



Soul Matters

**What does it mean to be
a people of STORY?**



What Does It Mean To Be A People of Story?

Stories don't just embellish our lives; they make and even dictate our lives. This might be the most important reminder of this month. Indeed, who of us hasn't felt controlled by a story? Stuck in a story? Hopeless about the way our story will end up? Simply put, our stories often write us as much as we write them.

For instance, the author Rachel Naomi Remen talks about how her family clings to the childhood story of her being "the clumsy one of the family." Ask all her friends and colleagues and they will describe her as graceful. They've never once seen her trip over her own feet or drop something, ever. And yet, somehow, when she goes to her parents' house or back to a family reunion, she spills coffee on at least one outfit, stubs more than one toe and trips on more steps than she can count. By trying so hard to escape her family's narrative about clumsy little Naomi, she inevitably slips into it anew. Talk about the power of story!

Or think about our current struggles with economic or racial justice. The unconscionable income gap is often described as "natural" or "the result of complex global dynamics over which we have little control." Similarly, the story of race in our country is too often told with an "entrenched" story arc or celebrated as "having come so far." The aim of all these cultural narratives is the same: to undermine action, and worse, to undermine our belief that action can change things.

So let's tell a new story! This is the message of our faith. We have a choice, it tells us. Our stories are not predetermined! Remember that old theological debate for which our UU forebearers gave their lives? All around them people were saying that God had predestined not just the big story of humanity, but our individual stories too. Supposedly, some of us were slotted for heaven and others for hell. And God had written the list in ink. Nothing any of us could do about it.

"Well," said our spiritual ancestors, "that's a bit harsh, don't you think?!" Forget this extreme fate-driven story, they said. Freedom has a much bigger role than we're giving it credit for. God is not so much the author of the story as she is the magical muse that needles and nags us to put our own stamp on the narratives before us. Shakespeare said, "All the world's a stage." Our spiritual ancestors might have offered a friendly amendment and said, "All the world is an improv show! Our job is to hop on the stage and make up the script as we go!"

So fate and freedom. This month is much more about the tension between these two than one might have thought, leaving us with questions like: Are you an actor conforming to the scripts handed to you? Or have you found your own way of becoming the director or screenwriter of your life? How are you struggling right now to regain control of your storyline? How are you and your friends working to regain control of the storyline of our community? Our country?

Or maybe taking back control is not your task at this time. Maybe your spiritual work is instead about finding a new storyline. Maybe retirement, divorce, illness or the empty-nest has closed the book on one story and is inviting you to leap into a whole new narrative. Does that leave you excited about what's to come? Scared? A bit of both?

Whatever it is. Wherever you are at. Don't give the storyline away. That's the message of our faith. And hopefully the gift of this month.

Our Spiritual Exercises

Option A

What's Your Sentence?

Author and motivational expert, Daniel Pink advocates distilling the essence of your life's story down to one single sentence. It's a focusing device that connects people to clearer purpose. Here's how Pink describes the exercise:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gw2xSdp4bOc&feature=youtu.be>

Here's how classrooms of children and youth took on the exercise:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UrLdUzeymal>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEpVaWZc-Ks>

After you come up with your sentence, figure out a way to keep it front and center. Carry it in your purse or wallet. Hang it by your desk. Leave it in your sock drawer or glove compartment in order to stumble upon it when you need it most.

Most of all, use this exercise to ask yourself: Do I know the purpose of my life's story? Or have I allowed my life to become a muddle of mixed and undeveloped storylines? Do I know the central theme of my life or do the plotlines of others dictate my days?

Come to your group ready to share how the creation of your sentence helped you see or embrace something new about your story.

Option B

Zoom Your (or Their) Story

We hold on to each other by holding on to their stories. And yet too often we let those stories slip away.

Parents and grandparents long to remember their children and grandchildren when they were young. Likewise, children and grandchildren wish they captured more stories of their elders before they were gone. So why wait? During Covid, Zoom has become a way for us to connect across distance, but it also offers us a way to capture each other's stories. All we need to do is hop on, hit record and let the storytelling begin!

For this exercise, think of someone whose story you want to hold tight. Invite them to join you on zoom. Be sure to come with a [rich question](#). For instance: What has been the best day of your life? When did you first fall in love? What was war like? Who is your best friend and why? What was your proudest moment? What was life like when you were my age? It's likely you already have a burning question to ask; use that!

