

The Stories We Tell Ourselves



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The Stories We Tell Ourselves

One evening back in the early 60's I was sitting with a college buddy named Bob in The Friendly Tavern. Odd that I should remember his name or the name of the tavern, because I don't remember much else about the evening. I don't remember his last name. I presume, but don't clearly remember, that we were smoking cigarettes and sipping mugs of beer (mild 3.2 beer was all we could get in Kansas those days, and we were innocent of any thoughts of weeds other than tobacco). Half a century churns evenings like that one into hazy, bucolic nostalgia.

But one memory stands out. A young woman, a black woman (perhaps, to be completely politically correct, I should say, a young woman who happened to be black) entered the tavern and went to the bar to buy something. What she did next, I don't know, because this memory is only marginally about her. Part of my rememberer wants to tell me that she bought something and left, but I don't put much confidence in that.

What I do remember is that the young lady caught our attention. Boys that age notice young females, and having blacks commingle with whites in taverns was still rather novel in our part of the world. Remember that Kansas was the source of the *Brown v. The Topeka Board of Education* ruling by the Supreme Court, the decision that broke the legal dam holding back the waters of racial integration. That ruling was just a few years old, and we really weren't used to having blacks around at all. Selma, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, race riots, and the exposé of the filthy underbelly of racial segregation: these were all years in our future.

Anyway, as we watched her walk to the bar, Bob turns to me and tells me a story, a tale of another black woman he remembered, and it was far from flattering. It is that story, that anecdote, that stands out in my mind like a beacon through the fog, not the details, much less the exact words, though the essence is clear. What struck me, what I will never forget, was that he chose to tell that particular story on just that occasion.

Why? What made his tale suddenly so appropriate that he should interrupt whatever thread of conversation we were engaged in to tell it. He told not about the young woman we were watching, but some other woman who had flitted in and out of his life, leaving no indelible trace other than his story. The only connection to the present situation was that it dealt with a young black woman. Yet it popped into his head as irresistibly as a shriek of brakes. That story had come to define his concept of black people. It expressed his archetype of the race. And while I never heard him tell it again, I expect he trotted it out, perhaps with embellishments, whenever a black woman made an appearance in his life.

Of course, the story I am telling you is similar. For it is my tale of the end of my ... is "innocence" the right word? At the time I know that I merely smiled and nodded, as one is supposed to do when a friend tells a "naughty" story. Remember, political correctness was hardly a standard back then. It would have been laughed at, just as we laughed at everything else. We told mean-spirited tales and jokes lampooning anyone different from the group we were currently in. I almost certainly did not see the word 'bigot' flash through my head. I suspect that my classifying Bob's story as an act of bigotry is one of those subtle revisions that we make to our memories as we review them in light of later

experience. But it clearly made an impression on me. I was obviously sufficiently uncomfortable with his story that it stuck around long enough to be reclassified.

Here we have two stories, one within the other, each with different, indeed, conflicting morals: the inner story explaining and justifying racial antipathy; the outer story highlighting and condemning racial bigotry. Note that neither story was about **people**; they were about **characters**. Bob was not telling a story about a real person with a life filled with hopes and fears, successes and failures, takes and mistakes. His story may have been spawned from an incident involving a real person, but her life before or after that incident made no difference. So far as his tale and its role in his life were concerned, she was just a character, an archetypal example to be made fun of.

At the same time my story is not about Bob, the person, the friend whose life wove an intricate tapestry with my own for several years before the threads took their separate directions. My story is about Bob the character, whose story-telling of that evening has become my own archetype of low-level but pernicious bigotry, which even today imposes a severe filter on the kind of stories, anecdotes and humor I am willing to relate. Bob the person might not have been a bigot. It's possible, I suppose, that he was embarrassed by hearing himself tell the story, and that from then on he struck it from his repertory. I'd like to think that, for he and I were good friends throughout college, and nothing I remember of his later behavior ever reinforced the impression I took from that one occasion. On the other hand, that possibility is not part of my story; to include it would complicate the archetype, and the story would lose its punch.

