

“The Stories We Tell, and the Stories We’re Told”

A talk by Rev. Jim Foti

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First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis

<https://firstunitarian.org/the-stories-we-tell-and-the-stories-were-told/>

Write it down, a friend of mine advised, back at the beginning of the pandemic. *We’re living through extraordinary times*, she said; *you’ll want to take notes*.

She was right, and so on March 16 of last year, I started a journal. I’m always interested in the stories of ordinary people living through extraordinary times, and now I, and all of us, had become such people.

So I began journaling more rigorously than I had at any time since high school. I did this so that I could someday look back on it all and remember “what it was like.” And I did it so I could get some of the endless, exhaustion-fueled thoughts out of my head.

Before the pandemic, I typically only journaled when I was on vacation, to record the joyful experiences of travel. But this time, like everyone else, I wasn’t going anywhere, and I still wrote it all down, the good, the bad, and the boring, so I could capture the whole story.

A little more than a month after I started my journal, we here on staff were wanting to keep the congregation connected during the shutdown. I figured there might be other people who might find it worthwhile to write about their lives. So I created a Tuesday-night writing group online, and I scheduled it to run for the month of May 2020.

No prior writing experience was required, and there was no homework; I offered writing prompts on the spot, and participants wrote in real time, showing up whenever they could make it. The goal was simply to make progress on writing down pieces of our life stories, from childhood to the present day; there was no critiquing (well, except for self-criticism, which seems unavoidable even in the safest of spaces). And there was no competition, except against the blank page.

Because we only had an hour or so, there was no time to revise between writing and sharing with others – we used a “first thought, best thought” approach, with remarkable success. Each week I was blown away by the prose and poetry that were created.

And what started as a one-month experiment has now lasted for more than a year. We were scheduled to have our final writing session on the day after the murder of George Floyd. Thanks to a teenager's cellphone video, the whole world got to see the full story of what happened to Mr. Floyd, sending many other lives in new directions. The writing group continued to meet, because there was so much more for each of us to write down.

And I think that points to the key to the group's success: participants have kept it real. From the very beginning and to this day, these Tuesday-night writers have shared truths, hard truths, full truths, truths poignant and hilarious, about their lives, their relationships, their neighborhoods. About racism and sexism and fear and justice, about great joy and profound despair, with plenty of compassion and good humor. Every week, we've witnessed the power of expressing and listening to the truth of our stories.

Our assembly theme this month at the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis is story. And today I want to talk about the importance and the impact of keeping it real and true, whether the story is about ourselves, or about a people or a nation. Whether we're writing a first draft of our personal story, or revising and rounding out our broader, collective story. I want to look at how narratives are being revised to bring them closer to the full truth, and I want to look at the powerful and sometimes challenging consequences of doing that. And it seems all the more important to talk about this right now, when we live a country in which a significant portion of the population has dissociated from demonstrable reality. The truth is at once eternal and fragile, and we have a duty toward its care.

As many of you know, I have an intense curiosity about the world, and I often feel like I'm trying to read the entire Internet every day, just because I find stories so interesting. And one thing I've noticed in the past few years, and especially in the year since the uprising, is that there are more and more pieces of the human story coming out of the shadows and into the light.

This kind of updating is sometimes derided as revisionist history, as though the versions of history many of us were taught in school long ago were handed down from the sky on a stone tablet, inerrant and immutable. In reality, those versions were written mainly by men from a narrow racial and socioeconomic range, and the stories centered the actions and perspectives of that demographic. The stories newly

coming to light are just as fact-based if not more so than the earlier versions. And for those hearing them for the first time, they can be alarming, even horrifying.

Just one example: Over this past winter, when I passed through Tulsa, Oklahoma, I already knew about the Tulsa race massacre, which took place 100 years ago this month. As you may know, the massacre led to countless deaths and the destruction of Tulsa's thriving African-American neighborhood. The massacre was not taught in the local schools or even talked about for many decades. In recent years, Tulsa has made great strides in acknowledging what happened, and I learned about the massacre during my seminary years.

