

## Tell Me A Story

*Tell me a story. A child's Request. How often we have said that as children. Tell me a story. Story illuminated the world for us in childhood. Today we might also make the request: tell me a story. Tell me the story of rivers and valleys and streams and woodlands and wetlands and shellfish and fin fish. Tell me a story. A story of where we are and how we got here and the characters and the roles that we play. Tell me a story, a story that will be my story, as well as the story of everyone and everything about me, the story that brings together the human community with every living being, a story that brings us together under the arch of the great blue sky in the day and the starry heavens at night. A story that will drench us in the rain and dry us in the wind, a story told by humans to each other that will also be the story that the wood thrush sings in the thicket, the story that the river recites on its downward journey, the story that the mountain images forth in its awesome grandeur; the story.*

*It is all a question of story. We are in trouble just now because we do not have a good one.*

With these words cultural historian Thomas Berry began the essay, published in 1978 and entitled, "The New Story," that would serve as the cornerstone of his life and work over the ensuing 30 years. "Tell me a story," he says; "Story illuminated the world for us in childhood." I think it still does. I believe that we live by stories, big stories, large narratives, that give meaning and purpose to our lives, and into which we fit our own smaller stories. But today we seldom take time in our busy lives to sit around and tell and listen to our stories and ponder how they fit into the larger stories that govern our lives. So these stories we live by are often hidden, unconscious.

We all love a good story. Stories can be entertaining, deeply meaningful and moving, even revelatory. But according to Paul Costello of the Center for Narrative Studies, stories are never innocent. Today I want to describe some of what Paul has learned about how we live by stories and to explore how it helps us understand the Gospel story we call the Road to Emmaus, and how it may help us as we face life in our perilous time which James Kunsler has called, "The Long Emergency."

It is fascinating to me to wonder - What stories am I, are you, are we living by? Are these stories taking us where we want to go? If not, how can changing the story we live by lead us to a new way of being, a new way of living?

Paul says this:

*I believe that we all stand on the ground of hidden stories to look out at the world and to take it in. If we want to change our lives or choose different paths, life doesn't necessarily have to change, but the story we stand in and on, does. If we can recognize the story that is the shape of our listening, that which shapes our telling, then we can move into another place by choosing a different story.*

Paul calls this work, “Life story editing work,” and it has its roots in a form of psychological therapy called narrative therapy. He’s fond of quoting narrative therapist Michael White who said, “You don’t have sick people; you have sick stories. The people are not the problem. The problem is the problem.”

Paul works primarily with groups such as churches and organizations, and much of his work has been in places of deep conflict such as Northern Ireland. He says that, “Sometimes communities come to us for help and say - our story is we have this problem... We tell them - perhaps your problem is you have this story.” What may be required is, to use Paul’s term, “story ejection.”

Nations have stories too. Paul gives an example of the contrast between how America responded to 9-11 and how Ireland would have responded to a similar event. Following 9-11 America quickly turned from a focus on the tragedy itself to celebrate the heroism of the firefighters and to taking an heroic, all-conquering path into the future. The Irish, on the other hand, would still be playing out the tragedy. Where there is possibility, Paul says, the Irish will find problem. The American story is all about heroism and conquest; the Irish story is all about tragedy.

Stories, understood in this way, are at root seductive and subversive. We live by stories. They are often unconscious. When we become aware of them, we can choose another story. As Paul says,

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With this background about story in mind, let us look again at the Gospel story that we read a few Sundays ago - the story we call, “The road to Emmaus.” It is a story itself, but it is also a story about story, and maybe even a story about story ejection, to use Paul Costello’s term.

The story begins with Cleopas and another disciple leaving Jerusalem on their way to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They have a problem, which they describe to the stranger who came up and walked with them by telling this story:

*Jesus of Nazareth, a prophet mighty in deed and word,  
who we had hoped was the one who would be the liberator of Israel,  
was sentenced to death and crucified.  
Then, some women of our company found his tomb empty  
and had a vision in which angels told them he was alive.*

What was the story the these disciples were living by? Could their problem be this story? It seems to me that the key to their story is contained in the sentence, "We had hoped that he was the one to be the liberator of Israel." Apparently the big story out of which they had been living was the story that one day the Messiah would come and liberate Israel from Roman rule and restore the Kingdom of David. We might call that the cultural heroic Messiah story.

