

NOTES for HOMILIES on

The NATURE and NURTURE of STORIES

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NATURE

Neil Greenberg

We are immersed in stories ... and arguably we **ARE** stories—that is how the brain links experience into memories and memories into more-or-less satisfying narratives. That is how we **KNOW ANYTHING!**

We are born into a world structured by stories:

The great myths of antiquity. What Joseph Campbell might call “the constantly renewed maps of consciousness”—The first great story in our tradition to be written down... tells of what it means to be human: “Sing, Muse, of the wrath of Achilles” and we hear how the Greek warrior lost and regained his humanity in the last weeks of the Trojan War.

The Bible’s countless stories of our connections to a transcendent reality, terror and triumph, folly and faith, desperation, and inspiration (in the 1940’s it was a hit radio show: “The Greatest Story Ever Told.”)

But these stories in which we are immersed **DO NOT** have any *real* meaning until they are connected to *OUR* STORIES.

And until *OUR* stories are connected to those of others of our tribe we may feel—with some justification—that our lives have no meaning: this is an issue of biological self-actualization—the **NEED** to project at least some of our selves—whether genes or memes—into the future ...

As Aristotle put it in the fourth century BC ... we are, when apart from community, either as beasts or gods—but certainly not human. We cannot exist in an existential void—prisoners in solitary confinement—unless, perhaps, if you believe in hell.

And so, we are motivated to seek knowledge about each other: **BUT** “facts” do not provide understanding and have little meaning unless they inform our actions—and most if not all actions are **INTUITIVE**—guided by motives energized by emotions.

Facts alone are not enough to guide us: “All truly wise thoughts,” wrote Goethe, “have been thought already thousands of times; but to make them truly ours, we must think them over again honestly, till they take root in our personal experience.” (1823)

At whatever level we inquire, it is the network of connections between our experiences that give them ... meaning.

Even at the cellular level: The relentless creation, disintegration, and renewal of connections is the way one of my favorite organ systems—the brain, works.

This cerebral collection of closely related organs has an extraordinary ability to communicate within itself, as most of us know—but also in constant dialog with our bodies, and with other people. (Phenomenologists call the outcomes of these activities, EMBODIED COGNITION—so, when we say that “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself” or that “looking into each other’s eyes can evoke powerful emotions” I am speaking from biological evidence, not metaphor...

But in all this, the connections formed by communicating are the key:

Of course, there are many ways of communicating: For example, the Great 19th century Romantic artist, Eugène Delacroix, believed that “...painting ... [is] no more than the ... bridge between the mind of the painter and that of the spectator.” (1850)

But this morning we are emphasizing STORIES TOLD WITH WORDS: language is arguably one of the greatest accomplishments of our species.

BUT, there is only so much that words are good for:

At the level they operate, utilizing our most complex (and recently evolved) cerebral organs, they are not without flaws—they *represent* meaning—BUT they are *not* meaning. Know what I mean?

After attempting any kind of commentary, we are likely to say this each other, “know what I mean?”

Grunts and groans and exclamations of joy and surprise—and then nouns, connected with verbs, modified with adjectives and adverbs, are amongst the supreme accomplishment of our species.

BUT despite their pride of evolutionary and physiological accomplishment, as Joseph Campbell observes...

“The best things cannot be told; the second best are misunderstood ... [and so eventually] we come to the problem of communication: the opening, that is to say, of one’s own truth and depth to the depth and truth of another in such a way as to establish an authentic community of existence.”

AND so, we do the best we can with what we have, and what we have is far from perfect:

"Since words are always an abstract, approximate map of reality, all verbal interpretations whether of scientific investigations or of mystical insights are necessarily inaccurate and incomplete

... this realization that all models and theories are approximate is basic to modern scientific research. Thus, adapting Einstein, 'As far as [words] refer to reality, they are not certain; and as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality.'" (Fritjof Capra)

ISSUES of KNOWLEDGE beg a question: For thousands of years, we have asked, “WHAT IS TRUTH?” And suppose we thought we knew?