Or maybe it is the story of your relationship you want to capture. In that case, think of this less like an interview and more like a conversation. Come with a sparky question you both can answer, like: Are there things about me that you've always wanted to know but have never asked? Or What is your first memory of me? Maybe you just record telling each other jokes!

Take this option seriously. We guarantee you will be grateful you did it. Years from now you will be telling the story of how you took the time to capture the stories that mean so much!

Option C

Have the Stories that Shaped America Shaped You?

Books change the world. We know this. But often the stories that shaped the world have yet to make it into our hands. Use this month to correct that. Below are numerous lists of books that have shaped the course of our country's history. Dig through those lists to find one that you've not read, but also that you think you need to read. In fact, that's where the soul work likely sits: in the process of noticing which one sticks out to you and figuring out why.

Here's the lists. Have fun exploring!

- **Books That Shaped America, 1950 to 2000**
<https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/books-that-shaped-america/1950-to-2000.html>
- **Books That Shaped America, 1900 to 1950**
<https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/books-that-shaped-america/1900-to-1950.html>
- **20 Books That Have Changed the Way We Think About Race in America**
<https://www.insidehook.com/article/books/20-books-that-have-changed-the-way-we-think-about-race-in-america>
- **Top 10 Banned Books That Changed The Face Of Black History**
<https://ncac.org/news/blog/top-10-banned-books-that-changed-the-face-of-black-history>

Option D

Imagine the Story Re-Written

This exercise is more meditative. It's an invitation to spend the month wrestling with a juicy question. Here it is:

If you could erase one event from the world's history, which would it be and why?

Most of us will likely enjoy reflecting on it on our own, maybe journaling about it over a week or two. But what about hauling the question around with you and asking it of friends and family? You might also want to check out this online conversation about it:

https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/a88p2d/if_you_could_erase_one_event_from_the_worlds/

Also spend some time thinking about what the question has to teach you. It a fun exercise, but more likely than not, you will also find a challenge in it. Or hope?

Option E

Find Insight About Story in Our Recommended Resources

Our recommended resources are full of wisdom about what it means to be a people of and a person of story.. Engaging these resources and finding the one that especially speaks to you is a spiritual practice in and of itself. So, if none of the above exercises call to you, engage the recommended resources section of this packet as your spiritual exercise for the month. Set aside some regular time throughout a week to go through them and meditate on them until you find the one that most expands or deepens your understanding of story. After you've found it, consider printing it out and carrying it with you or pinning it up so you can continue to reflect on it throughout the weeks leading up to your group meeting. Come to your group ready to share where the journey led you.

Your Question

Don't treat these questions like "homework" or try to answer every single one. Instead, make time to meditate on the list and then pick the one question that speaks to you most. The goal is to figure out which question is "yours." Which question captures the call of your inner voice? Which one contains "your work"? What is that question trying to get you to notice or acknowledge?

Often it helps to read the list to a friend or loved one and ask them which question they think is the question you need to wrestle with!

1. What story did you first fall in love with?
2. How has the role of story in your life changed as you've grown older?
3. When did you first feel like you understood your plot line?
4. Have you ever told a "white lie" story in order to protect something true?
5. What story about yourself have you outgrown, but others are still telling about you?
6. What genre is your current life's story? Are you living a mystery? An adventure story? A romance? A thriller? Are you worried that your story is not interesting enough to be published? Is it a half-finished manuscript stuck in writer's block? Are you in the midst of going back and re-writing the ending?
7. What stories did your "elders" pass down to you? Have you cared for them and passed them on as those elders hoped?
8. What story does your family of origin tell about you? Does that telling leave you feeling seen or misunderstood? Celebrated or unfairly characterized?
9. Do you have someone to tell your secret stories to?
10. What unrecognized current cultural or political "story" strikes you as most dangerous?
11. Are you hiding part of your story from the person you say you trust the most?
12. Are you faking a story right now? Are you following a storyline that isn't really you?
13. What does it take to walk away from a story you've been living for a long time?
14. Is it possible you are only in the middle of your current story, even if it feels like you've arrived at the end?
15. Do you believe in happy endings?
16. What has been the best plot twist of your life's story?
17. What's your question? Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to hear it. Or maybe the question or call you need to hear is waiting in one of the quotes listed below. Consider looking there!

