

The Stories in Our Head that Get in Our Way

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching
Sunday, May 2, 2021 ~ Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Story for All Ages

Duck! Rabbit! by Amy Krouse Rosenthal & Tom Lichtenheld ([see at this link](#))

Music and Biographical Note

“Sergei Rachmaninoff’s Symphony No. 1,” by Irina Tchantceva (printed at end)

Personal Reflection

“Leaping over Self-imposed Fences” by Suzy Mazrolle (printed at end)

Hymns: [“When the Spirit Says Do”](#) and [“Life Calls Us On.”](#)

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones

“Story” is our Soul Matters theme for this month of May. Stories enrich, challenge, and connect us. Yet any of us can get hooked on stories that lead us away from connection. In the story *Duck! Rabbit!* which Dirk and I read out loud to you, each of us had a story stuck in his head. We were so convinced we knew what we were looking at that we couldn’t even consider another perspective. We became attached to our version and could not imagine that there might be a *larger* story which could include both of us. We got so upset with each other that the story was no longer about the mystery we were exploring--the story was about our conflict! Of course, there was the brief chance of a new story... we were going to ask the creature— “What do you call yourself?” But it was too late—we had scared it off!

What’s Your Story? When people meet, sometimes one will ask the other person, “So, what’s your story?” In the dominant culture there are acceptable stock answers--your age, background, place of origin, family, field of work. And, to be honest, if you don’t have a sense that your listener will receive your story with care, you might be safe with stock answers. But as listeners and speakers, we must remember that every life can be told from various angles. We contain many stories. Every story may have something that is true, but every story may not be helpful to keep telling.

Some stories get in our way. We can get hooked on stories that keep us from accepting ourselves for who we are and feeling grateful for our lives. They can sap our sense of purpose and worth. Today we are looking at good ideas for telling new stories.

Dr. Diane Millis is a professor and spiritual director in Minnesota. She’s the author of a book entitled *Re-creating a Life*. Millis doesn’t mean creating a different life from the one you have. She is talking about taking the time to think about your life using a variety of perspectives.

For example, she recommends that we imagine our stories in the third person. Rather than thinking *I did this*, or *that happened to me*, we should think about ourselves as the main character in a story. Our narrator’s perspective should be one of compassion. The story can bear witness to the pain but also to the courage, fortitude, and survival of the main character. The narrator could highlight the moments of goodness, the parts of the story that enrich our lives.

Millis recommends we start the story in the way we'd start a fairy tale: *once upon a time*. Sit down and write it out in 15 minutes, she says. It doesn't have to be long, just a page or two. Of course, like a fairy tale our story might have dangers and hardships in it, but it might also contain unpredictable journeys. Consider when did a detour in plans brought this person to a surprising place in life? Tell the parts of the story that show your lead character's endurance and ingenuity. Describe the gestures of kindness this person received and gave to others.

Once upon a time, when Diane Millis was a little girl in Minnesota, she thought she had a perfect life, and tried to keep it that way. Yet her parents divorced, and she and her mother moved away, to Arizona. She left behind her family, her school, and her sense of holding everything together. Her world was broken apart. In early adulthood, she used to wonder: what if that little girl's parents had not split up and she hadn't moved away? How much better would her life be? Many years later, she now can admire the little girl's endurance and strength. She gives thanks for the people she met along the way. She can identify the talents which she developed in the midst of it all. For example, her ordeals taught her the practice of compassionate listening. She is able to bring this practice to her life now as a mother, wife, teacher and listening professional. She says we must hold our stories "lightly, not tightly."

This is how we can receive the stories of others, as well: lightly, not tightly. Today Suzy told us the story of her fears of starting new venture and moving to a new state a few years ago. She worried about having enough money. She recalled herself as the little girl, one who had feared never having enough. Yet her life story sparkles with moments of creativity and boldness. [Quoting another person] Diane Millis advises: "You are the story you tell yourself, so [make sure you] tell yourself a good story."ⁱ

Too often the stories we tell are saturated with problems. It is tempting to connect with other people by telling sad stories, to bond over lamenting or complaining or grumbling. Yet such stories can also be draining. The problem-saturated story is not the only story, it's one of many we could tell. Perhaps it would connect us even more if we included some shining moments in our stories. Assuming that we are not one-upping each other or telling a lie, we can share the moments that shine for us. Millis doesn't say we should ignore pain or sweep away problems, only allow the shining moments to be seen.

Twenty-four years ago, I attended a training for a group of new ministers hosted by the Unitarian Universalist Association in Boston. Our trainer said *I know you can outdo each other with a problem-saturated story about your congregation, so I'm not going to ask for that. Instead, he said, think of three sparkling moments from the life of your congregation.* We took some time to think. Then after we told our stories to the group, we felt hopeful and confident about our work. As we heard sparkling moments from others, we felt happy. We gave thanks for one another's work. It brought us together. It left us with a better mood than a problem saturated story.

