

**What's Your Story?**  
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Stories tell us who we are. A scholar of Jewish literature named Miriyam Glazer said it this way in her introduction to a collection of Jewish stories called *Dancing on the Edge of the World*: “Through the ages, we have told stories to fathom the intensities of our own collective history, to express our faith and our fears, to grasp the complexities of our religious tradition, to cast light on the mysteries of life. Stories have helped us to endure hard times. They have enabled us to share with one another what wisdom we have managed to accrue through life’s journey—and the delights and dangers of that journey itself.”

Glazer is speaking specifically for Jewish people, whose tradition of storytelling connects directly to the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, which is almost entirely a collection of stories. But her description of the importance of stories crosses cultures. Throughout the history of the human family, stories have been the way we understood ourselves and passed along the values of our communities. Mythologies, fables, parables, fairy tales and folk stories all act as dramatizations of peoples’ dreams, aspirations, fears, and beliefs about how one should live in the world. They make abstract ideas concrete and visible for us to follow.

We’ve heard two of those formative stories from the Hebrew bible today from Nancy and Nellie, but you probably know more of them: David and Goliath; Jonah and the whale; Noah and the flood; Samson and Delilah. These stories are so deeply embedded in our culture that they are part of our basic framework of communication. The images they convey and the values they express are part of our assumed common ground and we refer to them almost without remembering where they come from. They are imitated and echoed in books, in movies, in songs; they’re part of the imagery that politicians and playwrights and poets and preachers use without explanation because we’re so sure that everybody gets them. These stories are timeless—they have survived long past the context they were originally created for, and we still make meaning from them today.

Of course Christian scripture has its share of timeless stories, too. Nearly everyone in cultures where Christianity has any significant presence knows what a Good Samaritan is when we hear about one stopping on the roadside, or jumping into the ocean, or going out of their way in the grocery store to help someone. We know about not casting the first stone, and we’ve been to potlucks where there clearly wasn’t enough food but somehow it was like the loaves and fishes and everybody ate well.

But the stories that that shape us aren’t all religious. Many of us grew up enfolded in a web of stories, some that were read or told to us and others that we searched out on our own; I know I did. There were Aesop’s fables like the Tortoise and the Hare, or the Fox deciding that the grapes he couldn’t reach were probably sour. There were the fairy tale collections that included

stories like the Goldilocks and the Three Bears or Stone Soup, or the folk stories collected by the Grimm brothers—Red Riding Hood, the Three Little Pigs, Hansel and Gretel. These were stories meant to tell children something about how to behave, or what to expect from strangers, and also something about courage, resourcefulness, and the importance of finding our own strength. They, too, permeate our language as a culture.

For me, there were also Greek and Roman mythology, and later the far darker stories of the Norse gods of Asgard. Many of these are woven into the fabric of our communal culture, though we don't often think of them as religious stories any longer. Just as a simple example, you can't look up at the night sky as a Westerner without invoking the ancient gods and heroes of Greece and Rome, and you can't get through the second half of the week in English or any Germanic language without tipping your hat to Woden, Thor, and Freya.

Almost all the stories I grew up with came from Western traditions—by which I mean European and White, though in the case of Bible stories that involved white-washing. I think it's important to expand our sense of what we think of as "our" cultural stories. If we want to break the domination of whiteness in our understanding of what it means to be American, what it means to be a person of culture, we're going to need to learn to tell a richer palette of stories about who we are, where we come from, and how we live.

The Brer Rabbit story cycle, which came from Africa and was retold by enslaved Americans and their descendants, might be a starting point. Trickster stories, like the African ones about Anansi the Spider, or the Indigenous stories that people of the Hopi, Navajo, and other nations tell about Coyote, are another good source of wisdom. The story of how the Onondaga hero Hiawatha peacefully led five warring nations to join into the democratic Haudenosaunee Confederacy should be common knowledge in our country, especially given the real possibility that the framers of our Constitution adopted some of their ideas. Buddhist, Taoist, Hindu, and Pacific Islander stories are part of the cultural tapestry of our land and our people, as well.

I'm not convinced that stories of this kind have to be ancient and traditional, either. I think the epic of Harry Potter may find its way into the folk memory of at least part of the world, a saga that identifies some of the central dilemmas of growing into adulthood and confronting the challenge of learning to simultaneously accept moral ambiguity with grace and compassion, and hold onto moral clarity with all our strength and courage. Science fiction has offered some great stories to hang a moral vision on, especially the two great cinematic Star sagas that have stretched out across the turn of the twentieth to the twenty-first century.

These are cultural stories—stories that, as Miriyam Glazer says, we use "to share with one another what wisdom we have managed to accrue through life's journey—and the delights and dangers of that journey itself." They're not just for children, not by any means.

The story of the Emperors' New Clothes, for example, is a vital cultural tale that has special resonance these days when our country's highest elected officials and their supporters are trying

to make us believe that “truth isn’t truth,” which is an actual thing that an actual public figure said this week on national television. Some tricky tailors selling some seriously magical invisible cloth are working overtime to dominate our public conversation today, and we need a lot more than one brave little child to risk the scorn and anger of our neighbors to shout out that the emperor’s naked self is right there for us all to see.

