

Knowing the World Through Others' Stories
Sunday, June 4, 2023
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
Unitarian Universalist congregation of Lake County
Eustis, FL
Rev. Cynthia Snaveley

I had a great treasure in my childhood. I had a childhood overflowing with stories. I had a toybox full of toys and another toybox full of books. There will Little Golden Books and big fat books of fairy tales and more. As I grew older, I was introduced to the Bobbsey Twins, the Sugar Creek Gang, Lassie books, Little Women and Little Men. Those books were mine, but we also regularly went to the library. In summer the library reading program directed us to a variety of types of stories. One year I was introduced to a biography of Heinrich Schliemann and spent part of my summer digging up Troy. When we went on a long trip, I was allowed a little stash of comic books for the journey. Oh, the agony of having to choose. Should it be Archie or Richie Rich or Little Lulu or Spiderman or Supergirl? I shared a room with my sister and when we had to lay down, we didn't go to sleep, we would each pick who we would be that night Supergirl or Batman or Popeye or whomever, and then off we would go creating a story. I had a swing in the backyard where I spent hours swinging and creating stories in my head. We went to the movie theater where we saw stories. We went to community theater where people acted out stories. We went to Sunday school where we were told stories. We had a television which showed us stories. We hoped Dad would not get home from work too early so that supper would not be served until Star Trek was over. My favorite teacher was my fourth-grade teacher Mrs. Geesey, who as a special morning treat would read to us from chapter books, one chapter each morning. By high school I had favorite authors, Charles Dickens and Agatha Christie then. Then as now if you gave me a choice between jewelry or a book, I would choose the book. Stories were the treasure I loved.

The farthest my body had traveled back then might have been to Virginia from Pennsylvania, but through stories my mind went to Israel and France and England and outer space, back in time and forward in time.

I may be a straight, cisgender, white working to middle class girl to woman, but in stories I am offered the chance to view the world through characters quite different than me. I am not lesbian, but I have read Rita Mae Brown's Ruby Fruit Jungle. I am not black, but I have read Ta-Nehisi Coates' Between the World and Me. I am not a nineteenth century English boy, but I have read Charles Dicken's David Copperfield. Of course, that does not mean that I know everything there is to know about being a lesbian or black or a nineteenth century English boy. What it does mean is that I know more than I did before I read the books.

A friend of mine says one of his greatest regrets is that in a coal mining town in rural West Virginia he did not grow up with books. There was no library, and the books even at his school were the castoffs from the white school. Today he sees people around him reading for pleasure, and he says that he wishes he loved to read like that.

I read all kinds of books, but I admit I have a preference for fiction. There was many a night back when I was still in school when I read textbooks into the night to the point where I had read the same paragraph multiple times and still could not tell you what that paragraph said. But get me reading a novel. Then I

may have to force myself at some appropriate hour to just shut the book, turn off the light, and go to sleep. It is so tempting to keep reading on.

I like murder mysteries, but I don't want simple whodunits. I want stories that dig deep into the motivations, the flaws, and the strengths of the characters somehow saying something about human nature in general as the story is told of particular characters and particular events.

American writer Tim O'Brien says, "That's what fiction is for. It's for getting at the truth when the truth isn't sufficient for the truth."

Tim O'Brien served as a soldier in the Vietnam War. Much of his writing is about wartime Vietnam, and his later work often explores the postwar lives of its veterans.

O'Brien is best known for his book [The Things They Carried](#), a collection of linked semi-autobiographical stories inspired by O'Brien's wartime experiences, [Tim O'Brien \(author\) - Wikipedia](#).

I have never been a war veteran, but I think I can understand how semi-autobiographical fiction may serve one better than a straight biography in telling one's truths about war and its effects.

Sometimes truth can be heard in a story when it might be resisted in a straight telling.

I think of the prophet Nathan confronting King David over Bathsheba. From II Samuel, "The Lord sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, "There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

"Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him."

David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, 'As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this must die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.'

Then Nathan said to David, 'You are the man! This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. I gave your master's house to you, and your master's wives into your arms. I gave you all Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. Why did you despise the word of the Lord by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own...Then David said to Nathan, "'I have sinned against the LORD.'" II Samuel 12:1-9a,13 NIV. David heard the truth when told a story.

We are told in story that Scheherazade saves her own life and presumably the lives of any brides the king would take after her by telling him 1001 stories.

Can a story really save a life? Perhaps. Our LGBTQ+ kids need the stories with gay and lesbian, queer and trans characters being taken from this state's bookshelves. They need to know they are not alone. The "It Gets Better Project" website features a link marked "View All Stories." On that page are links to video

stories. Over 60,000 videos have been created to tell stories to let lgbtq+ kids know that it gets better. [It Gets Better – The It Gets Better Project exists to uplift, empower, and connect LGBTQ+ youth around the globe.](#)

Beacon College in Leesburg is a school for students with learning disabilities and ADHD. The school has created a TV series, “A World of Difference: Embracing Neurodiversity,” to tell compelling stories of people thriving not just in spite of but sometimes because of their differences. [A World of Difference | PBS](#)

A story can change a life. Henry David Thoreau said, “How many a (person) has dated a new era in (their) life from the reading of a book! The book exists for us, perchance, which will explain our miracles and reveal new ones. The at present unutterable things we may find somewhere uttered. These same questions that disturb and puzzle and confound us have in their turn occurred to all the wise...; not one has been omitted; and each has answered them, according to (their) ability, by (their) words and (their) life.”

Tell me your story. Tell me the stories that are important to you. Tell me the stories that have made a difference in your life. I can not possibly know completely what it is like to live in your skin, but through your stories I will understand a bit more. Tell me a story.

I end with a prayer of storytelling by Mandie McGlynn.

“Spirit of Life and Love, Holy One of our Being and our Becoming, That which is Sacred Within, Among, and Beyond Us...

“We know so many stories about You: God, Lord, King, Father. Earth Mother, Great Spirit, Universe. Holy Parent, Divine Love, Deepest Longings, Covenanted Partner.

“We know stories about our country and its founding, too... of the values we claim as a People. We have stories about those narratives; about how our values have and have not manifested in our reality.

“Blessed One, we also know so many stories about ourselves, some of them the same stories we tell about others: Beautiful, Ugly, Simple, Difficult, Joyous, Useful, Worthless. Stories about who we are, what we know, and the potentials and impossibilities of our future. Stories about our purpose and the meaning of our lives. We have countless stories buried too deep in our souls for us to even recognize them.

“God of Discovery, help us find the strength to excavate those buried stories. Let us lean on one another as we brush them off, hold them up to the light, and find their meaning and use. May our roots nourish us, so that we might grow abundantly and flower into blessings for one another and the world.

“Above all Holy Parent, sing us a gentle lullaby...

In the trees and the wind, in the kind words of our neighbors, in the warmth of the sun and the sparkle of the snow, whisper to us the truest story You know, and sing it to us in notes we can never unhear. Remind us every day, every moment, that we are beloved, beloved, beloved.” Amen.