of people we are depends on the kinds of stories we tell - about ourselves, about others, about the world. We can tell stories that build up our love, compassion, kindness, patience, gratitude, and humility, or we can tell stories that ensnare us in hatred, judgmentalism, greed, arrogance, impatience, and misery. Ultimately, though our lives are shaped and constrained in many ways, it is still up to us to decide what kinds of people we want to be and, therefore, what kinds of stories we want to tell.

- Worship Team member

The following quotes are from Byron Katie’s Who Would You Be Without Your Story?

"Reality is always kinder than the story we tell about it."

"You are what exists before all stories. You are what remains when the story is understood."

"The miracle of love comes to us in the presence of the uninterpreted moment."

"No one has ever been angry at another human being — we're only angry at our story of them."

"Forgiveness is realizing that what you thought happened, didn't."

"The forgiveness inherent in our faith teaches that all of us are much larger than the good or bad stories we tell about ourselves. Please don't get caught in just "my" story, my hurts, my agenda. It's too small. It's not the whole You, the Great You. It's not the great river. It's not where life is really going to happen."

-Richard Rohr, Everything Belongs

A while back, at the entrance of a gym, there was a picture of a very thin and beautiful woman. The caption was "This summer, do you want to be a mermaid or a whale?"

The story goes, a woman (of clothing size unknown) answered the following way:

"Dear people, whales are always surrounded by friends (dolphins, seals, curious humans), they are sexually active and raise their children with great tenderness. They entertain like crazy with dolphins and eat lots of prawns. They swim all day and travel to fantastic places like Patagonia, the Barents Sea or the coral reefs of Polynesia. They sing incredibly well and sometimes even are on cds. They are impressive and dearly loved animals, which everyone defend and admires.

Mermaids do not exist.

But if they existed, they would line up to see a psychologist because of a problem of split personality: woman or fish? They would have no sex life and could not bear children. Yes, they would be lovely, but lonely and sad. And, who wants a girl that smells like fish by his side?

Without a doubt, I'd rather be a whale.'

At a time when the media tells us [the story] that only thin is beautiful, I prefer to eat ice cream with my kids, to have dinner with my husband, to eat and drink and have fun with my friends.

We women, we gain weight because we accumulate so much wisdom and knowledge that there isn't enough space in our heads, and it spreads all over our bodies. We are not fat, we are greatly cultivated.

Every time I see my curves in the mirror, I tell myself: "How amazing am I ?! "

-- Delphine Fieberg

"When my Dad was very near the end and in a nursing home for a couple of weeks, the social worker told me that she had enjoyed my dad, he had told her "his story." This sounded a little funny to me, but now as I take care of my Mom and see her daily, I see this phenomenon. I hear my Mom, whenever she meets anyone new, she tells her story. And if you haven't heard it 4-500 times, it's a good story."

-- a Soul Matters
Facilitator

"It occurs to me that we live several "stories." Most of us want to please and fit in, so with different groups we may offer a different "story".

I remember vividly when my real story and my fictional story clashed for the first time.

My oldest child was in nursery school and I was a mother helper one day a week. On that day I patiently worked with the kids, mopped up their spills with a smile, skillfully diverted their attention when they were near fisticuffs and generally presented what I thought was a model mother. But at home, with 2 younger siblings, I was far less patient and not nearly the model I presented before the other nursery parents and kids! I often wondered what my 4 year old thought - did I become a different mommy when I walked into that nursery school door?

Was I enacting a different "story" of whom I was?

Luckily, neither he nor his younger siblings seemed to be too badly affected by my different behavior - but I'd bet they may have preferred the nursery school mommy!!"
-- a Soul Matters Facilitator and honest mom

“For twenty-one years I lived a married life "story" that frankly wasn't going well on any level. I felt trapped between the covers of the book- no possibility of getting out from under that cast of characters, scenes, chapters, etc. So many things were "scripted" in my life. Then one day the story came to a "turn of events" -- all the right and surprising pieces fell into place and I was out of that "book." And a new story was emerging-- based on things that "felt right"
- A Soul Matters Facilitator and honest person

“A legislator once told me (and rejected me by saying): “I’m sorry, but you can tell me all the facts and research and morality of the funding you want for young children, but Sherri--the women who came in before you--brought photos and stories of her twins, one of whom is Downs Syndrome. And that’s what I’m going to remember.”