The disciples had fit Jesus of Nazareth into that story. It had shaped their listening in such a way that they fit everything this prophet, mighty in word and deed, had said to them through years into this deeply embedded cultural story. No mater how many times Jesus had told them he would be crucified, die, and be raised again they didn't get it. They didn't even get it when it happened!! All they could say was, "We had hoped he was the one to liberate Israel." You can hear the disappointment in their voices and see it in their downcast eyes as they walked with the stranger on the road to Emmaus. They had "lost" Jesus, and they had also lost their story - the story that had given meaning and purpose to their lives.

What happens next? The stranger who walks with the disciples, whom we already know is the risen Jesus, proceeds to tell them an alternative story. Maybe he said something to them like this; "your problem is your story; you've got the wrong Messiah story; listen up." The Gospel story goes like this;

*How dull you are!*

*How slow to believe all that the prophets said!*

*Was not the Messiah bound to suffer in this way  
before entering upon his glory.*

*Then, starting from Moses and all the prophets,*

*he explained to them in the whole of scripture the things that referred to himself.*

The Gospel says that this alternative to the cultural heroic Messiah story, which we might call the suffering servant Messiah story, made their hearts burn as they listened to it. What was that about? Perhaps part of that fire was a recognition that this new story wasn't entirely new. They had heard Jesus, himself, tell them that story before, but always before they had been so full of the other Messiah story that they never really listened to it. Now they are beginning to realize the possibilities inherent in this new Messiah story, and their hearts are on fire.

It is at table, of course, when the stranger takes the bread, says the blessing, and offers it to them that they recognize that this stranger is Jesus. Also, for the first time really, they fully recognize who Jesus was -- not the cultural heroic Messiah that would overthrow the Romans -- but the Messiah of the broken bread and poured out blood, the suffering love that is the only road to glory. Christ in the distressing disguise of the stranger, the servant at table. His mission accomplished, Jesus vanishes; of

course, he did not come to bring comfort and companionship to the distressed disciples. he came to give them the story.

Choosing to live within a story of suffering that leads to glory instead of a story of raw power that drives a sword through the heart of the enemy oppressor is always a hard choice. It has to be an especially hard story to swallow for the people of a nation whose story is heroic, vanquishing all obstacles in their way.

Given a choice, how many of us, like those disciples, choose to interpret all the Gospel stories of Jesus in the context of a larger cultural story, in our case a story about America being God's especially blessed people - - about our destiny of being the world's only superpower. In the face of this deeply embedded cultural story, what will open our eyes to a story of suffering love?

There is no simple formula for story ejection, for creating that moment when the scales drop from our eyes and we see that our old story is inadequate, and a new story is there, waiting for us to choose it. I have the feeling though, that the disciples would never have seen - have had their eyes opened - even if Jesus had taught them the new story on the mountainside and by the lake shore for another 50 years before he died. For them, the old story had to first prove itself inadequate in the loss and despair of Jesus' crucifixion.

Maybe we too will not let go of the old story we live by until we reach a point where it simply won't work anymore. Perhaps "Who we thought Jesus was" has to die so we can come to realize who Jesus really is.

Maybe we ourselves have to suffer, or to enter into the suffering of God at the hands of a godless world (Bonhoeffer), before we can see another story that will be liberating and life-giving for us.

Or maybe there is another, less painful way of story ejection. Suppose we were to examine the often hidden, old stories we live by -- or those our church lives by, or those our nation lives by. Suppose we were to recognize how these old stories shape our listening, including our listening to scripture. Suppose we were able to step aside for a moment and examine how these stories shape the direction of our lives, our church's life, our nation's life. Perhaps then we might, with Thomas Berry, say that we are in trouble just now because we do not have a good story - a functional story. We might say that, like those disciples on the road to Emmaus, we need a new story.

We don't have to look far, of course, to realize that we are in trouble today. In a recent Thursday night class we studied James Kunsler's book, The Long Emergency: Surviving the End of Oil, Climate Change, and Other Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-First Century, which outlined the problems we face. We found ourselves ready to make some changes in our lives to avert the worst, or at least cope with the

coming catastrophes. but what about our story - the story we live by? Our old story isn't working, we need a new one. What is it?

Here is one way I have attempted to answer that question. I give this example not as the final "new story" we need, but to illustrate the kind of imagination and creativity we need.

Today we are waking up to the peril ahead for life on earth caused by increasing injustice, violence and exploitation of the earth by the human community. We are beginning to wonder what life will be like for our children and grandchildren in the decades ahead. We are also beginning to understand that we, in the materially wealthy world, bear a large responsibility for this peril.

