

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“The Danger of a Single Story”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore May 2, 2021

Sermon

I begin my words this morning with an apology for a personal story I told last Sunday of an incident in North Oakland. Although it was not my intention to cause harm, I take responsibility for the impact of the story. It was a story that involved violence that may have triggered unpleasant memories of trauma for some. I know for some the content of the story was hurtful.

Unintentionally, the racial references in the story reinforced stereotypes that I personally and our congregation collectively is committed to weaken and dismantle. The story was also a poor choice for the tender time following the Chauvin verdict and the violence at the Albany Police South Station.

I'm sad and regretful to say, my story was an illustration of the danger of a single story.

I chose [the video](#) of the Rev. [Nadia Bolz-Weber](#) as our reading today because she illustrates the danger that comes with being absorbed in one's own story. She responded to the challenges of being a stay-at-home mom with a baby and a toddler in ways that harmed herself and others. She was locked in her story about her life and her dysfunctional coping strategies.

She quoted a Biblical story found in the beginning of the fifth chapter of the Gospel of John. By the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem in those days, there was a pool called Bethzatha. This was a special pool with healing waters. The healing only happened when the waters were agitated or troubled (hence the source of the song “God's gonna trouble the waters”). Heavenly messengers or angels were thought to be the agents of the water's movement. When that movement was detected, the blind, lame, and paralyzed waiting nearby would rush into the pool with the hope they would be healed.

Now, thirty-eight years is a long time to be waiting near these waters for healing. One might say this paralytic was stuck in his story that this was the only way he could be healed. When Jesus challenged him, “Do you want to get well?” he doesn't respond yes. He rationalizes why he hasn't. He doesn't have anyone to put him in the pool. And If he did, someone else would get in first.

This is such a familiar story. I'm sure we've all heard it and some of us maybe have told a similar story ourselves. I can't get or have what I want or need because of someone or something else. I'm the helpless victim of my circumstances and have no control over my life.

Jesus' challenge is pretty harsh, as Nadia observes, “Do you *want* to get well?” Or for the context of our service today, do you want to break out of your self-limiting single story?

The stories we tell ourselves are extremely powerful in shaping our lives. Our brains are organized to make sense of the world through narrative. Every part of our lives has stories associated with it. Every one of us has a birth story. Somehow an egg and a sperm found each other and *presto chango* our individual existence started. Each egg came from a woman who had a life story. Each sperm came from a man who had a life story. However that embryo gestated into a baby, and

whatever arrangement of family cared for and nurtured that baby to childhood then adulthood had a story. The growth and development process of that new human being participated in creating a story that would shape the rest of their lives.

That story didn't get created in a vacuum. It happened within whatever communities, educational and religious institutions in which that growing child participated. Each one had their own stories situated in history and culture. You can see how this ever-growing web of stories shape our identity that harden into beliefs and values, ethics and ideals. So much of who we are isn't of our own creation but absorbed without thinking from the stories in which we are raised and taught. And until we meet someone from outside our bubble, we don't even realize how much our worldview is shaped by all the narratives that surround us. We don't even realize we're telling ourselves a story that we didn't create. We've identified with it so strongly.

That's one of the reasons why I enjoy Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's [famous TED talk](#) released in July of 2009. She describes her experience of growing up in Nigeria, the child of a university professor. She started reading at an early age and was writing as she began elementary school. She grew up relating to the cultures of the world. So, when she arrived to go to school in the United States, she was surprised by the deluded story her roommate had projected on her of coming from a rural village, living in a hut with a dirt floor and a thatched roof such as she might have seen in a National Geographic magazine or the Discovery Channel. Her roommate hadn't expected she could use a stove or listened to or enjoyed contemporary western music.

What I so appreciate about Adichie is she doesn't exempt herself from the danger of a single story. She absorbed American prejudice about Mexicans. She listened to the news reports of people striving to cross our Southern Border and the racist discussion of the immigration controversy. She had the opportunity to visit Mexico and arrived with biased ideas much like her roommate. She was surprised to see a modern city that didn't look so different from an American metropolitan city. She realized she had fooled herself by her uncritical acceptance of an American single story she had picked up in the media.

This is happening to us all the time. We all have limited experiences of the world. I've never lived in Alabama or Georgia, or Dubai, or Moscow, or Shanghai or Lahore, or New Delhi, or Nairobi, or Glasgow. I know I have prejudices and stereotypes floating around in my head that are untrue yet bias my opinions about these places and the rest of the world. This is especially true of the developing parts of the world. My trips to Thailand and Sri Lanka were greatly enriched by the indigenous people I met and our conversations and meals together.

