



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Once upon the time: The Power of Story

Clay Nelson © 6 May 2018

“May the sins of the father be visited upon his children.” This was the inscription in a book sent as a gift by my mother to my first born. The book was *Dumbo*. Confused by her sentiment, I called my mother to thank her and ask what she meant. She explained that when I was very young I insisted she read this story to me nearly every night. Sending this gift was her way of taking revenge, although she probably thought of it as balancing the scales of justice.

I have wondered since how much Walt Disney’s story of a young elephant, ridiculed and bullied for his over-sized ears, shaped who I would become, or was I simply drawn to him out of primal self-recognition. What was it about the story that so captured me? Was it the love of his mother who sought to protect him? Perhaps it was a nascent sense of outrage at the cruelty he endured by others? Could it have been Timothy the mouse who encouraged him not to believe his critics but believe in himself? Was it his eventually soaring over his tormentors when he learned his ears allowed him to fly? I hope it wasn’t because I identified with his name. I was only two or three after all. I really can’t say at this point. What I do know is that being read to nightly gave me a deep love for anything that began, “Once upon a time”.

I was not choosy. Growing up I read voraciously. I liked to read stories about people, places, historical events and the future, the gods and God, heroes, dragons and angels, mysteries and adventures. Nowadays I still like to read such stories but they are on my iPad as my bookshelves are full. But even better, I still like to be read to. I love listening to audio books. I used to have to listen to them on cassette tapes. Now they are on my phone. I can wake up and go to sleep listening to them. I can listen in the car or while doing the laundry or preparing dinner. In a quick count since Christmas, I have listened to 31 books, most of them 20 to 35 hours long.

Stories, of course, don’t just exist in books or in audio formats. Movies tell stories. My first born was not drawn to *Dumbo*, but to the movie *The Wizard of Oz*. She played the VHS tape over and over again until her mother and I went mad. Apparently it is the most watched film in history. I blame her for its achievement. Her younger sister was equally enamoured by *The Sound of Music*, making me long for the days of listening to the Munchkins sing *Ding Dong the Wicked Witch is Dead* instead of Liesl singing *I am sixteen, going on seventeen*. I’m sure my mother was over the rainbow in delight.

Stories are everywhere. Our prehistoric ancestors told them in paintings on cave walls. Newspapers and the nightly news love sharing human interest stories. Faith communities build worship around stories of Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, Muhammed, Siddhartha, Vishnu, Confucius, and many others. The growing interest in genealogy is ultimately about collecting family stories, not just proving you are related to someone famous. Ballads and epic poems are popular for capturing stories that enchant us. Shakespeare’s continued popularity is certainly based on the universality of his stories. “All the world’s a stage,

and all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances, And one man in his time plays many parts.”

I’ve been reflecting on why we are so attached to stories. My thought is that we are repositories of stories that shape who we are, give us meaning and direction, and connect us to one another. We are also instruments of story. Our lives are a pen put to paper. We ourselves are stories. We write them. BUT, not all stories are equal...

Rumours and gossip are destructive stories. I gather our prime minister’s partner has had to endure them lately. While not true, these stories have been detrimental to her work and his sense of well-being. If you have ever had to endure slanderous stories, helpless to counter them effectively, you know stories have power. But stories told to smear us are not nearly as harmful as some stories we tell ourselves. During time for all ages I shared the story of *The Beautiful Tiger* by Christopher Buice.

It is a cautionary and hopeful tale of what happens when we surrender our power to stories like these. The strong and beautiful tiger is captured by a mean man and placed in a cage. Over and over, the tiger hears that she is weak and ugly. Even though the tiger spies her own reflection in the water and recognizes her beauty, and even though she moves around the cage and feels the power of her own body, the tiger allows herself to believe the man.

That mean man is stories we tell ourselves of our insecurities and limitations and fears. It isn’t until a lion arrives to befriend and challenge the tiger’s narrative that the tiger can unlock a self-limiting story. As it turns out the cage isn’t even locked. The cage is of the tiger’s own making, the bars are the story that’s been repeated so often that it became her truth.

What do these stories sound like? Do any of these reside within you?

I don’t have enough time.

I don’t have enough money.

Nothing ever works out for me.

No one will help me.

I’m always disappointing people.

People are always disappointing me.

I’m too loud, too quiet, too short, too tall, too old, too young.

I’m unlovable.

I’m not a leader.

No one wants to hear what I have to say.

I’m not ready.

I’m not good enough.

I don’t have anything to offer.

If any of these are stories you tell yourself, have you tried to push open the unlocked door? You, your family and friends, this community need you to come out of your cage. You can’t honour the inherent worth and dignity of others if you don’t honour your own. Only then can you write new stories, stories of hope, empowerment and liberation the world longs to hear over and over again.

Individuals are not the only repositories of stories. So are communities. Certainly, this building houses countless stories. Some have been self-limiting, like we are too small, too poor. There is only so much so few can do. And so on, but there are many more stories that this community has written that inspire and give hope and need to be remembered and retold. Wayne Facer's recently published book about the splendid vision of our first minister, William Jellie, is one such story. But there are countless more that, when taken as a whole, tell of how this small congregation has been a bastion of progressive religion: from providing perhaps the first public library in Auckland to Jos Vroegop and David Fougere blocking American naval ships from entering the harbour in their canoe to being the venue for New Zealand's first same-sex marriage to providing sanctuary to Indian students threatened with deportation. But there are still new chapters to write that tell the story of who we are now and who we are striving to be.

I see us looking into the water and seeing our reflection as a beautiful powerful tiger, as people who are generous, loving, grateful, and joyful. I see us striving to be a prophetic church, a church that speaks and seeks justice, kindness, and compassion. A church that will not be controlled by self-limiting stories of powerlessness. A church that will not be silenced. A church that grapples with the issues of our time and builds the beloved community. A church that ventures boldly into the public square to demand justice and fairness – and to challenge the stories that are imprisoning and limiting all of us.

You know the stories I mean. Stories like these: people who get arrested or spend time in prison must have done something wrong; everyone has an equal opportunity in this country and if you work hard you'll get ahead; marriage is between a man and a woman; my religion makes it acceptable for me to deny your rights in the public square; some people's lives matter more than others; immigrants and refugees are a threat to our culture; jobs and profits are more important than the environment; a woman's work is not as valuable as a man's; domestic violence, racism, child poverty are someone else's problem.

We need to be writing new narratives to change these stories currently caging ourselves and our neighbours. Writing a good story can be difficult. A good story has conflict, but ultimately resolves. A story is messy and full of confusion, but there is meaning and completeness to it. A story is about people and places, not ideas and concepts.

Stories are concrete, absolute, and certain. Yet, they are mysterious. Stories have natural momentum to them, fuelling our passion to find out more from the teller.

Stories are laden with intrigue, with suspense and tension. Stories are provocative.

Fortunately, we have our principles and our Unitarian history to guide us in writing a good tale. They have been opening cage doors for five centuries now. They are our lion. They tell us how beautiful we are and teach us how to roar.