



Soulful Home

Finding the Sacred In
Our Everyday Spaces



May 2021
Story

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The Welcome Mat

What Does it Mean to be a Family of Story?

Is yours a story-telling family? In my own family, one parent told many stories of a childhood of hijinks and near misses living in Irish Catholic, lower-working class, urban New Jersey. The other parent told almost no stories at all. Later, as an adult, that parent told me they were a survivor of childhood trauma, and spent a great deal of energy blocking out events and periods of time; those growing-up stories simply weren't available for sharing.

I begin with this personal circumstance because this month's theme of story--especially the invitations throughout this packet to craft and share family stories--is going to be experienced differently by each of us. I want to acknowledge that fact, and ask you to join us just wherever you are. What we're hoping to be able to do together is to focus less on the stories we've inherited, and more on the stories we help co-create. Sometimes that involves being more conscientious about the stories-in-process, the ones we're living out with our children in real time. And sometimes that involves refocusing our memories of events or circumstances to center the narrative that is life-affirming and valuable to the people we are blessed to be becoming.

As is our way in Soulful Home, we'll be approaching our theme playfully, joyfully, thoughtfully, and with curiosity this month. In our Bedtime Story, you learn about the first storyteller, Crow, and consider together how stories have shaped our societies over time. In the Extra Mile section, we describe easy-to-make story baskets, and share a crowd-sourced list of stories that religious educators across the continent feel to be foundational to our UU identity. Around the Neighborhood, we explore our own places through the lens of story, perceiving our neighborhoods not as invisible backgrounds to our individual lives, but as settings for the unfolding plot in which we and everyone we know are characters navigating conflicts and making meaning.

We at Soul Matters are blessed to be a part of your UU story. Thank you for weaving this tale of faith-filled family life with us.

Yours at the place where our narratives intersect,

Teresa, on behalf of the Soul Matters team



At the Table

Exploring Story Through Discussions

At the Table questions explore the monthly theme through a discussion for all ages. They are designed for a family gathering - maybe during a Friday night meal, a quiet moment in the living room or before a board game night.

Introducing the Activity

Family members who are readers can alternate who reads the questions. Those who are not readers are invited to share their own impromptu questions. Discussion partners might answer as thoughts come to them or take turns in a circle.

Discussion Questions

1. What's the first story you remember hearing (could be a family story, a folk tale, a ballad, etc.)?
2. What happens in your mind when you hear a story? (Examples might be picturing the characters, imagining yourself sitting in the setting and watching what happens, smelling smells and hearing sounds, trying to figure out how the story will end, imagining yourself as one of the characters, etc.)
3. If your experiences last month had a title, what would that title be?
4. How would you describe the story of Unitarian Universalism? A hero story? Detective story? Love story?
5. Where do you think stories came from?
6. Who's usually the storyteller in your family? Who's most likely to add embellishments and exaggerations to make the story really memorable?
7. What makes a really good story?
8. Whose story are you curious to know?
9. If you could go back in time and ask a historical figure to tell you stories about their lives, who would you pick?
10. What are the ways we tell stories without words?
11. Have you ever been healed by a story?

Return to the Discussion Throughout the Week

Thoughts develop with time. Find opportunities to bring up particularly compelling questions again during the month, maybe on walks, rides home, when tucking your child in to bed, etc. If thoughts grew or changed, notice together how we are all evolving beings, opening ourselves to new truths and understandings as we live our lives and connect with others.



Around the Neighborhood

Around the Neighborhood activities engage families with their surroundings through the lens of the theme. It's about perceiving our well-known world in new ways. As you safely move around your neighborhood during this time of Covid, these suggestions help you transform your everyday backs-and-forths into a family adventure!

Treasure Hunt for Story

In this month's treasure hunt, we are going to search for, and maybe tell, the story of our neighborhoods. We'll begin by looking for the elements of a story (otherwise known as literary or narrative elements) and search out examples from our own neighborhoods and communities. Talk about the people, places, problems, events, and ideas that you see in terms of story elements: "Look! There's Toby. I bet Mr. Green doesn't know he's out again. If our neighborhood were a story, Toby the Ever-Escaping Dog would be a fun character."