I think the skepticism of the Greek philosopher, Gorgias, speaking of reality, is really best applied to truth. Sometime around 380 BC, he said ... *Even if TRUTH existed, it could not be known ... Even if TRUTH could be known, it could not be communicated. ... Even if TRUTH could be communicated, it would not be understood.*

AND YET, sometimes, when eyes meet or hands touch ... we feel we know and understand. The sophistry of the Pre-Socratic philosophers, of anyone... melts in the face of genuine feeling.

You may know that I find the workings of mind—the cells and tissues and organs of our being—endlessly fascinating. And so, you can expect me to shuttle back and forth between the metaphysical unknowables of being ... and biology.

So, let me go back to the brain:

To be honest, I do not think anyone knows –OR CAN *KNOW* anything beyond the instant of experience—

- actually, “*NOW*”—the duration of activity of specific receptive neurons—is about 4-6 seconds.
- All that has come before (for example, what Gorgias said) has been stored in different neurons as a memory.

After the cells that register *NOW*, other cells take over and *NOW* becomes *MEMORY*. And through successive stages of overlapping cerebral connecting and encoding, memory becomes more-and-more distant. So, when we remember anything we experienced, we are really remembering the last time we remembered it.

But, wonderful recent research tells us that memory is *more* than the past—it is the future:

IMAGINATION depends on *MEMORY* --not in an abstract, metaphorical way: the *PARTS OF THE BRAIN* that are most intimately connected to these two seeming contrary functions—*ARE* mostly *THE SAME*.

It makes sense: the brain is always predicting outcomes of actions—usually in fractions of seconds, but sometimes in the long reach of history that has not yet occurred.

And looking even more deeply, *TRUTHs* that are the *ANCHORS* of our stories are in lockstep with *PASSION* ... I mean the more powerfully emotional the experience well let me skip to *LOVE* and you will “see what I mean”.

In 1965 Paul Simon wrote *Kathy's Song* and it includes one of my favorite lyrics:

And so, you see, I have come to doubt
All that I once held as true
I stand alone without beliefs
The only truth I know is you

AND this deep sense of *TRUTH* is connected to one of the most challenging questions ever:

HOW do the organs, cells, and molecules of mind *GIVE RISE* to that feeling of *TRUTH*; to such an acute state of *CONSCIOUSNESS*—to what it *FEELS* like to be *YOU*??

By means of a process *UNKNOWN* to *SCIENCE* we regularly transmute objective facts into subjective thoughts and beliefs.

The manner in which objective—mechanistically describable elements of reality become subjective—personal thoughts and feelings is what philosophers and scientists have nicknamed the “hard problem.”

We are describing the bejeezus out of it, finding endless corollaries between actions, reportable feelings, and brain events but ...

Often, we ourselves do not know what we think until we act ... I've written down what I *think* I want to say, but in the writing down it changes ... and in the saying out loud it changes again, and in the sharing, it will change even more.

Untold, our best experiences are like dreams—gone in the instant of their becoming —connect them in a story and they become part of us.

The great story-tellers of our tribe, the authors and lyricists, poets and playwrights, have often said that their stories help them know at least as much as being known...

We may not have the skills of a John Keats—he died young and but shared often with his buddies, Byron and Shelley, that OFTEN he had not been aware of the beauty of some thought or expression until after [he had shared it]" (From <http://neilgreenberg.com/ao-extraordinary-experiences-of-creative-artists/>)

Seduced by the LETHARGY of CUSTOM we don't go looking for NEW STORIES , we don't pursue our deepest truths deliberately.

- BUT "There is a deep connection between meaning and beauty"
- "Neither is a function of the intellect, both can enrich a life and perhaps we develop an eye for meaning in the same way that we develop an eye for beauty."
- Few of us pursue meaning deliberately. Most of us focus our attention elsewhere, accumulating knowledge [that seems practical] (Rachel Naomi Remen , Lion's Roar)

It is in the AUTHENTICITY and COHERENCE of your experiences that BEAUTY and BEING merge. —

Telling your stories can actually tell you more about who *you* are! AND our stories also point to our possible futures.

