



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“Stories We Could Tell,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on May 4, 2014

Back in January, at the start of my sabbatical, I went to Patagonia, a large and remote region of Argentina and Chile. I'd been dreaming about this for years--leaving our winter to go to where it is summer, where there are trout, in country that's been described as what our West was like a hundred years ago. I went because of a sense that it would be good to go away, far away, if I really was going to step away from parish ministry for a time.

And it was good. Being in a new country, a different culture, it changes your perspective. Things I worry about or obsess over, from that distance, seemed pretty small. I was there, not here.

The first week there it was hot--in the 90s every afternoon. So my companion Mark and I would get up early, in order to start fishing before the heat of the day. We'd leave town before the sun came up, and drive through hill country that's like Wyoming and Montana, but with less people--dry and empty and beautiful. Once we got to the river, we'd walk for thirty minutes or more to reach a place where we'd start fishing. I loved it there--the walking, the wading, being out all day under that big sky.

One morning, the sun was just over the horizon when we set out walking, its golden light making everything beautiful. I was happy: a new day lay ahead, another day in that rugged country with rivers running through it. And as I walked through that beautiful landscape, as I anticipated the trout I might meet that day, I found myself thinking about you. I found myself imagining this day, when we would be back together. I could picture it: all of us gathered here, in this place that we love; I could picture standing before you, as I did a few minutes ago, and saying, “It is so good to be home.”

And it is. My mom used to say, “The best part of a trip is coming home.”

Last fall I said I could preach all year about journey and home as companion metaphors for the spiritual life. This sabbatical, this time to go out into the world, and to be at home, it was a real blessing. I used this time to wander and to wonder, to ask big questions, to think long thoughts. It was both an outward and an inward journey, and a homecoming too--getting in touch with parts of myself I'd almost forgotten about.

These words from the prophet Isaiah often came to mind:

You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace;

the mountains and hills will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field will clap their hands (Isaiah 55:12).

I thought of my journey to Patagonia as a pilgrimage, and a pilgrimage is not the same as a vacation. It's not a time to kick back and check out, but an invitation to pay attention and be open to what may come. It's about letting go of some things, so you can be present to what is. A journey to learn that, wherever you are, you're at home in the world.

You don't have to go anywhere to discover this--but changing your surroundings does help shake things up. I like to think that being part of a community like this one can have the same effect--can cause you to ask big questions, open you up to awe and wonder, can change your life for good.

That's what a pilgrimage is supposed to do--change you. And that's what I worked on during my sabbatical--paying attention and being open to what came up, doing the inner work that too often gets left undone.

I could tell you stories from my four months away. Stories about how I have been changed, how this time has renewed and strengthened me, how I am excited for this next chapter of our life together. And in time, I will.

But first, I want and need to hear your stories. I want to know what has been going on in your lives, and how it is with your souls. I want to hear about how you all have thrived in my absence. And, of course, about your struggles and the losses you have known. I want to hear how you all have changed.

This is about more than just getting reacquainted; more than seeing one another and catching up, as important as that will be. Today I want to lift up storytelling as a holy act, as a key element of our common life. In a faith community we need to know each other's stories. This will happen naturally over time; I'm just thinking we need to be more intentional about it, to hold open the time and space for you to share your story, and hear the stories of others.

We each have stories that we tell, that shape how we live our lives: that help us to make sense of things; consoling us in times of sorrow and loss, encouraging us and giving us strength. And there are stories, aren't there, like tapes that run in our heads, that keep us stuck, living lives that are smaller than our lives are meant to be.

You come here, don't you, to touch what is true and good and real. You come to church, don't you, to hear stories of lives redeemed and transformed; to tell your own stories of struggle and loss, yes, and also your stories of liberation and transformation. But where and when do you get to do this?

For Frederick Buechner, author of today's reading, telling stories is a sacred and life-affirming act. He says telling our stories can put us in touch with that source of life and love some of us call God. He writes, "It is precisely through these stories in all their particularity, as I have long believed and often said, that God makes God's self known to each of us more powerfully and personally. If

this is true, it means that to lose track of our stories is to be profoundly impoverished not only humanly but also spiritually.”¹

Buechner’s father killed himself when Frederick was a child, and over the years he wrestled with that story; he shared it in his work as a writer and preacher. Years later, a stranger approached Buechner and said, “You have been a good steward of your pain.” In other words, “You have taken a terrible experience and made it into something good and useful and even beautiful.” That’s what storytelling can do--bless and transform lives, both of the teller and the hearers.