Yet, most of us are not mean, selfish, or greedy. We are not "bad people." Perhaps we are, in fact, good people, caught in bad systems -- oppressed and exploited by powerful systemic forces. There is an old narrative about the oppression of women in Latin America which went like this: "keep them barefoot, pregnant and in the kitchen." We might rephrase that narrative for our situation as follows:

### **The Old Story**

**Keep them always busy, chronically unsatisfied, always wanting more, insecure and afraid, shopping and working without end, exhausted, and mostly unconscious.**

Living within this story our souls have become impoverished. We are quick to respond to whatever is offered that might fill our inner emptiness. We buy into what Wayne Mueller in his book *Sabbaths* calls "The Gospel of Consumption."

We need a new story. As Paul Costello of the Institute for Narrative Studies says, we need to undergo "story ejection." Here are two possible new stories:

### **New Story #1**

**Bad things are happening on this planet, and I am partly responsible. I feel guilty. Give me some things I can do that will help the situation and I will not feel so bad. Thanks for the new light bulbs and 9 other things I can do to help save the earth.**

This story is one we hear frequently in one form or another. As it stands, it is not a bad story, and fleshed out a bit, maybe with a few solar panels, a hybrid car, and a few home grown vegetables, it might have much to recommend it. But listen to another version of a new story:

## New Story #2

**Bad things are happening on the planet and I, for all my good intent, am caught in a socio-economic-political system that is responsible for it. I feel misled and exploited -- trapped. Give me a dream of who I can become that will help -- a different way of being in the midst of these oppressive systems -- and give me some concrete steps I can take to move in this direction.**

**Thanks for reminding me about Sabbath, about slowing down and enjoying the simple pleasures and beauty that is given in my life. Thanks for reconnecting me with my tree in the backyard. I miss that tree and do want to just sit under her wide canopy of leaves in the warm sun and feel her cool breezes against my cheek.**

**Thanks for the lettuce salad that I grew from seed right in my front yard, for the sun and gentle rain and good soil that nourished it.**

**Thanks for allowing and encouraging me not to go to the shopping mall today to get whatever it was I thought I'd better get, but instead to take some time playing some old hymns on the piano and walking down to the little creek in the woods and reading a psalm and the Sermon on the Mount once again.**

**Now I am able to make the changes in my energy use and lighten my impact on the planet because my soul is free. My soul is like a well-watered garden. I see that I live in a world invaded by grace. I've found the treasure buried in the field ... and the forest ... and the seashore. I feel that I am able to sell all that I have and buy that field.**

Which new story would you choose for yourself if you were determined to "eject" the old story? Determined to save the planet? If I lean toward the second of these two sample new stories, it is because I believe that new being precedes new doing, and that this perilous moment offers us humans the possibility of a new way to be human.

What are the big new stories that can shape our lives in this time of planetary peril?

How about the Jesus story -- you know, the one about the suffering servant Messiah who taught and lived a path of self-sacrifice that leads to glory and new life. If this is the real Jesus story, as followers of Jesus, could it also be our new human story, a story that says we humans, in our essence, are to sacrifice and suffer, to "lose ourselves," as Jesus put it, to serve the future of all life, including human life, on this planet? Could our new human story be one in which as disciples of Jesus, we can say, like Thomas, four very important words -- "I do not know?" This would be quite a turnaround from a story that says that everything in creation is here to serve us

humans, and that we, as masters of the planet, know enough, and are capable enough, to fix any problem that may arise on the planet!

What are the big new stories that can shape our lives in this time of planetary peril?

How about the really big story - the Universe Story? Perhaps it would be useful to envision our stories -- those of our individual lives, our church life, and our nation's life -- as derivative from the new story of the universe -- the primary story. Here again we might be led to a new human story in which the operative words might well be "servant" and "self-sacrifice" for the benefit of the whole community of life. When Thomas Berry speaks of a new human story -- "reinventing the human to re-inhabit the earth," to use his words -- he talks about "mutually enhancing earth-human relations," and of the human and the natural world "going into the future as a single sacred community."

If we want to change our lives or choose different paths, life doesn't necessarily have to change, but the story we stand in and on, does. Could this new human story be the story that we humans are now being invited to choose?

To conclude, let us listen again to that early vision of the new story from Thomas Berry with which we began:

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