



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Telling your story, fact or fiction

Clay Nelson © 30 September 2018

On Friday, while trying to get a handle on how best to approach the topic of “Telling your story, fact or fiction,” I was given a riveting example.

Like millions around the world, I was caught up in the drama of Dr Christine Blasey Ford telling her story to the Senate Judiciary Committee of being sexually assaulted by President Trump’s nominee for the United States Supreme Court, Brett Kavanaugh. I was deeply moved by her testimony and the price she was willing to pay to tell her story, even though the outcome of a questionable process had been fore-ordained by the Republican majority since day one. What good will telling her story do? some may ask. She has received death-threats, been forced from her home, been subject to cruel and unsubstantiated character assassination, and much more for having done so. No matter what the ultimate vote on Kavanaugh is, the prevalence of sexual assault has been exposed once again. The reasons for it having been under-reported in a patriarchal, misogynist society have been made prominently self-evident. And most importantly, it has given courage to a large number of women to now tell their story anyway. Telling your story can be liberating, for yourself, for others and for the common good. It can bring about change.

I have clearly shown my hand. I found Dr Ford completely credible. While I was inclined to do so in advance by others having come forward with similar accounts of Judge Kavanaugh’s alleged egregious behaviour, it was his blustery, intemperate response to her testimony that made her case for me. It reeked of elite male privilege that permitted him to angrily remonstrate against those who would deny him his rightful due. Imagine how a woman would be castigated for speaking similarly. I have to assume it was the only response available to him after her testimony, even though it revealed his utter unsuitability for the position for which he has been nominated.

So what insights did this drama offer about telling our story? What makes it fact or fiction?

Anthropologists tell us that storytelling is central to human existence. That it’s common to every known culture. That it involves a symbiotic exchange between teller and listener — an exchange we learn to negotiate in infancy.

Just as the brain detects patterns in the visual forms of nature — a face, a figure, a flower — and in sound, so too it detects patterns in information. Stories are recognizable patterns, and in those patterns we find meaning. We use stories to make sense of our world and to share that understanding with others. They are the signal within the noise.

There is clearly a driving force within us that urges us to tell our story and yet there is some ambivalence about making ourselves vulnerable by doing so. What we tell a recent acquaintance will be different from a close friend who shares part of our story, as will be the story we only tell ourselves. While we can control what we share we cannot control how the listener hears it. We all have filters that evaluate and shape what we hear. That’s why not

everyone finds the same joke funny or why everyone does not share my response to the Ford/Kavanaugh testimonies.

Then there is the challenge about how to tell the story. For 15 years I mentored small groups seeking to obtain the equivalent of a seminary degree in theology. It was a four-year commitment for each participant. Each of those four years began with writing and sharing our spiritual autobiography. As the mentor I was not exempt from the task. One year we were asked to write it much like a resumé. I was born in 1949 in Coral Gables Florida. I had one younger sibling. My father was a university professor. My mother was a homemaker. I began school in Sandy Oregon. Etc. Not very captivating but all factual.

Another year we had to tell our story around milestones in our lives: First day of school, first date, first job, marriage, birth of a child, death of a parent and the like. Still factual and in part verifiable, but more interpretive of how these milestones impacted us at the time and later. Certainly our story becomes a little more interesting.

Another year we had to select a few key events in our lives that most shaped where we were today in our journey. We were moving further away from factual, not in the sense that they weren't true, but they were our interpretation of the event. There might not have been any witnesses to them. They weren't documented but they were no less real than a graduation diploma on our wall. We were moving into unsafe territory as it often meant sharing mistakes, failures, disappointments, traumas, losses as well as successes and times of joy. The depth and openness shared depended on the trust the individual felt with the group. These stories had a greater impact than the earlier ones because they were less individualised and more universal, allowing others to identify with the storyteller and hook their story to theirs.

