

## Knowing Our Stories, Sharing Our Stories

My grandfather Ludwig used to tell me the same stories over and over again throughout my childhood. Not “The Three Little Pigs” or “Little Red Riding Hood.” If he was familiar with those tales, he never let on about it. Instead he shared the remembrances of his life with me. He told me about courting my grandmother, Martha...that she was the most beautiful woman in all of Usherod. Poor Grandpa had to be determined in his pursuit as she showed little interest in him at first. I loved his stories about breezing through medical school and about once showing up only for the last day of a class to take the final exam, which he aced in spite of having skipped all the lectures. I was awed by his tales of selling everything the family owned and boarding a boat leaving Europe with my grandmother and their infant son. A speedy relocation to Quito, Ecuador was their only option to escape the forthcoming Nazi onslaught.

Like choosing the summer vacation photos which are to be preserved in a family album, my grandfather selected snapshots of his life that he seemed doggedly determined to make sure I knew well. To this day I have images ingrained in my mind of their home in Quito, of the shop they ran there out of which Ludwig practiced medicine. My mind’s eye can still envision him learning Spanish on the fly, which he ultimately spoke with such fluency that his neighbors assumed him to be a native.

Above and beyond the lessons of courage, fortitude, diligence, and love that he imparted to me through his tireless retellings, Ludwig taught me the power of stories. In ways that mere facts and dates never could, his anecdotes have stuck with me. In actuality, my grandfather’s life surely included millions of moments, decisions, interactions, and reactions, but he lent cohesion to these disparate elements by connecting them through his tales.

Professor Dan McAdams of Northwestern University is one of many scholars who have written on our inclination toward such narration. He asserts that we are storytellers by our very nature. We all express ourselves and our world to others through our stories. We're born, he teaches, with a narrating mind.<sup>1</sup>

This is not a characteristic unique to Markley men. If I were to ask you how you chose your life's partner, you'd likely tell me a story. Why do you feel so passionately about a particular social issue? The response probably includes a story. Ask me why I became a rabbi, and I'll tell you a tale, or a series of them which taken together – organized and synthesized in my mind – explain to me why I chose this path in life.

“We are our stories,” writes author Daniel Pink. “We compress years of existence, thought, and emotion into a few compact narratives that we convey to others and tell to ourselves.”<sup>2</sup> The memories that my grandfather shared with me were not told for my benefit alone. Each of us comes to know who we are through this process of reflecting upon our past and creating a story of our lives that makes sense to us. It is this story, more than our ethnicity, our faith tradition, our language, or the color of our skin, that makes each of us unique, individual, and holy. That is why some scholars refer to this autobiographical narrative as “personal myth.” As McAdams suggests it is not because our self-story is a legend or fairy tale, but rather because it is a “sacred story that embodies personal truth.”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of Self by Dan P. McAdams, The Guilford Press, New York, 1993, pp. 27-28

<sup>2</sup> A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future, by Daniel Pink, Riverhead Books, New York, 2006, p. 113

<sup>3</sup> McAdams, p. 34

Without it, I would have no way of differentiating myself from others and knowing who I am in our world. We value this personal singularity and so does our Jewish tradition. Our Rabbis noted that if a man strikes many coins from one mold, they are all exactly alike. The miracle of creation, however, is that the Holy One fashioned every human from the mold of the first, and yet not a single one of us is exactly like another. Therefore, our Sages teach, each and every person should be able to say, “The world was created for my sake.”<sup>4</sup> We convey this through the stories we tell of ourselves, surrounded by settings, plots, characters, and challenges which revolve around the hero that is me. Thanks to this innate human response to life, and my grandfather’s lovable demeanor in the retelling of his personal tales, I was able to see at an early age what a hero he actually was...not only in his autobiographical narrations but to our family as well.

Ludwig was too sick to be at our synagogue on the day I became a bar mitzvah. We made an audio cassette recording of the service and played it for him in his hospital bed. He stared up at the blank television screen mounted high on the wall of his room as if watching me chant Torah on the Tonight Show. He died only a few days later. It was in the wake of his passing that I came to recognize that the gift of his stories was only the beginning of what he had bequeathed to me.

Ludwig left behind the faith tradition that had forced him to flee his home and livelihood in Europe. What was a cause for persecution then was now a wondrous blessing in the days after he left us. I remember the outpouring of support from our temple community. The visits to my grandfather’s home. I remember how touched I was when a friend from school took the day off to attend the funeral.

---

<sup>4</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin, 38a

And if I thought my grandfather's stories of his own life were rewarding, I had no idea how my heart would soar to hear others speak of him. "You're Dr. Markley's grandson? Let me tell you about the time he treated me free of charge when I couldn't afford to pay him. What an incredible man!" As is the case in so many *shiva* homes, the stories flowed and flowed. Those interpersonal tales of encounter, of relationship, of support have such tremendous power.

To paraphrase Rabbi Hillel, if I am unable to tell my own story, who will tell it for me? But if my story is only about me...what kind of person am I? Our tradition urges us to not only inquire "Who am I," but also "Who are we?" When interwoven with our personal stories, the ancient myths of our people help us to author not only a 'story of me' but a 'story of us.' Jews have been called "The People of the Book," because we have seen Torah, and all the volumes of thoughtful teaching that spring from it, as representative of shared values, truths, and beliefs.