What I hadn't known about was another atrocity that took place on the Osage Indian reservation, which starts on the outskirts of Tulsa. Osage lands were found to have oil beneath them at the turn of the 20th century, and to access that wealth, white men engaged in [widespread, systemic chicanery](#). They declared the Osage not sufficiently intelligent to manage their own affairs, and so required them to have white guardians, who skimmed off considerable amounts of money. Perhaps most astonishingly, some white men would marry Osage women, murder them or their family members, evade punishment, and then inherit the money. (Journalist David Grann [published a book about this](#) in 2017; you may have heard about it on public radio.)

And this kind of tragedy is not just in the past - even today, an Indigenous woman in Minnesota is several times [more likely to be murdered](#) than women of other races. These kinds of stories are sickening to anyone with a heart, and can leave one wondering whether there is any bottom to humanity's racism or brutality.

Websites, newspapers, magazines, documentaries - these days, all kinds of reliable sources are rounding out the stories and histories in a kind of mass reckoning. This deluge of stories, of overdue truth-telling, can be a lot to absorb. As one of our FUS members recently put it, "Some days I am just stricken by forgotten atrocities." His comment was in reference to the abuse of [unwed mothers in Ireland](#), but it applies to so much.

In times like these, it can be helpful to remember the adrienne maree brown quote from just a few years back. "[Things are not getting worse,](#)" she said in 2017. "They are getting uncovered. We must hold each other tight and continue to pull back the veil." This isn't to say that things haven't gotten worse for some individuals and groups; Asian-Americans, for just one example, are experiencing a surge in hate crimes right

now. The point is that hatred and violence, while news to some, are not new, and it's more that stories are coming out of the shadows seemingly every day.

It's better to know, to have a fuller picture of the stories we've been told. And we are seeing in real time right now the damage that can happen when a story is told in fragments and falsehoods.

"You can't handle the truth" is [a famous movie line](#) and [an internet meme](#). But millions of our fellow citizens literally can't handle the truth - the truth about their candidate, about the election outcome, [about the Civil War](#), about the benefits of wearing a mask; the painful truth about America's past and about the brutalities and gross inequalities of the present day; the truth about the world's rapidly changing climate. I had heard that quote countless times, but I had never fully pictured what it would mean for someone to not actually be able to handle the truth. Now we have some vivid ideas of what that looks like - irrational, disruptive, screaming, violent, deadly behaviors on a national scale.

So, it's good to do the hard work of learning more of the story, to know the truth from different angles, to know the difficult details. But sometimes people are reluctant to speak their truth.

Last summer, the Unitarian Universalist Association put out a report called "[Widening the Circle of Concern.](#)" It was written by its [Commission on Institutional Change](#). That's maybe not the most exciting-sounding name for a committee. But changing institutions to get them to reckon with their pasts and become more equitable is difficult and important work. And the report, which is free to read online, takes a look at the many challenges of inclusivity across the denomination.

Hundreds of people from marginalized groups were approached so that their perspectives might be included. Many of those approached did participate, but the commission reported this:

Over and over we heard from people who said they were no longer willing to describe the pain they experienced, because, after the initial shock and reaction took place, little changed. Some described this as a form of "trauma porn," in which those in the majority culture got a voyeuristic look into the lives of Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color; experienced deep emotions - and failed to act in any systematic way.

So, while listening to the story is an important step, it's not the only step if we want to keep hearing more.

I want to tell just a couple more stories this morning, to illustrate how a fuller truth can correct the record, and lead those of us who are reality-based to new paths and new ways. And I want to say that I do not share these as trauma porn. Because another message I've heard, over and over from black people, indigenous people, and people of color, and also from women, transfolk, disabled folk, and more, is a weariness or exasperation that the most prominent stories are the ones in which they are in the role of victim.

Addressing this is complex - as more stories continue to be unearthed, as more truth comes to light, there is likely to be wider awareness of horrible acts committed by the dominant culture, acts that do produce victims. But one response is to focus on different kinds of stories, stories that demonstrate the abilities and creativity and self-determination of groups whose full story has not yet been told.