I suspect we all know this. Yet we don't hold all our stories lightly, willing to modify them when we get new information or learn something new. Why? We get *strongly attached to our stories* and integrate them into our identity. My stories, in fact, define who I am and what I value and believe. Not only are my stories important to me, they are very important to my tribe, to the people with whom I closely identify. And in a time of social polarization, the stories we share become even more important.

Science educator Neil deGrasse Tyson [tells the story](#) of the husband of a co-worker who didn't believe that astronauts had landed on the moon. It was all fake. Tyson asked him if he was willing to consider evidence that would prove it to be true. The man said yes. Tyson asked him, what kind of evidence would be persuasive? He said, actual pictures of men on the moon. So Tyson sent him to a web site full of those kind of pictures. After he had visited the web site, Tyson asked him if he had been persuaded. The man

responded that, yes, the pictures were very interesting . . . but it was a NASA web site and he was suspicious that NASA had faked them. Tyson responded, ““You asked me what would convince you, and I gave you that evidence, and you’re still not convinced. So we are done. It means you are not prepared to be convinced.”

Such is the sorry state of the poor paralytic beside the healing waters. For most of his life he has been languishing beside the healing waters expecting to be saved and making up stories to explain why it hasn’t happened. Yet, when Jesus tells him, “Get up, pick up your mat and walk around,” he picked up his mat and started walking.

One way to understand this story is literally. Jesus used his supernatural healing power and the man was healed. Bolz-Weber doesn’t do that, nor will I. A better story is Jesus challenged his single story of healing failure and helplessness and challenged him to take charge of his life. The challenge shook him out of his narrative long enough to pick up his mat and discover, at some point, healing had happened. What held him back from realizing it was his previous story about himself. He was caught in a self-limiting story of helplessness and hopelessness.

There are powerful parallels with addiction. Substance abuse can lock people into self-destructive stories and identities that are quite difficult to change and break out of. This is especially true based on the way one’s body metabolizes an addictive substance or the family addiction story into which one is born and raised. Sometimes an inner or outer jolt is needed to break the hold of the story. Someone might need to say, “Nadia, nothing is wrong with you. You just need to deal with your life.” Someone might need to tell you, “Get up, pick up your mat and walk.”

That happened to me last Sunday. I’m *very* attached to the story I told because it initiated some important transformations in my life. It is a touchstone that changed how I live and engage with life. It has parallels with how getting hit by a car on my moped at the age of 20 altered the course of my life. (Today I’m striving for other ways to wake up than getting hit by something.)

So, when my story was criticized after I told it, it brought up a lot of emotion for me. It put in doubt all that learning and all that transformation. Had I deluded myself? Had I taken the wrong lesson from my experience. Had it reinforced my biases rather than broken them?

As I processed my story and the reactions, I consciously worked to let go of my attachments and allow in the questioning. Had I not told the story effectively? Could I have added or subtracted from the story to make it less potentially harmful?

What I realized in conversation with Jora Cohen and Anne Marie Haber, was the harmful elements of the story *were built into* the story. I couldn’t tell the story publicly without potentially causing harm because of the way it *could* reinforce other people’s harmful stories. It just isn’t an appropriate story to tell in public.

What I’m happy to report is the result of that processing is finding resolution and a new story. Now I understand my old story in new and different ways that has clarified it. Now I know how to work with that story in the future to lessen the possibility that I might cause harm. Now I have an even greater appreciation for the value of dialogue when someone tells me my words or actions have caused harm. It is a moment when learning, growth and development can happen. And learning, growth and development is meaningful, of high value and very satisfying for me. Even if it is unpleasant and painful in the process.

We are all walking around with dangerous and damaging stories in us. This is the ground implicit bias and racism grows in. Without being hyper alert to defending our minds against them, they implant themselves in us like viruses and use us to reproduce and infect others. Social media has amplified and accelerated the reinfection rate to dangerous levels. Our minds are very vulnerable to infection through repetition without vigorous critical thinking defenses. And even then, they sneak through.

Built into our Unitarian Universalist anti-authoritarian approaches to religion are the tools we need. A recognition of the importance and value of multiple viewpoints and diverse experiences is a powerful defense against single stories. Implicit, and becoming more explicit, is our commitment to non-harming. If I say something or do something that causes harm, I have a responsibility to respond, and be accountable for what I say or do. That goes for all of us, but especially those of us in leadership positions.

We are human so we are going to tell stories. Some of those stories will affirm universal elements of our humanity. Some of those stories will be full of delusions and errors. By telling, revising and re-telling our stories again and again, potentially, they can get better and better. That refining process will take many different perspectives and life experiences, the kind of diversity we celebrate and encourage in our congregations.

Some stories will become life-giving touchstones.

Some stories will need to be retired.

And, some *new* stories will be born in their place.

Many stories, not just one.