

The Power of Generational Story

UU Church of Vancouver

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Reflection on the Theme by Alexis Balkowitsch

I know my mother's family only through stories. Her last living immediate blood relative —my grandfather—passed away when I was five. And as a third generation only child, there was never that horde of aunts, uncles, and cousins to go to for those juicy family tidbits. So what I carry from her family is only gathered from old photographs and her own stories.

Stories of my Great Grandma Olive, originally from England, who's family owned a pub in Plymouth. Even after she came to the States as a World War I bride, she always observed the sacred tradition of afternoon tea. My mother joined her for tea often as a little girl, and said Grandma Olive liked her tea so strong the spoon would stand up in it. I like to think my love of intense teas comes from her.

There's Great Uncle Henry, who never had kids but doted on my mom, his only niece. A World War I veteran, he later owned a very successful seed catalog company—which he ran from a very impressive solid wood executive desk that my parents inherited. I spent many hours playing "office CEO" from Uncle Henry's large leather chair, dwarfed by that massive desk. He later sold his company and lucrative downtown Portland property to buy a ranch in Southern Oregon that never really took off. But he loved it, even as his friends scratched their heads and rolled their eyes. And I, too, tend to be an idealist who follows my bliss, even if it won't pan out financially.

But the family member I most regret not being able to meet is my Grandmother, my mom's mom, Bette. She died much too young, at the age of 44, when my mom was only 18. Through photos and mom's descriptions, I know her as elegant, a social butterfly, a vivacious woman who was always put together—and who had a fierce love for her only child. I can't say that I inherited Grandma Bette's everyday elegance. But I do wear her pearls every time I take the stage to sing, and they do help me feel the part. And of course, I felt that maternal fierceness in my mother's love for me.

Now that my mother is gone, the stories feel all too finite. There are no more suddenly remembered snippets, no way to ask for clarifications. A few years ago I found a huge box of slides from her childhood—a box that hadn't been opened in 34 years, since we moved into the house I've since inherited. I have no one to ask about the stories behind the pictures, and the people in them remain both familiar and like strangers.

And, of course, it makes me reflect on my own stories. As a proud life long member of the Childless Cat Lady Club, I can't help but wonder—who will carry on my stories? The desire to share ourselves—to live on through stories—is so deeply human. I suppose it's why I'm drawn to things like writing reflections, journaling, and even social media, with all its faults.

But I'm reminded to balance that need to live on with an appreciation the ephemeral— That no matter who we are, what we do, however many stories we share, we are only here for a moment. Millions upon millions of moments, stories, and lives—whether passed down through the ages or lost to time—all beautiful, meaningful, and worthwhile.

The Power of Generational Story © Bonnie Long

"I am sitting here wanting memories to teach me—to see the beauty of the world through my own eyes. . ." That song was written by a remarkable woman: Ysaye Barnwell... former member of Sweet Honey in the Rock and a commissioned composer of music. Inherent in this beautiful song is a universal need to know our story.

We are all born into an on-going generational story. I believe it's our responsibility to learn our story and then tell it—to recognize our place as a linchpin connecting the past with the future. There's growing evidence that keeping family stories alive has science-based impact on younger generations' mental health and resilience. More about that later.

First let's take a look at the strange bedfellows: TRUTH and FACT.

You might think that being factually accurate is the same as telling the truth. Not necessarily. When we try to communicate the inner workings of the human heart, the truth transcends mere facts, in order to reveal deeper truths.

Facts are concrete realities that no amount of opinion (or "alternate facts") will change. Once established, they're not arguable. They are simply acknowledged.

Our truths, on the other hand, are subjective, personal, and even malleable over time. But they nonetheless profoundly inform our authentic selves, our belief system, and the core of our spirituality.

A couple of Sundays ago in this pulpit, Jacob Jacobson-Tennessee shared his take on a couple of other strange bedfellows, science and religion—and the relationship between evidence-based fact and religious “truth.” Jacob got me thinking about how many of our beloved, brilliant scientists have recognized and made use of the symbiosis between objectivity and subjectivity—left brain/right brain—science and intuition. Astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson and primatologist Jane Goodall are two clear examples. Frank Lloyd Wright— that world-famous architect guy—liked to remind his clients: “The truth is more important than the facts.” They all look INSIDE themselves to find truths. And OUTSIDE of themselves to find facts.

How about a short quiz on distinguishing personal truth from fact. Say it loud! When someone says, “Rhubarb is delicious” . . . is it their truth or a fact? “Desert landscapes are dry.” . . truth or fact? “Politics is weird” . . . truth or —oh never mind. You get it.