And stories are important. We use stories to explain ourselves. Every religion has its stories. The *Hebrew Bible*, that is, the *Old Testament*, is an extensive compilation of the stories of the Jewish people, while the *Christian Bible*, that is, the *New Testament*, is the source of many stories told by Christians. Most of us here are intimately familiar of the stories of the birth and death of Jesus, tales told over and over on countless occasions. Somewhat less often we hear the stories of Christ's miracles and healings, as though the skepticism of our age has cast a doubt on them. Still less it seems do we hear Jesus's simple message of love and compassion, and never with the flamboyance of the former. (Can you imagine Mel Gibson producing a movie about the Sermon on the Mount with the same energy he applied to *The Passion of Christ*?) Although we may aspire to love in the ideal, we doubt its efficacy in this dangerous world, and are much more impressed by stories of power.

Islam also has its stories. In her book *The Martyr Imam*, Professor Salwa Al-Amd shows how Sunni and Shiite muslims came to different interpretations of the story of a single figure, Al-Husayn, son of the Prophet Muhammad's ... daughter.²

¹ Mel Gibson, producer, *The Passion of Christ*, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0335345/>

² Hossam Tammam, translated By R. Abdelazim, "Al-Husayn: the Shiite Martyr, the Sunni Hero", review of *The Martyr Imam*, by Professor Salwa Al-Amd, http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=Article_C&pagename=Zone-English-ArtCulture%2FACELayout&cid=1158658304787

Al-Husayn was martyred in Karbala' on the Day of 'Ashura' ... and this has since been considered the most well-known embodiment of the difference between the Sunnis and Shiites in respect to the notion of martyrdom.

Al-Husayn, according to Sunni tradition, is a historical personality that attained martyrdom in a special historical event. Accordingly, Sunnis deal with the tragedy of Karbala' by investigating the historical causes that led to the martyrdom of Al-Husayn and his companions. Sunnis may at times differ in estimating its causes and results, what is right and what is wrong about it, but never ignore Al-Husayn's grandreligious rank, affirmed by religious texts and his being the Prophet Muhammad's ... grandson.

On the other hand, the ... Shiite perception of the martyr reflects a pure ideological stance. Apart from history, Al-Husayn and his martyrdom in Karbala' signify a symbol, an issue whose significance overwhelms any historical meaning. Whilst the historical element is dropped, the personality becomes legendary and a saintly halo is conferred on Al-Husayn, approximating him to the status of Prophets, or even holier. The Day of 'Ashura' is given extreme consecration, manifested in the Shiite writings on the person of Al-Husayn and the memory of his martyrdom....

Shiites depict Al-Husayn as the stem of prophethood, not just an offspring of the Prophet...; one who is eternally present and whose more-than-prophetic miracles manifested before his birth, during his lifetime and after his martyrdom. His tragic death in Karbala' is as ancient as earth itself, not merely an incident. The holy day of 'Ashura' derives its sacredness from the fact that Al-Husayn was murdered on it. The martyrdom of Al-Husayn is itself simply the embodiment of an Eternal Divine Will.

Unitarianism and Universalism also have their stories, stories about King Sigismund of Transylvania, the first Unitarian king; about the Unitarian founders of the United States; about the transcendentalist revolution of religious thinking; about the rejection of hell as unworthy of a good god.

All Souls itself has its stories, stories about its birth in the factionalization of OUUC, stories about its mission as a place where everyone was welcome to be a valued member, where we governed and managed ourselves through consensus. The story is beautiful, even if recent events cast doubt on the fulfillment of that dream.

But perhaps more important than any of the canonical stories are the personal ones, the ones you tell of your disengagement from the faith of your fathers, of your finding Unitarian Universalism, of your finding All Souls.

I remember with emotional clarity that occasion in college when I finally realized I no longer believed in Christianity, having concluded that its stories could not be reconciled with science. I remember the bunk bed in the fraternity room, where I broke out in unabashed weeping. I remember the Christian missionary I went to for counseling, and his willingness to say anything, whatever it took, true or false, to keep me in the fold.

