

“A March of Stories”  
St. Patrick’s Day Sermon. March 17, 2013  
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It’s St. Patrick’s Day. The top of the morning to you all. You can’t very easily miss St. Patrick’s Day here in Boston. The Irish have a presence in Boston that dates back to Colonial times. In fact, the first St. Patrick’s Day celebration in the United States was in Boston in 1737. Then from 1845-1849 the Great Potatoe Famine brought a surge of Irish immigrants to Boston. Today, Boston has the largest percentage of Irish-descended people of any city in the United States, Boston has its own Irish Heritage trail and boasts more Irish pubs than anywhere else in the United States. Irish festivals throughout the year celebrate the arts and traditions of the Irish: the songs, the dances, the films, the poetry, the stories. Ireland has an illustrious tradition of storytelling. Indeed, St. Patrick himself is laden with stories.

And it is stories that I want to talk about and stories that I want to share with you today. When I was a child, my grandparents all seemed to have so many stories to tell my sisters, cousins, and me, and we’d ask them to recount them over and over again. I remember one of us calling, “Come quick, Grandpa is telling about the blizzard and the hands,” and us all running to hear. Grandpa Durfee, my mother’s father, grew up in Huron, South Dakota, where they would have such fierce and huge blizzards that they would have “white outs” --- “You couldn’t see more than a few feet in front of you because of the snow,” my grandfather would explain. And he’d tell the story of going to school in a one room school house out on the prairie when one

of those storms would hit. The men from the town would gather together, and then stretch out in a long line from the town to the school house. The children would go out the door of the sheltering school house and into the blinding blizzard, and a huge hand would appear out of the whirling white, grab onto them, hold them for a brief moment, and pass them onto the next huge hand emerging out of the rushing snow. And on and on from hand to hand my grandfather and the other children would be passed until they were safely home ---or safely in someone's home until they could get to their own homes.

This story is not very long, but somehow it encompassed a whole world in my head---a whole world far away and long ago that was connected to me by my grandfather sitting before me with his weathered face and freckled hands---imagine Grandpa just a little boy vulnerable in the snow and wind!---a world with gigantic hands looming out of the white darkness, reaching out to help. And not just one hand, but many hands, a whole community in a chain of helping hands bringing children home, long ago and far away.

My grandmother Durfee had stories in the snow, too. As a young woman, she went to work as a teacher miles away from the small town of Antigo, Wisconsin, where she lived. She got to the schoolhouse by hitching a ride on the milk truck very early in the morning. When the snow was heavy, sometimes the truck would get stuck, and she'd have to wade in the deepening snow in the dark to the school in her dress, carrying her school supplies and perhaps some bottles of milk. Another snow story tells of an escapade in her teenage years. When her father was out one night, she snuck out to the barn with some friends and

hitched up her father's best horse to a sleigh. Off they went under the starlit sky on the fresh, fast snow, singing and laughing ---until off they fell, and the horse, whose name was Goldie, got away. My grandmother and her friends frantically tried to catch the horse, but Goldie made it back to my great-grandfather on her own. Now, I don't know how many details of this story are factual--- my grandfather's sister provided the family with the maxim, "Never ruin a good story for want of a few facts," and I mainly remember this story being told by people other than my grandmother, though she would detail that the horse's name was Goldie. But we delighted in the story---I think because it showed my grandmother, who was the picture of gentleness and piety, being naughty! Stories of Uncle John or Uncle Peter being naughty were great fun, but stories of Tiny Grandma (as she was sometimes called) being naughty were gleeful! It was like the time she was stopped by the police in her flowered hat for going through a red light on her way to church. "Better pray you don't get hit next time," admonished the police, while Grandpa grumped and my sisters and I giggled in the back seat.