"You are the story you tell yourself, so [make sure you] tell yourself a good story."

Looking at the boy who is the main character of my life, I could tell a sad story. And I have, on some occasions. But I don't recall telling it in the third person, and I can add some shining moments to it. Once upon a time, in a dysfunctional, distracted family, this boy didn't feel welcome. You could say his days were saturated with loneliness. But on many evenings, he learned to play card games at the home of his mother's Aunt Kate. And he spent whole days at the house of his cousins and his Uncle Roger and Aunt Mary. He enjoyed many home-cooked meals there, some dishes he had never heard of before. His uncle had served as a cook on a Navy ship in the Second World War. When his uncle recalled the task of making a turkey dinner

for Thanksgiving for hundreds of men out at sea, describing it in detail, his uncle's eyes twinkled.

In school this boy felt lonely and shy. Yet in high school he became a high school newspaper reporter. This made it easier for him to get other kids to talk, relieving his awkwardness. It made teachers notice his work, which he liked. He was a people pleaser. He often held himself back. Yet armed with a reporter's notepad and fired up with his First Amendment right to the freedom of the press, he sat in the principal's office, grilling the man with questions. He argued with a tall white male history teacher who didn't like an editorial opinion he had written and published. Back then the boy didn't know he was armed also with privilege as a male and a white person, which made it easier for him to get away with being bold with authority figures. But if he had known about this privilege, he might have written about that also. In any case, he can do it now.

This boy dreaded physical education class, feeling self-conscious and inadequate—so many dropped outfield catches and basketballs missing the basket. Yet in high school physical education class, he learned how to swim laps. He was never a competitor at swimming, but using that skill has given him pleasure and health for decades.

So that's me in the third person. Once I started writing this, I remembered other shining moments. It made me feel better. Not only do I have more compassion for the kid who's the main character of the story, I like him better than he liked himself.

We must hold our stories lightly, not tightly. Except for our phantom stories. We can let go of them altogether. Phantom stories haunt us with lives we didn't live. They include asking the "what if" questions and lamenting the "if onlys" of our lives. Sometimes I listen to them... *If only I had stayed in that relationship, or the other one. If only I'd gone to law school or medical school. What if I had majored in computer science?* Phantom stories are so powerful as to seem realistic, but they're not. They get in the way of appreciating the life we have. Instead of telling a phantom story, let's consider the story we want to create for the days ahead of us.

Let us remember that every story is incomplete and unfinished.

As Irina told us, Sergei Rachmaninoff's First Symphony was rejected by critics, in part because the orchestra played it badly, and in part because it was bold and unfamiliar. The story of rejection and failure haunted him for years, and he left the composition locked away for the rest of his life. Fortunately, with compassion and guidance from his doctor—from a listening professional—Rachmaninoff kept on composing. And fortunately, his bold first symphony was discovered in later years, and published and played, and it continues to enrich the world. Every story is incomplete and unfinished, even after we are gone. We don't have to be a composer whose early work was hidden away for this to be true. There is always more to be heard, more to understand. Let us imagine that a larger story remains always to be unveiled and appreciated.

Let us consider our own stories and write them and tell them, with as much compassion as we can, holding the tough moments with love and celebrating the moments that shine. Doing this will help us be able to bear witness to the stories of others, and receive their stories with care.

Stories enrich, connect, and challenge us. They are gifts we share. May we be ever grateful. So may it be. Blessed be and amen.

Music and Biographical Note

“Sergei Rachmaninoff’s Symphony No. 1,” by Irina Tchantceva

[\[Music on piano for 90 seconds.\]](#)

That was the opening of Sergei Rachmaninoff’s iconic Second Piano Concerto. I am sure you recognized it at once. One of the last great pianists-composers, admired by audiences for his unsurpassed brilliant pianism and works of breathtaking beauty, Rachmaninoff found his refuge in the United States, after the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. He was considered one of the most successful performing musicians of his time.

With his first concert on American soil given in Providence, Rhode Island, he then settled with his family in New York City on the Upper East Side, then later in life, relocated to Beverly Hills, California. Steinway’s association with Rachmaninoff lasted his entire life.

Rachmaninoff’s glamorous success would never suggest the struggle and insecurity he experienced throughout his life. It was the failure of his First Symphony in 1887 that haunted him forever. At the premiere, a fatal blend of an under-rehearsed orchestra and, as they say, a drunken conductor, brought a fiasco that critic and composer Cesar Cui compared with the Biblical 10 plagues of Egypt, stating that the piece was fit only for a music conservatory in hell. Rachmaninoff hid in a stairwell, hands over his ears. His dreams, his hopes were destroyed.