And like all sacred myths, those from Jewish tradition are intended to convey the most pressing interests and values of our collective people. We could simply tell our children, "Freedom is important," but this is not a lesson likely to take root. Instead, we gather around a *seder* table with our *haggadah* – literally our book of storytelling – and we recount a narrative of which we still feel a part. "You were a slave in Egypt, and so was I." Just for the sake of historical record, let me clear. I grew up in a comfortable home in Connecticut. The closest I've been to Egypt is a vacation in Eilat. But the tale of Passover is my story – our story – nonetheless. Because of it I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I am responsible for ensuring that all are able to live lives of freedom in our own day – enslaved neither to political power, tyrannical ruler, nor insurmountable poverty.

Our collective Jewish tales are about justice, fairness, and equity. They share messages of striving for family harmony amid dysfunction and discord. Our stories are about journeys away from places of comfort, into places of challenge and strife, and back to homes of blessing. We tell of reaching out to those in need, welcoming strangers as though they were our own, building meaningful relationships with others and with God. The myths of our people are about struggle and hope, loss and alienation, wholeness and peace. They resonate with us because they address the same existential concerns that each of us faces when constructing our personal sacred myths.

Elie Wiesel has taught that God made humans because God loves stories. If our purpose here on earth is to tell significant tales, then so too is it incumbent upon us to listen to the stories of others. This practice is increasingly at the center of our sacred community building here at Beth Shalom.

Our 7<sup>th</sup> graders who serve dinner at a Cambridge soup kitchen get to hear the guests speak of their lives. The impact of these stories upon our students is clearly profound as they regularly relate them in their own Torah teachings as they become *b'nei mitzvah*. Last spring dozens of congregants gathered in one another's homes to tell their stories of connection to Israel, and the result is a program year ahead filled with opportunities to learn, dialogue, and act upon our relationships with the Jewish State. TBS C.A.R.E.S. has brought together scores of people to share their stories of job loss, not only providing support and council to one another but often new employment opportunities as well. These are but a few of so many instances when members of our community open their hearts to others by opening their ears to words that need to be spoken.

When we hearken to the values and truths of our people's ancient stories and integrate them with our own personal narratives we can be inspired to make meaningful change in our world and in the lives of others. So too, when we listen carefully to people relate their personal myths, we are now better prepared to relate to them.

This social and spiritual practice is what Temple Beth Shalom is all about. As our newly adopted Vision Statement reminds us: "We care deeply about one another, rejoicing in each other's *simchas* and reaching out to support one another in times of need. Together we help to nurture belonging, resilience, and *shleimut* – wholeness in our lives." We can only fully achieve that vision for our community if we share of ourselves, engage with others, and ask them to do the same. In Hebrew, the verb "to count," and the verb "to tell a story" have identical roots. Indeed, we don't feel fully counted, wholly included in the community, until our own story has been related to another.

Many of Ludwig's traits are recalled within in our family but none more than the great joy he found in feeding the birds in his backyard. He'd watch his feeders from the kitchen window, studying them, indentifying newcomers to the group, conceiving elaborate plans for keeping the squirrels away from their food. And while he loved all of his winged friends, the cardinals, with their majestic red feathers, were his favorite. The vibrancy of their coloring matched Ludwig's personality. This bit of family history is well known in our home, and we always take special note of Northern Cardinals when they now land on the feeders outside of our kitchen window.

And yet, I was taken aback one morning last spring when our then three-year-old daughter, Mia, and I had the following conversation over breakfast. She began, "We're lucky that we have so many birds at our house." "That's right," I replied, "I love watching the birds." "I love watching the cardinals," she said, and I agreed noting that those are my favorite.

Mia asked me why, though she already knew the answer. “Because they remind me of my Grandpa Ludwig,” I said. “He was your grandpa when you were a little boy?” she inquired. “Yes he was, sweetie. And I miss him all the time. He was a wonderful person who touched a lot of lives with his smile, his caring, and his humor.” Mia paused in thought so long that I mistakenly thought our conversation had concluded. She turned from the window to look at me, and with a clear desire to offer comfort, she said, “But now you only have to miss him a little bit because you have me to love!” Then she added, “That’s your story.”

Our stories become our legacies, not only within our families but throughout our extended communities of connection. The narratives we tell of ourselves, and those that others come to tell of us, will become the letters and words that we leave inscribed upon our world. What do we want to write?

On this fateful night when we consider the mysteries and uncertainties of a new year ahead, we are compelled to ask ourselves: If I am unable to tell my own story, who will tell it for me? If my story is only about me...what kind of person am I? And if I don’t share it with my loved ones and community now, then when?

Early Reform Rabbi, Leopold Zunz, once taught that we retell the tales of those who came before us in order to bring heaven down to earth and to elevate humanity a little closer to heaven.<sup>5</sup> It is through these tales that we come to understand who we are, how we’re connected, and what our purpose is during our days in this world. And it is in the sharing of our own stories with one another that we can weave our personal narrative into *sefer hachayim* – The Book of Life, or more literally, The Book of Our Lives. *G’mar Chatimah Tovah* – May we each be inscribed for blessing in the volume we author together and in the one written on high as well. AMEN!

---

<sup>5</sup> Weisberg, Dvora E., et al. "Aggadah or Haggadah." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. 2nd ed. Vol. 1. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007. 454-464. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Web. 16 Sept. 2010.