The stories that really took the "Never ruin a good story for want of a few facts" adage to heart were probably the ones my grandfather told of being a district attorney and dealing with some rougher characters in the back woods. Two of the most beloved of these characters were named Dillard Mayberry and Lurid Crisp, who got into all sorts of adventures, all of them true. They had a special penchant for giving the pastor trouble. This pastor was rather officious and presented himself with an air of being much more righteous than anyone else. Dillard and Lurid would have none of it. In one story they drilled a hole in

the church roof and one lowered the other one down on a rope, convincing the pastor that he was receiving a visitation from an angel of the Lord. In another story these two decided that a baptismal group down the river was not getting sufficiently purified, so they opened the locks and let the water flow.

Stories are entertaining, but they are much more than that. As Marshall Ganz, political campaign organizer and Harvard professor, explains, stories are powerful means of conveying values and of instilling agency. Stories, he says, translate values into action. Stories connect to our emotions, inviting us to experience making choices in the face of challenge, even the challenges that the uncertainty of every day brings.

Human beings are meaning-makers. We search for ways to organize our experience, to find connections, patterns, order, and significance, to figure out how things fit together. We look for ways to orient ourselves in our surroundings. We map our worlds. We act in ways that are dependent upon the meanings that we've made and how we've made sense of things. Our map making (or meaning making) is both intellectual and emotional. Drawing on the work of psychologist Jerome Bruner, Marshall Ganz explains that we make analytical sense of the world through finding organizing patterns and order, but we also give evaluative structure to our world; we mark what makes us feel good or feel bad, what is scary or not, what makes us happy and sad, hopeful or despairing. The mode of this evaluative structure is narrative.

Stories communicate values. They tell of characters facing something out of the routine, a situation in which they have a choice to make, and the story tells what happens when they make that choice. The choice that is made reflects a value, for

ultimately, says Ganz, our choices are value based. And these values are accessed emotionally, which is why stories are such a good avenue for imparting values.

Stories help us to map our world by teaching to our hearts as well as our heads. The word story comes from the Greek word, to know. Stories are a way of knowing. We empathize and identify with a character in the story, and then learn with that character as he or she faces the challenges or uncertainty presented in the story.

Stories tell us the “why” of action, and help us to articulate our own reasons for doing what we do or why something matters. Stories show us motivations for action and in turn motivate us. They speak to our hearts and our heads, reminding us of our values, and reaching to emotions that facilitate action, such as empathy, anger, courage, and hope. “Stories,” says Marshall Ganz, “thus teach how to manage our emotions, not repress them, so we can act with agency to face our own challenges.”

Stories inform us of who we are deep down. Telling our own stories helps us to articulate what is important to us, what is valuable to us. Stories also connect us to communities and groups, what the group stands for, the challenges the group has faced. There are different layers to stories, as we dig deeper into them or widen the horizons (to borrow practical theologian Charles Gerkin’s term) of the setting in which the plot takes place. So, the values that are experienced through the telling of the story depends to an extent upon the teller and the listener. Storytelling is relational. It connects us to our deepest selves, to the communities of which we are a part, and to a present now, a present situation, that calls us to action.

Now it is St. Patrick’s Day. Today there is the St. Patrick’s Day parade. The South Boston Saint Patrick’s Day parade is,

according to some, the second largest in the country, drawing 600,000 to 1 million spectators. But it bars the Veterans for Peace group and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender groups from marching. Their voices are not to be heard in this parade. When we hear the stories of people being shut out of the St. Patrick's Day march, it can put us in touch with both empathy and anger. We feel with those who are being excluded, and we feel angry. We want to do something about it. Other stories can put us in touch with feelings of courage and hope. Stories of taking on a challenge can inspire courage. Stories of successes, big or small, can bring up feelings of hope.

I stood up for peace once. It was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade. I was a new girl in town. I was playing with some new friends at recess and wearing a sweater my Clarke grandparents had given me, and which I loved. Another girl came up and started running after me, taunting me, making fun of my sweater and of my family, and saying didn't I want to fight. A fight ensued and I had her down on the ground. She was pulling my hair so hard it hurt. I raised my fist in a punch, and she jumped up, letting go of my hair. I stopped fighting.

"Come on," she said, ducs up. "Aren't you going to fight? What are you, a coward?"

"No," I replied, "There's a need of peace in this world, and we can start right now."