My wife Marilyn often told a story of seeing a relative who had just passed way. The aunt had died in Pennsylvania, but Marilyn saw her in the back yard of the house here in Olympia that was to become our home. She carried this story in the hip pocket of her mind, ready to whip out as armor, whenever my own “rational, scientific” skepticism for life after death became overbearing. I of course was helpless. I had no way of denying the occurrence of the experience, and also no way of proving that she had misinterpreted what she “saw”. I think it was at that point that my elitist intellectualism began to give way to a kind of universalism: there was no value to either of us in my trying to prove her wrong, and great potential damage to our relationship. I accepted the story with that amused tolerance that we adopt for those whose “mistakes” are persistent but not pernicious.

And therein lies a challenge for universalists: we rarely get beyond tolerance for another’s stories to engage in true dialog, to reach true respect. We may listen patiently, but the stories we hear never touch our own. I put my own stories – physics and evolution and philosophy – in a special room in my mind, *the hall of truth*; the rest I lodge on the great *wing of fiction*.

But what is the difference? The odd thing about these stories is that they need not be *true* to be *true*. The lesson I offer from the stories I told above, the *moral*, the *message*, does not require them to be historically accurate, or factual in any way, for them to be reliable indicators of the way I think about the world. That is the message of Joseph Campbell’s extensive work on mythology³, and it is the weakness of fundamentalists of every religion, faith or belief: they are ensnared by literalist thinking; they cannot comprehend how important spiritual principles can be expressed through stories that are not factual and accurate.

But Jesus himself spoke in parables; he told stories that he did not intend to be interpreted as factual, but which nonetheless conveyed important messages. Many archeologists today dispute claims that the *Bible* is in part a literal history of the Jewish people, citing a lack of confirming evidence in the archeological record; but this doesn’t lead them to deny the *truth* of the *Bible*, but to reinterpret it as a spiritual or mythological or metaphorical truth.⁴ At a climactic point in the movie *Secondhand Lions*,⁵ the character Hub (played by Robert Duvall) tells Walter (played by Haley Joel Osment) that something doesn’t have to be true to believe it.

Fiction is important. If an extraterrestrial scholar were to visit our planet, wanting to learn all about us (and if we managed not to blow each other up), he would have much to learn even to reach the level of ordinary people such as you and me. He would of course have to learn our history, both evolutionary and cultural. But that wouldn’t be enough. In order to understand *us* he would have to study our *fiction*. Homer and Aeschylus, Shakespeare and Milton, Twain and Dickens, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, Jane

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_campbell.

⁴ For a competing story to this widespread skepticism, see the works of David Rohl, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Rohl.

⁵ Tim McCanlies, *Secondhand Lions*, 2003, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0327137/>.

Austen and the Brontë sisters, Steinbeck and Faulkner, JRR Tolkien and JK Rowling, Charlie Chaplin and Cecil B. DeMille, Steven Spielberg and Nora Ephron – these and many more are the authors who have penned our souls, though not a word of what they wrote is literally true.

Actually, that's not accurate; each of these authors built their stories on a foundation of fact. Good stories blend fact, embellishment and message, all wrapped up in a package intended to keep the audience listening. Each story has its own recipe for how much of each to include, and the author's judgment about which is which might not coincide with our own. It is not in the author's interest to tell us which is which. Inside the story everything is factual, relative to the story. A story doesn't normally work if you draw a clear line between your facts and your embellishment.

In Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*,⁶ there are elements that seem obviously factual (that is, true to the real world), others that I find extremely dubious, and many that the I can't decide about without doing a lot of expensive research. Brown's ability to blend all of these with a patina of verisimilitude accounts for the success of the book. He got people arguing about what was fact and what was fiction. But what they were arguing about was **not** what was true **inside the story**, but how much the story corresponded to **the real world**.

How should we react to the stories others tell, when they contain elements and messages we cannot accept?

Forrest Church explained his version of universalism by asking his readers⁷ to imagine themselves in a great cathedral on a summer's day, with the sun shining brightly through a wall of stained glass windows. The floor below is dappled with colors that shift from place to place and time to time, depending on the angle of the sun and the shading effects of passing clouds. There is only one sun, one truth, but we all have our own perspectives of it, depending on where we are standing. Each of these perspectives has its own worth, its own value.