The fourth year we had to take the previous year's list of events and choose one that most changed us. How did it impact how we see others and ourselves, determines our life choices, our views of the world? No one wants to tell a story that says I have never changed. I'm the same person I always was. It is stories of redemption that draw us in and help us find meaning in our own stories. These stories are less about fact versus fiction and more about truth.

In 2003, author James Frey published a bestselling autobiographical memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*, purportedly detailing his struggle to overcome addiction. Nearly three years later, during an appearance on *Oprah*, he admitted that several supposedly factual details had been embellished or fabricated. All later editions of the book included a note from Frey, admitting his embellishments but claiming that his primary mistake had been "writing about the person I created in my mind to help me cope, and not the person who went through the experience."

Deep down, we are all raconteurs, drawing on past memories and weaving them into a coherent narrative to construct our autobiographical selves.

Dan McAdams, a psychologist at Northwestern University who specialises in the autobiographical self, has identified three distinct layers to the autobiographical self. By the age of two, most of us can recognise ourselves in mirrors and understand how we fit in relation to others. At this point, we are *actors* in our personal narratives, defining ourselves by explicit traits and the roles we play. We might be shy and conscientious students, while others are funny, outgoing, and popular.

Around the age of 8, we add another layer: the self as agent. Now, in addition to being actors in our own lives, we also perceive our own agency: we can look at our past, project into the future, and set goals, whether we want to become an astronaut, a writer, or merely find a best friend. Finally, as we move into early adulthood, we embrace the self as author, developing a narrative identity that we continue to hone for the rest of our lives to describe what kind of actors we are, and why, as agents, we do what we do.

McAdams' conclusions are based on hundreds of personal life story interviews, conducted over many years, with adults from all walks of life. The subjects are asked to imagine their lives as a book, with chapters, just like a novel. Then McAdams asks them to focus on key scenes: a high point, a low point, a turning point, a negative early memory, a positive early memory, and so on — all universal elements of a good narrative. The broad strokes are the same: We all experience many such moments over the course of our lives, and we weave them into our story as it evolves.

Next, McAdams asks the subject to identify those people who have filled the roles of heroes and villains. Subjects are also asked to think about future chapters — goals and aspirations — and how their values and beliefs are reflected in the full arc of the personal narrative.

Finally McAdams asks subjects to identify overarching themes running through their stories. One common theme is redemption, particularly among people he calls “highly generative” — those who volunteer in soup kitchens or political campaigns, start their own non-profit charity, or otherwise seek to make a positive impact on the world. Their stories invariably involve hardship and suffering, but with an optimistic twist: they triumphed over their woes, learned valuable life lessons from the pain, and emerged stronger for it.

This doesn't mean that non-highly generative people are necessarily worse storytellers; their stories just don't have highly redemptive themes. It requires a lot of hard work to be a generative person — how much easier would be to just stay home and watch *Dancing with the Stars*? — and McAdams thinks that having a strong redemptive narrative serves as a motivational tool.

I think the lasting power of the world's great religions is their writings are full of redemptive stories that motivate us to be better human beings.

Without redemptive stories I would argue there would be no great literature. I don't want to live in a world without Beowulf, Jane Eyre, Ebenezer Scrooge, Jean Valjean, Anna Karenina, Raskolnikov, and so many more whose lives encompass the overcoming of hardships, who struggle with all of our human frailties, suffer our guilts, find forgiveness, seek justice, find themselves in life's chaos, while weaving their stories into ours. I'm a better person because of their fictional stories. Without them would I be so passionate to re-establish a cosmic balance where the world is a little more just? Would I be as empathetic to those others would scorn?

I suspect there are many numerous redemptive stories in this room today waiting to be told. I base that on you being drawn to Unitarianism. We believe in a world that can be redeemed. It is why we stand up for justice and choose to be on the side of love. We have transformed theological thinking over the centuries, not just in our own tradition, to be more progressive,

rational and more open to change. I encourage you to tell your stories. They will give hope and vision and courage to others and that could make all the difference.