There’s a hymn in the black church tradition called “When the Morning Comes.” Each verse describes the struggles of human life. But the chorus comes around and tells another truth. It goes

By and by, when the morning comes,
When the saints of God are gathered home,
We’ll tell the story how we’ve overcome;
For we’ll understand it better by and by.

This hymn were written by Charles Albert Tindley, who was born in the middle of the 19th century to a free mother and a slave father. He grew up among slaves, and taught himself to read, then educated himself through correspondence courses. He studied theology and was ordained a Methodist minister. And then Rev. Tindley returned to pastor the church where he had once served as the janitor. He knew something about pain and struggle, and the importance of telling the story of how you’ve overcome.²

One of the things a church offers is a space where people can really see and hear one another--something that’s in short supply these days. These encounters happen all the time around here, when two or three are gathered together.

But Sunday worship and coffee hour don’t tend to provide a space for the kind of sharing and deep listening I’m talking about today--you need more time, and a smaller group, for that. So starting next Sunday I’m offering a weekly gathering, called “Sharing our Stories,” that I hope you’ll check out.

You may have a recent story to share. Or maybe you’ll tell a story that’s been with you for a long time. Even if you don’t come to one of these gatherings, I hope this week you’ll take the time to ponder these things, and ask yourself, “What are the stories that inform my life, that shape how I live?” And then ask, “Are they helpful, or not? If not, what needs to change? What are the stories I could tell?”

Each of us has stories that we tell. They may have been planted in us at an early age; they may be ones that we learned over time. You may have been told, “Please don’t try to sing,” so you still don’t. You may have learned that other people have all the luck, so you have forgotten how to hope. Some stories may have served a purpose once, but have now outlived their usefulness.

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Telling Secrets*, 30.

² This story is told online at http://www.hymnary.org/text/trials_dark_on_every_hand

Here's an example. A story I told myself, that I lived by for a number of years, was that there was never enough time to do everything I wanted. I don't know if this started when I was a parent of young children, or a freelancer, or both--and it doesn't matter. My pattern was to hurry along, to equate busyness with importance, and too often, I'm ashamed to admit, I didn't pay as much attention to the present moment, and the people in it, as I should have.

Then came my sabbatical, when there was enough time. There was nothing but time. And I tried to not fill it. That's what a sabbatical is, a sabbath; time to slow down, rest and reflect. I discovered, paradoxically, that when you move slower, time seems to expand. And I learned another story, that says there is always enough time for what matters.

Now that I'm back, some of you might be inclined to tell me, "Time to pick up the pace; time to get back up to speed." But that story, which is so prevalent in our busy culture, it isn't mine any more. I've left it behind; it's from the time I now call "Before Sabbatical," also known as B.S. I'm not buying it anymore.

I've got a new story, and I'm sticking with it--that there's no need to hurry, because there's enough time for what matters. My job is to be present--to you and your stories, and to the larger story we are all part of. This is the real work I'm about, and it requires being what Eugene Peterson calls an "unbusy pastor."

And don't you have a similar job--to be present to your life, to know your particular story? I want to hear about your lives--what's happened, how you've changed. And I want us to hear one another, to listen for the story or stories that are emerging in our midst. And to ask, what will the next chapter of our life together bring? What can we imagine together? What are the stories we could tell?

The spiritual life is about going out and coming back, finding companions and finding our way. Lines from a favorite hymn describe these connections we share:

Drifting here with my ship's companions,
all we kindred pilgrim souls,
making our way by the lights of the heavens,
in our beautiful blue boat home.³

Whether walking the dry plains of Patagonia or wading its clear cold rivers; whether walking the streets of Haverhill or watching the waters of the Merrimack flow toward the sea; wherever we go, we're all passengers on this beautiful blue green planet earth. My spiritual companions, here we are, together, in this place. Isn't it good? It's so good to be home!

Amen.

³ Peter Mayer, "Blue Boat Home," hymn # 1064 in *Singing the Journey*.