So for this next story, I want us to float nearly 700 miles down the Mississippi River, to a spot in what is now Illinois, not far from what is now St. Louis. A thousand years ago, 500 years before Columbus, a city sprouted up there, along the fertile river banks and it eventually grew to some 20,000 people, larger than London or Paris at the time. This place, called [Cahokia](#), had sweeping plazas, thriving agriculture, transcontinental trade, and the largest earthen monument in North America. I grew up learning about the Aztecs, Incas, and Mayans, but I never learned about Cahokia.

The mounds are still there; but the city, which existed for three or four centuries, was abandoned long before Europeans arrived. For the past few decades, the main academic thinking about Cahokia's decline was that the people who lived there had brought it on themselves, through deforestation and other mismanagement of resources. This assessment was part of a long pattern of blaming marginalized communities for whatever befalls them, and a pattern of viewing Indigenous Americans as less intelligent and subhuman.

But just this month, there's [new published research](#) finding no evidence that the people of Cahokia were poor stewards of their land. Rather, archaeologists have determined that the flooding and erosion in the area started centuries after the city had been abandoned, when Europeans arrived and began heavy plowing and coal mining along the riverbanks.

Dr. Caitlin Rankin, an archaeologist from the University of Illinois, led the research. She says that our own, present-day, human-caused environmental disasters may be coloring our view of this long-ago civilization: “We shouldn’t project our own problems onto the past,” Dr. Rankin says. “Just because this is how we are, doesn’t mean this is how everyone was or is.” Her diligent research is helping update and expand the story, and is lifting up the stewardship demonstrated by indigenous communities across this continent.

The final story I want to share features an unlikely main character: Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. I would imagine that many of us have heard of Maslow’s hierarchy; perhaps you learned about it in a psychology class or at work. Maslow’s hierarchy is usually depicted as a pyramid, with things like food and water at the bottom – needs for the basic sustenance of human life. Above that is security and safety, then belonging. Then, nearing the top, esteem and accomplishment are paired together, and, finally, self-actualization: described as fulfilling one’s full potential, including creative activities.

I probably learned about this pyramid in college, and because it seemed as obvious as gravity to me, I don’t think I ever questioned it – until a few weeks ago. That’s when I read a blog post that kind of blew my mind.

It had the title [“Maslow Got It Wrong.”](#) The blogger later acknowledged that he himself got a few things wrong, but the gist of what he wrote was mind-expanding to me and to other ministers and even to people with psychology degrees, who hadn’t heard this part of the story. None of us was ever taught that Maslow got some of his ideas from spending time with the Blackfeet Indians in Canada, and that many of today’s Blackfeet have taken issue with Maslow’s use and interpretation of their values. The point that made the most immediate sense to me was this one:

While in Maslow’s model, we find love and belonging only after attending to our basic needs and safety, the Blackfoot model describes that our tribe or community is the means through which we are fed, housed, clothed, and protected.

Of course that’s true. Community, which Maslow’s followers placed right in the middle of the pyramid, is actually essential to the needs placed under it. Belonging has to happen first. And as one minister I know pointed out, there are plenty of artists

engaged in creative activities (at the top of the pyramid) who might not be very secure about their basic needs farther down, who might not have much community.

And then I considered how esteem and self-actualization, in Maslow's view, relied on accomplishment. By contrast, the Blackfeet model (and in fact our first UU principle affirming everyone's inherent worth and dignity) - these bestow human value separate from achievement. The more I looked at the pyramid and thought about it, the whole thing seemed like a rickety structure in need of serious remodeling or even inversion. As sobering as it was to hear yet another example of something being extracted from indigenous peoples, I was grateful to know more of the story, and to update the lens through which I look at the world and make decisions on how to spend my limited time in it.

So for those of us who can handle the truth, there is great value to be had in finding more of the story, in asking questions, in keeping it real. Not just so we can be satisfied with being smarter, but also so we can act with more depth and intention and grounding, as we write the next pages of our own stories. We as individuals, as a congregational community, and as a country can be grateful to have turned a couple of corners recently - moving away (a bit) from authoritarianism, at least at the top, and the denouement of the pandemic plotline may be in sight.

But we are still living in extraordinary times, so we would be wise to continue to hold each other tight, as adrienne maree brown says. We would be wise to keep it real when we examine our own stories. And we would be wise to embrace and act on the emerging, fuller picture that the world keeps providing. Forward, together, is the only way.