Companion Pieces

Recommended Resources for Personal Exploration & Reflection

The following resources are not required reading. We will not analyze these pieces in our group. Instead they are here to companion you on your journey this month, get you thinking and open you up to new ways of imagining what it means to be a people and a person of story.

Word Roots & Definitions

Our use of the word story stems from the Latin term *istori* meaning "history, account, tale." This goes back to the Ancient Greek *historéō*, "I inquire" which also formed the idea of "one who knows," from Proto-Indo-European **wéydtōr*, "knower, wise person". This thread is a reminder that at the root of all stories is not just wisdom but also the desire to know, to inquire. It invites us to think of stories as a form of inquiry and a way of investigating our world.

[Source](#)

Wise Words

We do not experience a world and afterward make up stories to understand it. Stories teach us what is real, what is true, and what is possible. They are not abstractions from life (though they can be that); they are necessary for our engagement with life. As the Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre puts it, "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'"

[David Loy](#)

There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.

Maya Angelou

There are no true stories; we are making up every one of them.

Pema Chodron

There are only true stories. We are discovering the truth in them.

Christina Baldwin

Many of us had thought that myth meant "not true," when in fact the older meaning of myth is precisely "always true"!

Richard Rohr

When a person dies, a library is burned.

Edmund White

Stories are told as spells for binding the world together.

John Rouse

There is a you telling yourself another story of you. Listen to her.

[Pádraig Ó Tuama](#)

Those who tell the stories, rule the world.

Proverb, exact source unknown

Storytelling is dangerous to those who profit from the way things are because it has the power to show that the way things are is not permanent, not universal, not necessary. Having that real though limited power to put established institutions into question, imaginative literature has also the responsibility of power. The storyteller is the truth-teller... We will not know our own injustice if we cannot imagine justice. We will not be free if we do not imagine freedom. We cannot demand that anyone try to attain justice and freedom who has not had a chance to imagine them as attainable.

Ursula K. Le Guin

Change the story, change the world.

Terry Pratchett

Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.

[Neil Gaiman & G.K. Chesterton](#)

As I considered it, the truth of the matter was that we were living within an old story; and a new story needed to be told, but we didn't have the language for it. The old story was of victimization, marginalization, oppression, oppressors; and the new story would see all of us evolving, self-expanding, and finding a new place in this wonderful cosmology that is a reality we have not paid attention to. So, in order to get to that point—and here is where my transformation begins—I had to reconsider what I thought about people, because I had hardened my view of others and who they were and what they meant. I had spent my time raising two little African American boys who had to be taught how to survive in society. In doing that, I taught them to view the world in only one way; and I myself was hardened into a position that either you were with me or you were against me or us.

[Barbara Holmes](#)

Look at the legacy of poor Eve's exile from Eden: the land shows the bruises of an abusive relationship. It's not just land that is broken, but more importantly, our relationship to land. As Gary Nabhan has written, we can't meaningfully proceed with healing, with restoration, without "re-story-ation." In other words, our relationship with land cannot heal until we hear its stories. But who will tell them? In the Western tradition there is a recognized hierarchy of beings, with, of course, the human being on top—the pinnacle of evolution, the darling of Creation—and the plants at the bottom. But in Native ways of knowing, human people are often referred to as "the younger brothers of Creation." We say that humans have the least experience with how to live and thus the most to learn.

[Robin Wall Kimmerer](#)

A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor restrain men from doing the things they have always done. If a war story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie. There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue. As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil... You can tell it's a true war story if it embarrasses you.

Tim O'Brien, from [How To Tell a True War Story](#)

We evolve in the midst of narratives meant only for some and ways of being made narrow by fear and power. We must, then, have the courage to listen to the truth of our own lives, to the wisdom that comes from within.

[enfleshed](#)

Your heartache is someone else's hope. If you make it through, somebody else is going to make it through. Tell your story.

Kim McManus

Telling, Laura Hershey

Full piece at

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reading/telling>

Those without power
risk everything to tell their story
and must.

Someone, somewhere,
will hear your story and decide to fight,
to live and refuse compromise...

Practice listening beyond, or beneath, opinions.
Opinions are only the thinnest surface sitting on top
of the deep stories that we all carry.