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So here’s a story about when I first learned the power of subjective truth. Back in the early 70s, I enrolled in a creative writing class. We were assigned to produce a short story during the course. After some dithering, I settled on what my father’s childhood might have been like. I knew a few facts: his parents had separated when he was just a boy. His alcoholic father still lived in Omaha, where my Dad lived with his mother. His mother took in other people’s laundry to help make ends meet.

Eventually I squeezed a story from those facts onto the page. I set it during an afternoon in the bustling streets of how I imagined Omaha to be in the early 1900s. A boy meets up with his father and they spend a few carefree hours together. Then he heads home—feeling a little guilty. He finds his mom in the kitchen, bending over her ironing board. He remembers a chore she’d asked him to do and he heads to the yard to pick a few berries for supper. I had no clue about my Dad’s and his father’s factual relationship, so I made the whole thing up. Of course I did. It was fiction.

Some years later, during a visit, I asked my Dad if he’d like to read that story. He was a mechanical engineer—he was task-driven and analytical, a highly trained problem solver. And he didn’t suffer fools who wasted time in fanciful daydreaming. I sat at the kitchen table with him and watched him work his way through my story. When he finished, he was quiet for a while. I was getting nervous. He may never have lost his hat when his father grabbed his arm and pulled him onto an open-air streetcar. He may never have been given a shiny 5-cent piece

when they parted, after a few hours of fun. There probably wasn't a row of raspberries in the backyard. The details I'd woven into the story weren't facts. At last, though, he looked up at me as he wiped tears from his eyes. I waited as he pulled his handkerchief from a pocket and blew his nose. Then he said quietly, "That's exactly how it was. How did you know?"

Indeed. How did I know? I'd somehow tapped into his truth with little or no factual basis. It wasn't the who-what-when-where of my story that made it the truth for my Dad. It was the relationship stuff between boy and father, the giddy tenor of their time together, the conflict the boy felt in his loyalties to both parents. On some level, I was able to "remember" those truths for him.

Here's where that uneasy relationship between science-based knowledge and intuition comes into vital play. Evidence-based Facts and the subjective, inherited stories that simmer in our subconscious are not mutually exclusive. Both play an important role in the transmission of memories from older family members to younger ones... and sometimes back again.

#### SO WHERE DO OUR STORIES COME FROM?

Each of us is living a story in these very moments that provides a sacred connection between, say, our 5<sup>th</sup> great grandparents and those who will people our families several generations from now. There is a throughline between the past, the present, and the future. Our story is an unending loop of connection that is ours to sustain.

Not all of us have fully-leafed-out family trees, or bookshelves crowded with ancestral memoirs. But genealogy websites are using increasingly reliable technology to surface factual connections through DNA and historical records. And time after time, it's revealed to a guest on Finding Your Roots that an uncle several generations removed shared a passion or a talent that the guest has. It's awesome to see the light flicker in their eyes. Like on some level they're realizing "Of course. I knew that. That explains me." Which reminds me of a story shared with me by a friend about her 4-yo granddaughter. Gazing for the first time at an old photo of an elderly grandmother the child had never before heard of, she quietly announced "I know her."

Is there some cosmic connection between us and earlier generations? I've traced my English ancestors back to the earliest New England colonies, and my Irish 8x grandfather Rilee was likely an indentured servant in 17th century Virginia. But even though I can recount their names, their lineage, I feel little connection to them. Plenty of facts, but little if any sense of subjective relatable truth.

On the other hand, although my maternal great grandmother died five years before I was born, I know her. Sure, I'd heard a few 1<sup>st</sup>-hand stories about her and I have a couple of photos. . . but since I started writing a novel about her---yes, a piece of fiction---based on a particularly emotional time in her life, I've felt her helping me, chapter-by-chapter, to get the story true. I'm learning things about her that no one's ever told me, if they ever knew. Not just how she behaved, how she spent her days. . . but what she thought, how she felt, what she dreamed of. Could it be that my inherited memory is bubbling up, with each plot twist that I build into my story?

How do we awaken those memories that may be imbedded in us? Some say meditation helps, and I know firsthand that dreamwork works. Immersing ourselves in making music or art --or writing--might also open up paths to insights when we least expect them. And something as simple as looking closely at old photos may spark memories we didn't know we had. The challenge in grasping insights that may come to us through any of these portals are (first) noticing them, (second) remembering them and (third) sharing them. In whatever way you can.

Barnwell, an only child, wrote the song *Wanting Memories* before she knew she had any ancestors waiting to teach her. It was only after both of her parents had passed that she discovered a box full of old family photos. She was stunned that the photos revealed the family truths--the memories-- that she was wishing for when she wrote the song. Like Alexis, in her lovely *Reflection*, she has no one left to ask about them, let alone pass their stories on. But she still celebrates them. The most poignant line for me in the song is when she says to these photographs--her newly discovered family--"I know that I am you, and you are me, and we are one."