And yet ... and yet ... can we really accept Church's story? Can I get my heart and mind and soul to act on idea that all the stories I tell myself are mere **perspectives**? I don't know that I can carry my universalism that far.

For one thing I process fiction differently from fact. When I regard something as fiction, I carve out a room for it in my mind, a place just big enough for all its characters and events as they emerge from the story. If I put the book down for a while, it takes but a little reading later to return to that room, where the characters and their tales spring again to life. On occasion, a character from one story will wander into another, as Falstaff wended his way from Shakespeare's *King Henry IV* to *The Merry Wives of Windsor* to *King Henry V*. Then I have to tunnel from one room to another, creating an interconnected suite. Sometimes the tales told of people and events in the rooms of

⁶ Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*, Random House, 2003, <http://www.randomhouse.com/doubleday/davinci/>.

⁷ Forrest Church, *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology* (Beacon Press, 2009), reprinted at <http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/151706.shtml>.

such a suite are not wholly consistent with each other. But it's fiction, right? I can give the author leeway.

I handle fact, that is, non-fiction, differently. These stories all have to be processed in one big room, my **Hall of Truth**. When multiple stories are told about the creation or Jesus or the war in Afghanistan or health care or taxes or evolution or consciousness or choice or whatever, I cannot simply add these stories to the pile in the appropriate part of the room. They have to be interpreted and integrated. Apparently inconsistent claims have to be rationalized. I have to decide whether to regard a claim as worthy of acting on or as merely something to consider. Moreover I have to examine the causal and logical relationships that associate that information with what is already there. New information can be inserted with only a little effort. But if that information is important at all, my thought processes soon link it to other items in the library, like mental spiders weaving a web. Unlike a physical library, where physical spider webs indicate disuse and neglect, the webs that span from book to book in the hall of truth indicate usage and importance. Replacing a web-laden item is not like choosing a new ring to wear on my finger, it is like replacing the finger itself. It is major surgery.

This process of integration requires a lot of effort. I avoid pursuing it when I am tired. I prefer fiction in the evening; the effort of building a new room in the wing of fiction is much less than upgrading the hall of truth.

Of course, my hall of truth, as big as it is, is rather cluttered now. And I suspect that many of my truths are obsolete and in need of upgrading. Maybe you have the upgrade I need. It is this **maybe** that takes me down the path of universalism beyond mere condescending tolerance. Tell me your story; maybe I can learn from it.

But if what you want to teach me concerns a topic of significance to me, a topic that my mental spiders have woven deep into the webs that hold my thoughts together, be warned: you will need a good story. Not just a story that is good in the telling, though that would be fun. Such a tale might readily find a home in the wing of fiction, but not in the hall of truth. For that would require replacing whole systems of interconnections, and that requires a really good, believable story. You must persuade me not just to listen and enjoy, but to believe.

Sometimes your stories might reveal something that I had not considered, something that helps me reorganize my hall of truth. Sometimes I will not be persuaded, and our halls will continue to differ. On those issues we both cannot be right about the real world; at least one of us is mistaken. But that's okay. As a universalist I believe without reservation that it is not a sin to be mistaken. You and I can enjoy a fruitful relationship despite our differences.

I hope to continue to learn the stories that will make my hall of truth as accurate as possible. But there are lots of stories to hear. Each requires energy to process, to decide what parts of it go into the hall of truth, what into the wing of fiction. In order to husband my limited resources, I have to perform a triage, to select the stories I am willing to pay attention to. In part this means recognizing and avoiding paths that in my earlier investigations led to dead ends. So it may be that my triage cuts your story off before it is fully told, just as your own triage cuts off mine. Each of us is disappointed.

In our heart of hearts we believe that had we told our stories a little better, we would have shown the other hidden but rewarding passages into our own halls of truth. But alas, we must choose.

