

UU Talk - Stories

I am going to talk about stories today, and tell a couple stories. People are a storytelling species. And the stories we believe form our culture. So it occurred to me that one way to change the culture is to change the stories.

I think I need to tell you what triggered this whole chain of thought. I was thinking about a question I have been asked repeatedly. I am of Jewish descent, and even though I don't follow all the rules and customs, I am culturally Jewish. And the question people ask when they find out I am Jewish is, "Why does everyone hate Jews?" This isn't asked in a mean way, people just are curious. And I think I know the answer.

For hundreds of years, the Catholic Church was the most powerful ^{entity} group in Europe. The Church had power over monarchs, they controlled schools and education, they held the only key to heaven's gate. Jews were among the only people who weren't completely subservient to the Church, and therefore, they were a threat and a danger. So, for hundreds of years, the Catholic Church slandered and libeled the Jews. They said that Jews drank the blood of Christian babies at the Passover meal. They said that Jews crept into churches at night to pee on the sacramental wafers and wine - the very body and blood of Christ. They said that Jews intentionally caused the Black Plague by poisoning wells. And that was the only story available - there was no MSNBC denying Fox New's propaganda.

Of course, the Catholic church no longer says these things. Nobody has said these lies for a long time, and in fact, it's likely you never heard them before now. So why is there still antisemitism? It's because children were raised by people who were raised by people who were raised by several more times back people who heard and believed the slander. And they taught their children, who taught their children, that Jews were evil and not to be trusted. Even long after the original lies have been forgotten, the hate culture continues.

Look at racism in the United States. Why is it such a persistent, intractable problem? Well, for hundreds of years, while slavery was legal, teachers and clergy and statesmen told a story. They said that black people were genetically inferior to white people. They said that god created white people, his chosen people, to rule over the inferior races. They said that white supremacy was god's will, it was right there in the bible. Much as god hates gays today, he hated black people back then. This story was in textbooks, it was preached from the pulpit, it was oration on the campaign trail. It was even in medical textbooks.

That is not the official story line anymore. Regardless of what disgusting things your obnoxious uncle Phil may say at the Thanksgiving table, people can no longer talk like this in any official capacity. People lose their jobs over racist hate talk now. So why is racism still such a huge issue? Because children were raised by people who were raised by people who were raised believing the ugly, hateful lies, and they taught their children to hate.

So, the stories we tell are important, they create our culture. And obviously, it is not enough to just stop telling a bad story, we have to actively replace it with a good story to change things.

The most important thing you need to know about stories is that everything you know or believe is a story. Some stories are true, in that they help you understand the world more clearly. Some stories obscure and distort the world. But it's all stories, that is how people think about things.

So, how do we improve our stories and improve our culture? A good story, I think, is a story that creates good outcomes, or good behaviors. I gave you a couple examples of bad stories, now I will tell you some better stories. Let's look at the problem of alcoholism and drug addiction. One story is that alcoholism and drug abuse are big problems for society. Alcoholics are more likely to be involved in bad car accidents and in domestic violence. Drug addicts will steal or become prostitutes to support their habits. Neither can hold a job. This story leads, logically, to strong drunk driving laws and prison sentences for drug possession. A different story says that alcoholism and drug addiction are diseases. You don't punish someone for being sick, you help them get better.

This story leads, logically, to rehab programs and treatments like 12 step programs. For many people, I think that is a better outcome than a prison sentence. Now there is a new story about addiction. When they do research on addiction, they do a lot with drug addicted rats. They make a drug like cocaine available to the rats if they push a button, say, and then watch them become addicts. And one guy noticed that these rats always live in small, bare cages. So he built a nice, big enclosure, with plants and fresh air and sunlight, and toys and hiding places. And he put in the cocaine button, and cocaine addicted rats, and the rats all quit using the drug. So there is a new story we can tell, which is that addiction is a response to a terrible environment, it is coping with a bad life. This story would lead, logically, to trying to deal with things like unemployment, poverty, domestic violence, and racism. This story could result in improving our entire society. So I think it is a very good story.

Here is one more example of improving a story. When I was a child, in the late 50's and 60's, the story about homosexuality was that it was a ^{mental} disease and a perversion. This story led, logically, to prison or psychiatric wards for anyone who was caught being gay. There was no such thing as an out gay person, because being found out meant jail or insane asylum. And then, in the '70's, gay people began to work to change the story. They said to the psychiatrists, wait. For every other diagnosis, the mental illness must make the person unable to hold a job or have normal social relationships. Being gay doesn't do that. And the psychiatrists finally agreed, and said that homosexuality was not a mental illness. Fortunately, the activists did not stop with getting rid of a bad story. They began telling a better story. The new story was, you know gay people. People you like, relatives, your car mechanic, your doctor, your hair dresser, are gay. Now, it has taken about 45 years, and there are still people who tell a story about god hates gays, but, my partner and I got legally, lawfully married one week ago. *That's a good outcome!*

And finally, I want to propose a better story than one of our big-picture, how we view the whole world stories. We live in a world of ^{the story} them and us, good and evil, ^{victim + victimizer} ~~the home team and the away team~~. The story of duality is so pervasive we can hardly imagine stories that don't presume it. But other cultures have told a different story, that I like better. It goes like this:

All life is one life. There is really no such thing as me and you, as this and that, because the same life energy flows through every living thing. All living things are as connected as cells in one body. All living things are like billions of leaves on one giant tree. All living things are like waves on the surface of one vast ocean. Each wave imagines itself to be an individual, and it doesn't see the ocean that connects it to every other wave. I like this story, and I think I would like the sort of culture this story would lead to. ^{I think it is true}

Tell good stories. The story that ^{I told you today} says everything we know or believe is a story is a good story. Because, people are so eager to kill each other over their differing beliefs. Not only are Christians and Muslims and Jews killing each other, but Shiite Muslims and Suni Muslims kill each other. Perhaps if people thought of their stories as, you know, stories, they might take them a little less seriously, maybe even not need to kill each other over them so ^{readily} easily. The 7 Principles of the UU church is a very good story, because it leads to kindness and decency and an effort to improve the world. The UU church tells a story that I hope informs the children who raise children who raise children who will know to be kind and decent and responsible, even if they never heard the 7 principles. So lets tell good stories, and live happily ever after.