He plunged into severe depression and for the next three years hardly wrote anything, only with psychiatric help being able to return to his work. The Second Piano Concerto you heard an excerpt from is dedicated to his doctor, Nikolai Dahl, who restored his self-confidence and helped him to climb out of despair. Many masterpieces were written by Rachmaninoff after this concerto, yet the nostalgia and dark nuances always marked his style.

And what is the fate of the infamous Symphony? Rachmaninoff locked the manuscript away in a desk and made no attempt to collect orchestral parts in his haste to leave St. Petersburg. It was only after the composer’s death, in 1944, when the instrumental parts were discovered by a pure accident in the Archives of the Leningrad Conservatory Library. The second performance of the piece, considered a success, took place at the famed Moscow Conservatory in 1945. The American premiere took place in 1948, with the Philadelphia Orchestra under the helm of Eugene Ormandy. With the posthumous rise of Rachmaninoff’s reputation as a composer, the symphony became part of the standard orchestral repertoire.

From different times and places these are responses of listeners who were stunned by the depth and significance of the piece: “One of the best Romantic symphonies of all time”; “Ferociously impressive”; “Lived so long without being familiar with it...peace to all and if you meet rejection at first it could well mean that you are a power waiting to be recognized.”

I wish Rachmaninoff would live to these days to see the second life of his creation.

Personal Reflection

“Leaping over Self-imposed Fences” by Suzy Mazrolle (printed at end)

When I received the email from Rev Roger regarding today’s topic he suggested perhaps I could speak to my career in Food and Nutrition. You might not imagine that comment evoking a little gasp! But it did!! Had Rev Roger been secretly spying on me from afar? Could he know that I’ve been mired in a combination of covid-coma and self-doubts as I struggle to pull myself out of the rut I’ve been in to find more fulfilling work? Or maybe he recalled a remark I made in a recent meeting about the “soul sucking” nature of my current part time position.

Nearly 3 years ago I sold my home back East to look for something new. I had fulfilling work, but I was so far from my widely dispersed family. A trusted friend advised: don’t stay here till you retire, go now, you can rebuild your consulting work anywhere. Off I went into the unknown!

Most of my prior consulting work involved community outreach, teaching and public speaking. I moved into my apartment and covid hit a couple months later, not an ideal situation. But now after a year I do feel as I’ve gotten to know my community better and am finally ready to break out.

Oh My Gosh!!! Fear arising! What if I don’t still have the chops?? This soul sucking job I referred to has often made me feel inadequate, not because I don’t know how to do the job, but because I’m not given enough time and resources to do the job well. I rarely get to use my creative abilities.

Two weeks ago while pet sitting for my daughter, we chatted and when I asked what chores she’d like me to tackle, she paused... Mom, I want you to start your nutrition website we’ve been talking about since February. And so with that kind nudge, I did. It’s not done yet, but I’m moving forward and the feedback I’m getting has been encouraging.

For me, fear seems to be at the core of much of my procrastination. I’ve been reading a book entitled *Natural Bravery* by Gaylon Ferguson, a Buddhist teacher. Throughout the book Ferguson quotes his teacher Chogyam Trungpa, founder of the Shambala school of Buddhism in the US. Heres’ a piece that resonates for me.

Doubt is the first obstacle to fearlessness that has to be overcome. We’re not talking about doubts about joining an organization or something like that. We are referring to overcoming a much more basic doubt, which is fundamentally doubting yourself and feeling that you have some kind of shortcomings as a human being.

In a later chapter, Ferguson writes about Fear of Action: “If I do something new, there is a chance that my actions will expose my ignorance or lack of skill or my neurotic confusion. I might make a mistake, I could fail.” “We fear not being perfect or entirely correct, so we hide in a cocoon of imagined safety “ Safe, but not a very satisfying.

Just yesterday, in my typical chatty manner I started a conversation with a older neighbor gardening in her yard. Next thing I knew I was on a tour of her lovely gardens. Bringing our visit to a close she remarked: “You know what’s good about our stage of life? We don’t have to worry about being perfect or of failing. We can just try something new and who cares if it doesn’t go just right!” Wow, you never know when a teacher will appear!

I’m learning a lot about what I do and don’t know and like so many long avoided tasks, creating my currently in progress business website is not as hard as I imagined. I may not know a lot about websites and social media now, but I will soon!

We all have stories in our heads. Some good, some not. Some real, some imagined. I have the power to choose which story to listen to, that is if I notice it playing in the background! I can change the channel playing in my head, and so can you! And when the Spirit says Do, I’m gonna Do!!

ⁱ Diane M. Millis, *Re-creating a Life: Learning How to Tell Our Most Life-giving Story* (Bellevue, Wash., 2019: SDI Press), 15. All other paraphrases and quotations are from this book.