It wouldn’t be a bad idea for us all to refresh our memories on the story of the Pied Piper, too, because an awful lot of folks in our country are in danger of following a clever tunesmith right over the brink of catastrophe.

Another timeless story that seems important to me right now is the story of the great, high-minded scholar and alchemist Dr. Faustus, who sold his soul to the devil in exchange for wisdom and power—or alternatively of the blues man John Lee Hooker down at the crossroads, making a different bargain for a different goal, but with the same end in the long run. The expression “devil’s bargain” has its origin in stories like those, and that is something that some opportunistic Congress members are learning something about right now.

I think, with Nellie, that we need to know the poetic creation myth that lies at the heart of so much of Western cultural understanding, but that isn’t enough for me. Every culture has its story of the Beginning, and each one conveys messages about the nature, worth, and purpose of humankind. We live in a global culture now, and we are working to build a multicultural society and world, so it’s well worth knowing a good assortment of those creation stories. I think it’s also vital, in our era, to know the great epic of evolution. The story of the Cosmos, unfolding from the Big Bang to the present and on into the future, is the creation saga of our time, and I want us to be able to tell it in ways that fire the imagination and inspire the spirit.

So whose job is it to act as stewards of these cultural stories and to make sure they’re being passed on? Storytellers Megan McKenna and Tony Cowan write that “In every culture, in every geographical place, among every people, there are individuals who are entrusted with the words that belong to that place and group. They hold the heritage, the experiences, and the stories that express who they are and how they stand in the universe. These are the keepers of the Story. . . . storytellers, *griots*, shamans, medicine chiefs, Zen masters, *seanachai*, monk-scribes, singers, musicians, gypsies, angels who are messengers of God, hasids and rebbes, mystics and tale-spinners. . . .”

Do our children, our grandchildren, the children of our friends and families, the children we share time with know our cultural stories? Would it be good for us to find ways to tell them? We can do some of that here, of course, but I think it’s a good idea for all of us to deepen both our memory of the familiar stories and our knowledge of the stories that shape the cultures of the world. We are the keepers of the Story, all of us, not just those who weave the strands of story together for a living, and we can all be part of passing on the stories we think should be timeless to the next generations. It’s up to us to see that our children—all our children, not just the ones in our immediate families—grow up immersed in a world of narrative that uses wonder,

imagination, and delight to make meaning and to convey deep messages about who we are, where we come from, and who we want to be.

So what is *your* story, what are your stories? When I put out my call for stories a few weeks ago, I didn't know how many of you might choose to respond. Now that you've heard a little more about the kind of story I'm thinking of, and what they might do for us, I wonder if any more come to mind for you?

This isn't a rhetorical question, and it isn't a casual one either. I want to know, because this year I'd like to incorporate this kind of story purposefully into our services, in the Time for All Ages sometimes, and also as a source of inspired and meaningful texts to build some whole services around. I wouldn't want those stories to be something I make all the decisions about alone, because the whole point of this kind of story is that that they are *community* artifacts, myths and images and legends that we share.

So what are your stories? If any have been coming up in your mind, I invite you to share them with me in the coming few weeks, by email or in person.

Now I'd like to add one more story. This one is unique to our own faith tradition, and it tells us something about who our spiritual ancestors as Unitarian Universalists are.

The story begins in New Jersey in 1770, where an illiterate but spiritually inquisitive farmer named Thomas Potter had built a chapel on his land in 1760. He had become convinced of a new doctrine, Universal Salvation, meaning that God would reunite all humankind with the divine in the end. When he built the chapel, which he did because his wife grew weary of having people preach in their kitchen, he said that he was waiting for a preacher who would come and build a congregation there with Universal Salvation as its central message.

One day, a broken man named John Murray, who had lost everything for preaching Universalism in England, appeared on Potter's farm. Murray was sailing to Boston on his way to a new life, which he swore would have nothing to do with religion or preaching. The ship he was on, called the "Hand in Hand," had been blown onto a sandbar offshore from Potter's farm. Murray, recognized as a responsible man by the ship's captain, had been sent ashore looking for provisions. Potter and Murray began to talk, and suddenly Potter said, "You are the man I've been waiting for." He asked Murray to stay and take over his little chapel, but Murray refused, saying he was done with the religious life.

Eventually they reached an agreement: if the wind changed and the ship could leave before Sunday, that would be the end of it, but if the wind held the ship against the sand bar, Murray would preach his gospel of Universal Salvation to Potter and his family and neighbors. The wind didn't change, and the first Universalist sermon in America was given at Potter's chapel. Murray went on to Boston a few months later, and went on to become one of the great founding figures of our faith in this country.

Who are we, in that story? A people who believe that the Holy is a power of love, universal love. A people who teach that keeping faith with love will heal the wounds of our lives and of our world. A people who believe that the Holy will embrace us, that the good in the world will come to our aid if we surrender ourselves to love.

That's our story—one of them, at least.

What's yours?