How do they know where to go? You might ask...

We have asked Gail Anderson to share with you one of the great insights of the Spanish Poet, Antonio Machado: "*Se hace camino al andar*" ("You Make the Road by Walking" ...

Gail Anderson read poem by Antonio Machado

NURTURE

Katherine Greenberg

Almost every Friday morning, I have the opportunity for a deep and emotionally affecting, spiritual experience. It happens when I am listening to the weekly broadcast of StoryCorps on NPR Morning Edition. If you are unaware, StoryCorps began in 2003 with the opening of a storybooth in Grand Central Terminal, in New York City. In 2005, NPR began to broadcast stories on *First Edition* and stories began to be saved at the Library of Congress. Over one million people have downloaded their app. StoryCorps publishes books of stories, five to date, each emphasizing certain kinds of experiences—those of LGBT people, African Americans, Mothers—you get the idea. This nonprofit organization has been awarded many honors,

including a one million-dollar MacArthur award. It has programs for schools and other organizations to learn how to encourage and facilitate the sharing of stories. Their website lists one of their goals, and I quote, “to weave into the fabric of our culture the understanding that everyone’s story matters.”

So, what is it about the power of stories? How do they nurture us?

This past March, I listened to the story shared by Dr. William Lynn Weaver. He talked about his experience as one of 14 **African American students** who, in 1964, integrated the then all-white **West High School**. I know West High School as a good school, through the eyes of my daughter, Lisa, who is a school counselor there. West is now one of the most integrated schools in Knox County. But I was appalled at the racial discrimination Dr. Weaver suffered, the fear and frustration he shared about his experiences of teachers, coaches, and other students.

As I listened that March morning, Dr. Weaver shared how a teacher in his former, all Black school, mentored him throughout his time at West. Although his grades improved over the years, his experiences left him feeling insecure about his intellectual abilities. His mentor, however, knew better—and filled out an application on his behalf for admittance to college. Dr. Weaver graduated from **Howard University and Meharry Medical College** and is now Chief of Surgery at **Fayetteville VA Medical Center** in North Carolina.

You may have heard this story on NPR—but do you know that later this spring West High School principal, Ashley Jessie, invited Dr. Weaver to come to West, and speak with students and staff? He came, shared his story, answered students’ thoughtful questions, and accepted the public apology made by the principal. My daughter contacted me that day to say how proud she was of her school and how moving it was to hear Dr. Weaver tell them he felt more at peace after returning to West. And this happened because of the open, honest sharing of a story. That story had power to bring people together in communion.

And communion requires a special kind of relationship amongst people. Buber, in his famous book, *I and Thou*, talks about the ultimate relationship we can have if able to join another on what he calls the narrow ridge. Neil and I spent some time recently exploring Buber’s metaphor in relation to teaching and learning. For we are currently engaged with other authors in writing a book about a relational approach to pedagogy in higher education. Our research indicated that the heart of teaching and learning is the place where teachers and students join together in sharing personal experiences that are carefully woven with the abstract knowledge of course content.

Buber actually used the metaphor of narrow ridge in multiple ways—beyond what he wrote in *I and Thou*. One morning last summer, Neil and I spent several hours expanding this metaphor for our use:

Each of us is on our own narrow ridge of concrete experience. It can be very lonely up there. And we may best find our spirituality through communion with others in authentic relationships—across our narrow ridges. The abyss on both sides of a ridge go deeper and deeper into abstraction, to the representation and explanation of the world and ideas—including misunderstandings. And, when we use language, when we tell stories, we are already representing our thoughts and sensations beyond the concrete experience. And herein lies the mystery:

As we walk on our own narrow ridge, we have a few seconds of presentness. What is real is what happens on the ridge. The abstractions in the crevices are always of something—of what is real... Behind us is the past, including that of our ancestors and our culture. Ahead of us is the future, including our biological and intellectual heirs. In Friedman's view, meeting another person on the narrow ridge—or as we think of it, reaching out from our ridge to that of another—can lead to an authentic communion, where both I and Thou are experienced as real as much as is possible. And there may be no better way than through sharing our stories.