Old photos can be treasure chests of truth--especially the few we might have that are casual snapshots instead of stiff formal portraits. I'd heard that my grandmother eloped when she was 15. She embellished her age by enough years so she and the 27 year old man she was marrying could get a license. But what I didn't know was that they lived in dire poverty the few years the marriage lasted. This was revealed to me when I discovered a tattered snapshot of her-- dressed in a plain flour sack smock, looking like she was about 10 months pregnant-- and literally barefoot. She stands alone on a wooden stoop at the door of a shack. Nothing but dry barren dirt surrounds her. She does not look happy. That one tattered snapshot somehow survived to provide me crucial factual insights into her story. But oh wow. . . the implicit truth of it breaks my heart.

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So next we come to the other part of the process, PASSING OUR STORIES ON

A lot of us grew up in an era in which grown-ups were reluctant to talk about their histories or personal experiences. Their reasons for this vary, of course—they were too busy making ends meet for the family, too burdened with trauma to want to risk reliving it, or maybe they weren't told much by their parents. In any case, a common lament—after the fact—is “Why didn't I ask more questions?”

Another story? When my older sister and I were in our 30s, that same grandmother called us up and invited us to dinner. This was a woman who'd pretty-much failed as a mother—and she knew it. With us she'd always been affectionate and supportive, but she'd closely guarded the details of her earlier life. So something told us this was a moment we did not want to miss. My sister flew in from New Orleans. We drove together to Grandma's small apartment in Centralia. She served us her signature roast chicken and mashed potatoes. Then. . . she told us her story. The whole sorrowful and sometimes sordid mess of the life she'd lived her first few decades—before either of us knew her. The guilt, the sorrow, the pain. When she died suddenly, a short while later, we knew what a gift she'd given us. She wanted us to know her “truth.” And she trusted us to pass it on.

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There's never been a shortage of wonderful children's literature. But social scientists tell us that the most relatable stories are personal family stories. They resonate better with us as truth, and are easier to take-in and remember. Family narratives—the good parts along with the not so good—have been shown to play a key role in the development of children's self-identity. Especially stories that go beyond the mere sharing of details. . . and tell about proud moments along with times of failure or tragedy. Such stories serve as an extra strong catalyst for increasing cohesion among family members. Especially as children age and begin to take active roles in contributing to the narrative. It's really OK to not shield the kids from the not-so-good times. They can usually spot sugar-coating a mile off.

In another study, researchers Marshall Duke and Robyn Fivush of Emory University wondered if children who knew their family stories would be better at dealing with challenges and stress. In 2001, they tested that hypothesis: They developed a measure called the ‘Do You Know?’ scale that asked children to answer 20 questions.

The questions included: Do you know where your grandparents grew up? Do you know where and how your parents met? Do you know about an illness or something really terrible that happened in your family? Do you know the story of your birth?”

The researchers ran this experiment on children in 48 families. When they correlated the results with additional tests, they were blown away:

The more children knew about their family's history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, and the higher their self-esteem. The 'Do You Know?' scale turned out to be the best single predictor of children's emotional health and happiness.

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Potential mental health benefits of family narrative can be found outside of "hetero-normative" and biologically-based families, too. I'm a proud member of a branch of Alexis' cat ladies club— the childless dog ladies club. In our cases, even though we are without human offspring to share our stories with, we are blessed to have found a kind, loving community willing to listen to our stories. We all need to be listened to. One of the basic benefits from sharing stories and memories is the understanding that we are not alone.

Many people missing an active connection with their "real" families have developed strong ties to "chosen families." I was part of a small insular community for a few years in my 20s. If anyone ever needed a "chosen family" I did then. Looking back, I cherish those years and those people. We did many "family" things together—sharing holiday meals, celebrating our birthdays. And we all knew each other's stories. Many of us were in the same boat—sent adrift by our bio-families because our truth differed from their truth. I can say now, if I'd not had that "chosen family" then, I'd be a lot more rudderless than I am today.

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In CLOSING. . .

As Jacob reminded us a couple of weeks ago, we are both *products* of evolution and *agents* of evolution. So it is with Story. We are both products of and agents of story-telling.

Each Sunday service, we remind ourselves and our children to "search for truth with an open mind." Not for someone else's truth, but for our own. It's what I love about Unitarian Universalism—no one tells me what my truths should be.

And one of the truths I've come to cherish is the belief that, spiritually speaking, there is no beginning and no end.. In the ever-looping circle of life, we are all following a spiritual path from cradle to grave to cradle. We are all elders; we are all children.

Whether our families are biological, chosen, or a hybrid of both (like mine)—there is a need for us to reconcile the stories we've learned with those we choose to send forward. The truth is, we could change the world if we told the right story.

May it be so.