How much energy should we invest in reconciling our stories? The Dalai Lama answered the question this way:

"I feel there is tremendous convergence and a potential for mutual enrichment through dialogue between the Buddhist and Christian tradition, especially in the areas of ethics and spiritual practice, such as the practices of compassion, love, meditation, and the enhancement of tolerance. And I feel that this dialogue could go very far and reach a deep level of understanding. But when it comes to a philosophical or metaphysical dialogue I feel that we must part company. The entire Buddhist worldview is based on a philosophical standpoint in which the central thought is the principle of interdependence, how all things and events come into being purely as a result of interaction between causes and conditions. Within that philosophical worldview it is impossible to have any room for an atemporal, eternal, absolute truth. Nor is it possible to accommodate the concept of a divine Creation. Similarly, for a Christian whose entire metaphysical worldview is based in belief in the Creation and a divine Creator, the idea that all things and events arise out of mere interaction between causes and conditions has no place within that worldview. So in the realm of metaphysics it becomes problematic at a certain point, and the two traditions must diverge....If you are Christian it is better to develop spiritually within your religion and be a genuine, good Christian. If you are a Buddhist, be a genuine Buddhist....Don't try to put a yak's head on a sheep's body."⁸

I'm inclined to agree. Each of us must devote most of our energy in refining and refurbishing our own halls of truth. The paths you and I take may differ. But we need not believe alike to act together with compassion.

On the other hand as part of a religious community we need to find a common path of exploration that fulfills some of the needs of all our members; but no path, no story will be fully satisfactory to anyone, even the author. That choice imposes a measure of responsibility on all of us. If you don't like the stories being told, tell your own. Bring the common path closer to your own hall of truth. Don't expect anyone else to tell your story.

***This I believe.
This I choose.
Namaste!***

⁸ The Dalai Lama, *The Good Heart* (Wisdom, 1996), 81-82. Quoted by John & Wendy Morehead, in *Buddhist Christians*, 1999, <http://uncletaz.com/wc/wcthread/buddhchrist.html>

Appendix 1. Kingdoms need their castles

*Kingdoms need their castles,
Just as dragons mighty scales.
Without a quest or vision
There's no magic in the tales*

*I savor deeds of wonder
told in prose or told in rhyme
May I never grow too old
To treasure
"Once upon a time"⁹*

⁹ Jennifer L. Aikman-Smith, Dragon Dreams Inc.,
http://www.nika-net.com/CARON_09SITE/nov00files/nov00desf1.html

Appendix 2. Related Sermons by Jim Fulton

1. **Buttons, Buttons, Who Pushed My Buttons**, January 2010,
http://www.asuuc.org/Home_files/Sermons/2010/100124-WhoPushedMyButtons/Buttons.pdf
2. **I Am**, September 2009,
http://www.asuuc.org/Home_files/Sermons/2009/0920-IAm/I%20Am%20....pdf
3. **I Believe - A Universalist Catechism**, September 2009,
http://www.asuuc.org/Home_files/Sermons/2009/0927-IBelieve/UniversalistCatechism.pdf
4. **Love Me, My Valentine**, February 2010,
http://www.asuuc.org/Home_files/Sermons/2010/100214-ValentinesDay/Love%20Me,%20My%20Valentine.pdf
5. **Morality and the Selfish Gene**, November 2009, adapted from Douglas R. Hofstadter, "The Prisoner's Dilemma – Computer Tournaments and the Evolution of Cooperation", "Metamagical Themas", Scientific American, May 1983. Reprinted in Hofstadter, Metamagical Themas, Basic Books, New York, 1985, pp. 715-734.,
http://www.asuuc.org/Home_files/Sermons/2009/1115-Morality&TheSelfishGene/Morality&TheSelfishGene.pdf
6. **On Being Part of a Whole**, October 2009,
http://www.asuuc.org/Home_files/Sermons/2009/1025-PartOfSomething/PartOfSomething.pdf
7. **Phoenix Communion**, January 2010,
http://www.asuuc.org/Home_files/Sermons/2010/100103-PhoenixCommunion/PhoenixCommunion-1003.pdf
8. **Sin and the Universalist**, May 2009,
http://www.asuuc.org/Home_files/Sermons/2009/0524-Sin&Universalist/Sin&Universalist.pdf
9. **Universalism**, March 2009,
http://www.asuuc.org/Home_files/Sermons/2009/0315-Universalism/Universalism.pdf