

## “Everybody’s Got a Story”

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Fiona Heath, Intern Minister  
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto

*"A story is the shortest distance between people."* Pat Speight

### Call to Worship

These are the days that have been given to us;  
Let us rejoice and be glad in them.

These are the days of our lives;  
Let us live them well in love and service.

These are the days of mystery and wonder;  
Let us celebrate them in gratitude together.

These are the days that have been given to us;  
Let us make of them stories worth telling.

*William Murry (adapted)*

## “Everybody’s Got a Story”

In my twenties I spent one fall living on a farm. It was in Northern Saskatchewan and I was taking part in a social ecology program. We were learning how to live sustainable lives in the country. We were all poor and lost in some way.

A man struggling with his marriage. A single mother. Four students not knowing what to do next. Including me. I was lonely and underemployed at a Mark’s WorkWearHouse clearance store in Ottawa. I wanted more. We all did. We wanted community, integrity, nature. We wanted to learn how to live better.

We came to find answers, but mostly we found root vegetables.

It was very cold. We ate a lot of borscht. We picked garlic under a full moon. We stared open mouthed at the dancing northern lights.

We found that it was hard to create community in isolation. That poverty is tough, even with company. That running water indoors is a great, great gift.

There was no tv, so we told each other stories when we weren't out watching the northern lights. Stories from our lives. Stories about our hopes and dreams. We retold the events of the day, turning them into stories.

**Everybody has a story.** And we so often don't hear those stories, the stories that matter. The stories not just of what we did, but why we did what we did. The stories that we tell to ourselves – and maybe not anyone else - that shape our identity. The stories of our lives, the events both great and small, which define us. The writer Isak Dinesen says “To be a person is to have a story to tell”.

When I first left Northern Saskatchewan, it was with a great sense of failure. The program had imploded through a lack of leadership, the isolation and the poverty. I told myself I was a failure. That it had been a stupid thing to even try. Another dumb, poorly thought out choice. I told myself that I wasn't cut out for adventure.

I mocked the families who had shared their farms with us. It became a comic misadventure, populated by eccentric farmers with outhouses and bad teeth.

I didn't mock my fellow participants though. I could have, because we were all eccentric to one degree or another. But I did not. Not just out of solidarity, but because I knew their most intimate stories. Mental illness. Lost love. Family conflict.

By holding each other's stories we became, in a way, obligated. In being honest in our storytelling, we had created a sense of responsibility, a sense of care. Not that it meant we were any kinder or nicer to one another on a daily basis, but we were perhaps more tolerant, forgave more easily.

Knowing someone's stories builds connections between you. When you hear in their story an echo of your own, they become more real to you. We live in a society that is superficial. That appears obsessed with hair colour, traffic, and tim horton's. It is hard to get past the small talk of weather and the traffic. It is easy to forget that the taxi driver just might have a phd.

Once there is a connection, once you have really heard someone's story, it is harder to treat them like an object or a problem. It is hard not see them as a fellow human being.

The program in Saskatchewan was led by a director who had a full time, off farm job and was hardly there. We didn't get to hear much of her story. Looking back, I can see she did tell it in pieces. Her sense of isolation, her deep love for the prairies, her concern for the future. But I wasn't able to hear her story. Not properly. She was too clearly defined as part of the problem. It is hard to hear the stories of the people we don't like so much.

Think about that person who drives you crazy at work or the relative you wish lived out of cell phone range. Maybe they have a story you need to hear. Maybe you have a story they need to hear.

Ulla shared part of her story today. Of children mixing concrete. Of Quakers bringing books. World Accord expeditions are powerful, not only because they build schools, but because of the connections created. Connections strengthened through telling the stories. Stories bring us together. They connect us at a visceral, feeling level. Matthew Fox calls stories “knowledge passed through the heart”.

Stories, personal stories, make people real to us. Hearing a story helps us make connections in a deep and profound way. **Stories can transform.**

This isn't to suggest we should go around telling everyone everything about our lives. That would be too much information. The introverts among us would totally freak out. And in a superficial culture, even our personal stories can be turned into a consumer item – look at all those reality shows. Telling our stories includes a judgement call about the right time or place or person.

But nor should we hide our stories. We know when we need to tell one of our stories. We get that bubbling up pressure in the chest. It can be scary. People might not be ready to hear. Especially if it is painful or tragic. The hardest thing we can do sometimes is tell our stories.