The power of stories. This is my political fallacy- that facts will win people over.”

-- A Soul Matters Facilitator and honest Democrat

“I find my self wrestling with the uses of story in our lives. On the one hand, I feel as though I have finally gotten beyond needing to use my story as a way to make people pay attention to me. I've had some amazing experiences throughout my long life, and I used to tell those stories as a way of helping myself know that I was interesting and valued, and as a way of entertaining people.

Now I know that the stories are only a small piece of the whole.

My deeper, truer self is more than just the sum of the exciting or sad or difficult stories I may have lived.

On the other hand, I also know that telling our stories can have a deeper purpose, can be a way of illustrating something

that has meaning for all of us and a way of connecting us in our common humanity rather than setting ourselves apart by emphasizing our differences.

We need to be able to discern the difference between story as saying "look at me" and story as saying "look at all of us, and what we have in common," and I think that's where I'd want the spiritual exercise to lead. What does this story say about what I have in common with others?”

-- a previous Soul Matters Facilitator

“During a long retreat , I had what seemed to me to be the earthshaking revelation that we cannot be in the present and run our story lines at the same time! It sounds pretty obvious, I know, but when you discover something like this for yourself, it changes you.”

-- Pema Chodron, "When Things Fall Apart"

“Furthermore, we have not even to risk the journey alone; for the heroes of all time have gone before us; the labyrinth is thoroughly known; we have only to follow the thread of the hero-path...and the many stories which tell his [and her] tale.”

-- Joseph Campbell

Podcasts & Websites:

Believing Is Seeing: a podcast from NPR’s Diane Rehm Show: <http://thedianerehmshow.org/shows/2011-10-05/errol-morris-believing-seeing>

“Errol Morris is well-known for making documentary films. “The Thin Blue Line” is credited with helping overturn a murder conviction. And “The Fog of War” - an intense conversation with former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara interspersed with images of war - earned Morris an Oscar. His films challenge viewers to take a

second look, a third at “the truth of the story.” Nothing is as it seems at first glance. Lately Morris has turned his attention to writing. In a new book, he explores his fascination - some might say obsession - with photographs and how they always only tell part of the story.”

War of the Worlds
from WNYC’s RadioLab
podcast found at:
<http://ax.itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/wnycs-radiolab/id152249110>
War of the Worlds is podcast #82 and dated 11/03/08
This podcast explores the way we buy into stories often at the expense of facts. Whoever controls the story...

Books:

Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal,

by Rachel Naomi Remen

My Grandfather's Blessings:
Stories of Strength, Refuge, and
Belonging,

by Rachel Naomi Remen

The Will to Live and Other
Mysteries,

by Rachel Naomi Remen

When Things Fall Apart
by Pema Chodron

The Hero with a Thousand Faces
by Joseph Campbell
(or anything by or about Joseph
Campbell)

Movies:

Big Fish

[http://www.rottentomatoes.com/
m/1127787-big_fish/](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1127787-big_fish/)

“Tim Burton directs the fantasy
drama Big Fish, based on the
book Big Fish: A Novel of
Mythic Proportions by Southern
writer/illustrator Daniel Wallace.

Billy Crudup plays William
Bloom, a young man who never
really knew his dying father,
outside of the tall tales he told
about growing up, making his
way, and meeting his mother.

During Edward's last days,
William and his wife Josephine
hold bedside vigil as the old man
recollects elaborate stories of his
youth. Still doubting the
legends and folklore, William
makes a journey to meet a
mysterious woman from whom
Edward had bought property.

The Thin Blue Line

[http://www.rottentomatoes.com/
m/thin_blue_line/](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/thin_blue_line/)
[http://errolmorris.com/film/tbl.ht
ml](http://errolmorris.com/film/tbl.html)

Yes, it's called a documentary
but this is really one of the best
detective stories you'll ever

encounter. A great adventure into how deeply we can believe that we possess the “truth of the story” but still be wrong!

The Fog of War

[http://www.rottentomatoes.com/
m/fog_of_war/](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/fog_of_war/)

A sad but mesmerizing exploration about how power and war almost always leads one to twist the story.