It makes me think of something Thoreau wrote,

"What lies before us and what lies behind us are small matters compared to what lies within us. And when we bring what is within us out into the world, miracles happen" --Henry David Thoreau

Much of the time, I—and perhaps you as well—experience ourselves as the main character as I/we walk or run through life. I am the main character and you may be extras in my show.

John Koenig, the author of *the Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows*, decided we needed a new word to help us perceive the world more broadly. That word is **sonder**, (n.) This is what he says on his YouTube site:

Sonder (n.) Everyone has a story. Sonder is, and I quote, "the realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own—populated with their own ambitions, friends, routines, worries and inherited craziness—an epic story that continues invisibly around you like an anthill sprawling deep underground, with elaborate passageways to thousands of other lives that you'll never know existed, in which you might appear only once, as an extra sipping coffee in the background, as a blur of traffic passing on the highway, as a lighted window at dusk."

Sometimes I am aware of sonder, most especially when I attend one of TVUUC's Memorial services. I always learn about vivid and complex parts of the life of the person we are celebrating. And, I wish a thousand times that I could tap their wisdom! But I am too late to join them in community.

This happened for Neil and me even at the memorial service for our daughter, Jessica. Taryn Strauss told stories shared by the group of girls who grew up with Jessica in TVUUC. We learned another side—other sides—of Jess, that we carry with us now and forever.

Neil and I are long time members of a Small Group Ministry. For those who don't know, TVUUC has numerous small groups formed around the principles of SGM in which members meet regularly for two hours to "check in" with each other during the first hour, and then to explore some spiritual topic through dialogue during the second hour. We have opportunity to hear each other's stories every first and third Sunday morning. Our group has taken up a new practice of late:

Prior to each meeting, we share a StoryCorps Great Question with the group members. You can find this list online at [StoryCorps Great Questions](#) to start a conversation. Questions like

- What was the happiest moment of your life? The saddest?
- Who has been the biggest influence on your life? What lessons did that person teach you?
- Who has been the kindest to you in your life?

So, during the second hour of our meetings, each of us tells a story from our own life in response. And the rest of us ask back. Somehow it brings us new perspectives, new snapshots of experiences that influence each of us and make us who we are.

Sometimes we see some quality of a group member that appears in all the stories shared by that person—those things that change and yet are more of less the same. At other times, we find a whole new dimension of a person we had not seen before, a dimension that helps us understand each other and feel understood. Sometimes, I feel connected to them in a whole new way. I see them in a new, expanded light. I break apart some of the assumptions I had about them that I never realized I held, that I never questioned. Barry Oshry, a wise and creative writer about organizational systems, stresses: What do we do when we don't have all the information? We make up a story!

And, speaking for myself, I find I better understand ME, how I make my road by walking, how I am able at times to turn a beehive full of stinging bees into nurturing ones--bees who make white wax and sweet honey from my bitter disappointments—how my stories don't mean anything unless I have someone to tell them to.

Neil and I have been thinking: What if we had a kind of StoryCorps open to all who are a part of our church family? This would meet a very different purpose than the private story experience offered by the Spiritual Care Team. We could record our more public stories and listen to others'. People could choose a question and sit with a partner who could ask back and help them clarify—or they could tell a story with another with whom they had shared some experience.

By listening to each other's stories, we just might find the way to connect on deeper and deeper levels. And we could ask back before it's too late! We might go down between our narrow ridges where we can find deep communion—where “you” won't be “you” anymore— where “you” becomes “thou.” And just maybe, we would be better able to be a bridge over troubled water for each other—when we needed it most.
