

“Everybody Has a Story,” 11 April 2010

Most of you know that we have this wonderful little granddaughter who just turned one year old last week. I have the joy of spending the majority of my day off, typically Monday, with her, and we enjoy all kinds of activities together. We go for walks, and we play; of course, we eat and she naps. One of her favorite activities, however, is when she pulls out one of her books, sits right next to me, and we read a story. Currently she has two favorites, or maybe they're my favorites and she humors me, but they're *Goodnight, Moon* which was one our daughter loved when she was little, and *Guess How Much I Love You*.

Spending the time sharing a story together has reminded me of just how significant stories are in our lives. We all have one, you know; it's just that we don't often tell our stories, or even put them together in some coherent whole. I know personally how difficult that is, because I started out trying to do that seven years ago when I had the opportunity to spend three months on a clergy renewal leave exploring my roots. When I was in Madison, so many stories of my growing up days with my parents really came to mind—things I hadn't thought about forever, maybe never. I decided to try to write them down, so I'd remember them and so our daughter would have the chance to know me and her grandparents in a way that she otherwise would not. I wasn't very successful in that enterprise, however, because I ran out of time, work took over, and it remains an unfinished manuscript that exists somewhere on a computer hard drive.

I guess that's part of the reason I've always appreciated it when people who are known for one reason or another choose to share their memoirs. Their writing gives us a peek into their lives, into the passions that motivated them and the joys that kept them going. Books like that Carver McGriff wrote a year or two ago about his experiences during the Normandy invasion serve to give those of us who didn't share that experience a glimpse into the thoughts and feelings, the reflections and understandings that he has gleaned from that

time over the passing years. Things like that convince me that stories and storytelling are important and powerful.

Clearly, Jesus knew the power of stories, because he used them all the time in his speaking and teaching. That was a way for him to relate to his listeners, and share with them in a way that allowed them to garner new wisdom and insights. His frequent storytelling was also a topic of conversation among his followers, and some of what they talked about is found in the Bible passage for today. This is from Mark's gospel, the first story of the life of Jesus that was written.

Here's what our version says: He went back to teaching by the sea. A crowd built up to such a great size that he had to get into an offshore boat, using the boat as a pulpit as the people pushed to the water's edge. He taught by using stories, many stories...

When they were off by themselves, those who were close to him, along with the Twelve, asked about the stories. He told them, "You've been given insight into God's kingdom—you know how it works. But to those who can't see it yet, everything comes in stories, creating readiness, nudging them toward receptive insight..."

With many stories like these, he presented his message to them, fitting the stories to their experience and maturity. He was never without a story when he spoke. When he was alone with his disciples, he went over everything, sorting out the tangles, untying the knots.

Stories help us to do that—to sort out the tangles and untie the knots of our lives. For instance, I read an article in *O Magazine* a few years ago about Carole Radziwill, a journalist and author. After working at ABC News for several years, she married a fellow ABC producer named Anthony Radziwill, who was the only son of prince Stanislas Radziwill and Lee Radziwill. Her husband died in 1999, after a five year battle with cancer, and after running back into her chosen field of endeavor and trying to escape the pain, she returned to the States and was, as she said, a mess!

At one point, she had coffee with Delia Ephron, with her sister Nora, was writing a play that involved a young widow, and Delia wanted to talk with Carole Radziwill about her experience in order to develop the character in the play. Carole said that she had anticipated spending 20 minutes, but two hours later, she realized that she had told Ephron things she hadn't told anyone.

That's when she realized she had a story to tell, and she engaged her sister-in-law Teresa to help us let go of her memories, but not lose them. Teresa told her she must write them down, so on Memorial Day weekend of 2003, the two of them went off together with a tape recorder, and recorded about 20 hours of tape. Carole Radziwill said that Teresa would ask her questions to jog her memory, and she would respond. At one point, she said, she looked up and saw that Teresa was crying. Radziwill said, "She made me understand the power of the story."

Clarissa Pinkola Estes is someone else who knows the power of story. She was a seasoned psychoanalyst for 31 years and had 15 years of artist- and scholar-in-residence status, and after the horrific massacre at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, she was called in to help with students and their families cope with the terrible tragedy, and part of what she used was the art of storytelling. She said, "I have understood since childhood that stories are medicine. Stories, personal narrative, poems, dreams folktales—all are powerful unguents, bandages, plasma; they are soporifics, antibiotics, sinew for sewing; they offer the needed returns to sanity." I believe that she's right. You see, Stories are like medicine; they heal and inspire us; they encourage teach us. And our stories can help others view their own lives and life journeys with new insights and understandings.

Every one of us has a story, and even The Garden has its own story, which many of you know. Even though it's familiar to some of you, I'll tell you the short version just so we're all on the same page. The first vision of what became The Garden came to me in a dream in November of 1994 at a low point in my life. It became clear that I was to be doing something

very different in ministry and that a new passion was being unearthed within me.

After some time of discernment, it became clear that I was to try to reach out to as many people as I could and share God's love. Now, you may think that's not unique for a pastor, and really, it's not. However, the way we envisioned doing it was far different. Our goal became creating a way to lower the barriers between us and God, and to help us experience God in an entirely new way.

More specifically, I felt it important that we try to share the story in a way that those who had been burned by the church in one way or another might hear it in a new way. That's why we use movie clips to tell the story—today's version of the parables, the stories, that Jesus told. That's why we use music that many of us download from iTunes, or hear on the radio—music that takes on new meaning when it's put in the context of relationship with God and one another. Our aim has been to create a Sunday experience that connects with those who, as I often say, have been turned out or turned off by the church, or who have had little or no exposure to church, and or those who simply find this way of being with one another more comfortable and meaningful. That's why we try to be, as our billboard says, "different, relevant and inclusive." Everyone is welcome at The Garden.

Just as those I've mentioned have their stories, and The Garden has its story, so, too, does each one of us have our story. Over the next few weeks and months, we're hopeful of sharing some of those stories with one another, as we envision and begin to map out the future story of The Garden, and we're going to ask you to help us with that.

As many of you know, I will be away for three months on a Lilly Clergy Renewal leave beginning the first of May. During the time I'm away, I'll be trying to gain a fresh vision for my life here at The Garden and what my life beyond The Garden might look like. At the same time, you as Gardeners will be invited to participate in some Garden Gatherings to help shape the vision of how we want our Garden to grow and what we want our Garden to look like. I do hope you'll be sure to join us on either June 6 or June

26 to share your ideas and dreams, because you're important, and they're important.

As a starting point, we're going to be using the next three Sundays to gather stories and experiences, impressions and convictions that will help us understand better who we are now in order to build a better future. I'm going to ask you to help us, and I hope that everyone of will do so, in whatever way works for you.

Today, we would like to know a little of your story. Would you be willing to tell us in writing, on video, or via email or Facebook, your story of how you got to The Garden? What is it that caused you to come the first time, and if you've become one of our "regulars," why you've stayed here?

Sharing your story is part of our story, so I hope and pray that you will help us by your willingness to become a Garden storyteller. Will you?

Janet Litherland described stories this way: "Stories have power. They delight, enchant, touch, teach, recall, inspire, motivate, challenge. They help us understand. They imprint a picture on our minds. Consequently, stories often pack more punch than sermons. Want to make appoint or raise an issue? Tell a story. Jesus did it. He called his stories 'parables.'"

Stories do all that and more. So let's tell our stories.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.