Rev. Rod Richards

Only share with people who have earned the right to hear your story... [Ask yourself,] “With whom am I in a relationship that can bear the weight of my story?”

[Brené Brown](#)

We cannot wish old feelings away nor do spiritual exercises for overcoming them until we have woven a healing story that transforms our previous life's experience and gives meaning to whatever pain we have endured.

[Joan Borysenko](#)

Music

We create two different playlists for each of our monthly themes: one in Spotify and another in YouTube. We organize these lists as a journey of sorts. So consider listening from beginning to end and using the lists as musical meditations. Follow the links below to connect with this month's “story songs.”

Click [here](#) for the Spotify playlist on [Story](#).

Click [here](#) for all [Spotify playlists](#).

Click [here](#) for the YouTube playlist on [Story](#).

Click [here](#) for all the [YouTube playlists](#).

Videos & Podcasts

The Truth That Sets You Free, Jason Silva: Shots of Awe

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VQ5EbGjTRMo>

Tell Me A Story: What Narratives Reveal About The Mind

From Hidden Brain

<https://www.npr.org/2020/01/09/794683840/tell-me-a-story-what-narratives-reveal-about-the-mind>

On stories as magic tricks that expose the peculiar biases of our minds.

A Catalyst for Humanity: A Conversation with Isabel Wilkerson

Part of [Public Health Storytelling](#): Powerful Narratives for a Healthier World

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NxVeDI5_XXg

The Danger of a Single Story, Chimamanda Adichie

https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?nolanguage=en%3Futm_source%3Dtedcomshare

Imagining Peace, Pádraig Ó Tuama

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IjFByz6tab8>

Kurt Vonnegut on the Shapes of Stories

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GOGru_4z1Vc&list=PLcEd0IYai8aRXfTJs4vwQFg4fFCep1iWF&index=1

Rethinking the Story of Human History: Calling today 12,021 rather than 2,021

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czgOWmtGVGs>

Articles & Reflections

How Will History Books Remember the 2010s?

<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2019/12/27/how-will-history-books-remember-the-2010s-089796>

Exploring how the story of our time will be told...

The Top 10 Stories that Shaped the World

<https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20180521-the-top-10-stories-that-shaped-the-world>

5 things people still get wrong about slavery: debunking slavery's greatest myths.

<https://www.vox.com/identities/2019/8/22/20812883/1619-slavery-project-anniversary>

A Story Inherited, Jabari S. Jones

Full piece found at

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/reflection/story-inherited>

“Not belonging here” is a story I have inherited, an American inheritance. I was born and raised here, yet to some I am and always will be from “somewhere else.” ...

The Myth of the Absent Black Father, Teddy Burrage

<https://blackgirlinmaine.com/parenting/the-myth-of-the-absent-black-father/>

Debunking the Myth of the Middle Class

<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/amanpour-and-company/video/debunking-the-myth-of-the-middle-class/>

notes from BALLE talk, Adrienne Maree Brown

<http://adriennemareebrown.net/tag/narrative/>

Butchering the Mythic West: Setting the story straight about America's frontier, John Freeman

https://www.altaonline.com/books/fiction/a34839129/john-freeman-butchering-the-mythic-west/?utm_source=pocket&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=pockethits

On Neil Gaiman & Why Scary Stories Appeal to Us, brainpickings

<https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/03/20/neil-gaiman-ghost-stories/>

Books

These Truths: A History of the United States

Jill Lepore

Review at

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/14/books/review/jill-lepore-these-truths.html>

The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human

Jonathan Gottschall

Review at

<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/05/books/review/the-storytelling-animal-by-jonathan-gottschall.html>

Related TED Talk:

<https://sciencebookaday.com/2016/09/01/the-storytelling-animal-how-stories-make-us-human/>

Everything Is Illuminated

Jonathan Safran Foer

Life of Pi

Yann Martel

Movies

[Derek DelGaudio's In & Of Itself](#)

Stories We Tell

[When They See Us](#)

Boyhood

Big Fish

More Monthly Inspiration from Soul Matters!

Our Facebook Inspiration Page:

<https://www.facebook.com/soulmatterssharingcircle/>

Our Instagram Page:

Find us as “soul_matters_circle”

Music Playlists:

Click [here](#) for links to the [Spotify playlists](#) for each month.

Click [here](#) to check out the [YouTube playlists](#).



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