She was dumbfounded, and that was the end of the fight. We never became good friends, but we were friendly.

But where did I get the courage and hope to make this small stand for peace? It didn't just arise spontaneously within me. The story of my grandfather holding fast from hand to hand in the blizzard showed me courage and the power of community.

The image of a chain of helping hands coming out of the storm stays with me. I experience fortitude listening to the story of my grandmother wading knee-deep in snow in order to teach children, along with the dedicated milkman bringing them milk. In addition, the incident in 5<sup>th</sup> grade took place right after I had been living in Harvard Square during the second half of the 1960's, and I had been surrounded by many songs for peace, and heard many stories of people who stood up for justice. The songs and stories had made a deep emotional impact in me through these songs and stories, instilling in me hope and courage as well as the values of peace and justice. All of these stories swirled around and inside me like the snow, then settling on the ground of my being, and nurtured by new stories, songs, poems, traditions, grew into values of my own.

My story is not unique, except in that all stories are unique. The values of peace and justice, of human dignity and equality, and of love and care, and the vision of beloved community, are values and hopes that we share as congregants of this church, or as members of the broader Unitarian Universalist Association, or as visitors interested in how we worship here or simply coming along to accompany a friend. And we all have stories that express and through which we experience those values and learn how to access those values to make purposeful choices when faced with a challenge. What are your stories? What brought you here today? Where will your stories take you when you leave?

And there are our communal stories. We are standing in a stream of stories, our stories marching along as drops of water in the communal stream. Laura's story of Jesus's march on Palm Sunday connects us to the wider community of religious faiths. It tells of Jesus and his disciples making a choice to face challenging power structures and stand for justice, peace, and equality. The story tells us that we can do something. We can march for peace and for inclusivity. Arlington Street Church

itself is rife with its own stories of standing for justice, peace, and equality, working for beloved community. The abolitionist movement, civil rights, feeding the hungry, gay and lesbian marriage, immigrant rights, and our present work to become a more multiculturally welcoming church all have a history at Arlington Street Church. We have marched before. And if you cannot march today, you can still make a stand for peace, justice, and equality. You can tell your own story. You can pass on the stories. Every voice is important, including yours.

The Irish people of Boston and Massachusetts have stories of marching for justice, too. Those who came here in the 1800's faced much discrimination. Jobs were denied them. Many single young women came here in the mid-1800s and worked in the mills in Lawrence and elsewhere. The different immigrant groups were pitted against each other in the Lawrence mills so that they wouldn't unite and threaten the power of the owners. But eventually the different groups dug deeper into their stories and found that they shared a common story of discrimination and unjust working conditions. They united and marched. Icy water was sprayed on them in the middle of winter, but they still marched. And their cause won out. Wages were raised, the workweek shortened, and overtime pay granted. And though the gains this diverse group of marching immigrants won were only temporary, as the mill owners kept chiseling away at the workers' rights, it is ironic that the only textile factory left in Lawrence now is Malden Mills, which is the original manufacturer of the semi-environmentally-friendly Polartec, and whose one-time owner famously, when the mill burned down in December 1995, continued to pay all his now not working workers until the mill was rebuilt.

And I want to leave you with one thing more. When I was little, I worried I'd never have any stories to tell my grandchildren. My grandparents' and even my parents' stories were so exciting.



I was once alone in a house at night when robbers invaded, and hiding out on the roof in my pajamas in the winter air, I thought, “Well, if I live, at least I’ll have a story to tell my grandchildren.”

But to instill value, stories don’t always have to be thrillers. The challenges faced can be simple choices, like how to spend a sunny afternoon. Last weekend, up against a challenge voiced from the backseat of the car by my just turned 6 year old son, I put my foot down and said that we were going to spend some time outside. We went to the Mystic River, and walked a long march along the path, flying his toy superheros through the air and rescuing them again in the snow, throwing snowballs into the river, watching the trains, and looking at our footprints. After a while, Nathaniel, my son, grabbed my hand and said he’d just been joking in the car, he really liked being outside. Then, tucking his superheros into his coat pocket, he went down to the water and reached out his hand to the ducks.