Maya Angelou says “there is no agony like bearing an untold story inside of you.” **It is healing to speak, it is healing to be heard.** Ivar came back to the joy of living once his story of lost love was told. But he needed a King who was able to listen.

In this busy society it can be hard to find a listener. And we start to forget that our lives are interesting. That we have stories worth telling. That we are fabulous people. Bombarded as we are by images of all the pretty people in magazines. saturated in stories of car chases, quick escapes, hostage takings. It is hard not feel that packing lunch for your kids lacks a little drama. But to be a person is to have a story to tell. We need to tell our stories, shape ourselves through story.

I took a counseling class at the seminary in which people had the opportunity to explore their pasts. I knew a few people. I knew them as sweet, safe, church ladies.

Boy, was I wrong. I was astonished at their stories – sometimes tragic, always surprising. Some were still struggling to heal, others were moving forward with power and grace. Some stories were big and dramatic, others quiet but just as painful. It reminded me how quickly I make assumptions about others. How easily I stick to the surface. And how wonderful we all are, what depths we have. I will never look at a church lady the same way again.

In counseling, narrative therapy helps people discern what stories are shaping their lives. The therapist helps us to find aspects of the story we can't see clearly, that might bring out a strength instead of a weakness. That might help us make a different choice. So that our stories help instead of hinder.

It is easy to tell ourselves stories that beat us down. Life can be painful and terrible. We all suffer from failure, from letting others down, from letting ourselves down. I can easily catalogue my limitations, from the stupid awkward moments to the larger betrayals. They often play in endless loops in my head.

On the bad days, it takes no effort to belittle ourselves. To tell hopeless tales painting ourselves as the fool, the loser, the idiot. Or is that just me?

When I first left northern Saskatchewan, I felt like a failure. And I lived that out for a few years, being afraid to take risks, second guessing every decision in case it was another stupid one.

But I tell a different story now. The program was a failure, I was not. I was unkind and careless at times. I handled the conflict with little grace. But I was also funny. I was helpful, kind most of the time. I baked a great loaf of bread. I managed not to kill anyone when the car I was driving slid on black ice and fishtailed across the highway. And I realize now that I was loved, even at my weakest and worst, by my companions.

I was loved in the particular. And that was a very good thing. As Barbara Brown Taylor says, who wants to be loved in general? We want to be loved for who we are, for the way we bake a loaf of bread, for the way we stand delighted in the snow, under the northern lights.

Northern Saskatchewan was a long time ago. I've lost touch with my companions. And I often find it hard to remember that I have interesting stories to tell, that I am lovable as I am, faults and gifts together.

So I come here on Sunday morning. To be reminded of my inherent worth and dignity. To be reminded that my default setting is not "loser". That my default setting, your default setting, is "fabulous". We are all whole and holy wonderful beings. With fascinating stories to tell, both the big ones and the small ones.

"There is no way of telling people they are all walking around shining like the sun." wrote Thomas Merton the trappist monk and writer. This describes the impossible task of Unitarian Universalism. This is what we try to say, every Sunday morning, through the rituals of the chalice, the words, the music: that we are all, every one of us, walking around, shining like the sun.

You don't believe me, of course. I don't believe me.

Most of us are bleary eyed, tired, thinking about another cup of tea. We're worried about paying off that mastercard bill. We're concerned that our kids might not be okay. A little lunch soon would be nice. No shining here!

We make the mistake of assuming shining and needing lunch are mutually exclusive. That we have to be good and kind to shine. Better than we are. But the universe is made up of atoms and stories, woven together (adapted from Muriel Rukeyser). Our lives are the mundane of the tea and the beauty of our story, woven together. Sometimes it is the beauty of the tea and mundane story, woven together. We are fabulous in the particular, not the general.

You still don't believe me. I don't believe me. There is no way of telling people they are all walking around shining like the sun.

But keep an eye out. You just might feel that shine one day. Telling your stories, the stories that reveal the fabulousness of you, might help. Listen to other people's stories. About the taste of the last summer peach. Or why the kid dancing on the subway made you cry. Or why the northern lights makes you homesick for a farm in northern Saskatchewan.

May it be so. May it always be so.

### **Closing Words**

“Remember on this one thing, said Badger. The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each other's memories. This is how people care for themselves.”

— Barry Lopez, *Crow and Weasel*