Spend a week answering the questions below by looking with new eyes, and then share what you find as a family, or with other Soulful Home friends. If a story emerges from your watching, tell that, too!

Who do I see? Who do I know? Whose life do I admire or wonder about?
[Characters]

Where do we live? What are the places within the places (maybe a sunny alleyway between two favorite stores, or a patch of tall wildflowers along the fence line of a field)? [Settings]

What are the problems in my neighborhood? What do people disagree about?
Where are needs going unmet? [Conflicts/Tensions]

What happens in my neighborhood? What events do we experience together?
[Plot]

What is my neighborhood about? What idea is big enough that it describes all of us? (Some ideas might be comfort, working hard, helping each other, beauty, playing, etc.) [Themes]

Characters	Settings	Conflicts/Tensions	Plots	Themes

From the Mailbox

Our literal mailboxes connect us to the wide world outside, sometimes with messages asking things from us (a donation letter or flyer encouraging us to vote), sometimes with messages offering us gifts (a letter from a friend or a special delivery). Our “From the Mailbox” section applies this metaphor to today’s call for families to engage in the work of dismantling white supremacy culture. Together each month, as a Soulful Home community, we open and accept these “invitations” to join some of the many brave, inspiring and wise leaders and organizations who are co-creating a future that is actively anti-racist.

A Story of Particular Beginnings

Astro-physicist Dr. Chanda Prescod-Weinstein’s book, *The Disordered Cosmos: A Journey into Dark Matter, Spacetime, and Dreams Deferred*, tells the story of the forces at work in our universe through the lens of Black feminism. For her book, she commissioned artist Shanequa Gay to create a painting called, “We Were Always Scientists,” seen behind Prescod-Weinstein in the image at the top of [this interview](#).

Invitation: Listen to this sample from the [audio book](#) of *The Disordered Cosmos*. As you listen, spend some time being present with art of [Shanequa Gay](#). Afterward, in a journal, sketchbook, or just a scrap of paper, write or draw your impressions and reactions.

Share one thing you learned about the experience with a friend.

If your means allow, consider making a donation to the organization [African American Women in Physics](#).

The Story of Two-Spirit

[Geo Neptune](#) is a Passamaquoddy Two-Spirit, master basket maker, activist, storyteller, and model. In the video linked below, Neptune tells the story of Two-Spirit-- where the term came from, how the term functions across Native spaces, as well as who uses the term (and who doesn’t).

Invitation: [Watch this video](#). Watch it again if the concept of Two-Spirit is new to you. Share the video across your social media, with a small group over Zoom, or in another way. If your means allow, consider donating to the [Native Justice Coalition’s Two Spirit Program](#), which promotes decolonization of gender roles among First Nation and Native American communities.



At Play

Playing Games with Story

At Play activities and questions are a way to joyfully, playfully, and imaginatively experience the theme.

Option A: Poetry for Neanderthals

Have you ever tried to tell a story only using one-syllable words? It's a lot harder than you'd think, and it's hilarious!! [Poetry for Neanderthals](#) is a card game a little bit like Taboo and a little bit like Password, where players try to get their team to guess a word or phrase *by telling the story of the concept using only one-syllable words*. The box says 7 and up, but I've played it very successfully with a 5 and 6 year old, with the ability to pass on cards for words or phrases they didn't know.

This game stretches one's communication and critical thinking skills as you work together as a team to get the most points.

To make this a zero-purchase option, watch the how-to-play videos at [the link above](#), then feel free to use the word bank below to play more informally as a family--still guaranteed to get folx laughing!

Words to write on folded pieces of paper:

Taco	Jump rope	Ladder	Carrot
Kangaroo	Campfire	Kite	Chair
Wheelbarrow	Mailbox	Ice cube	Hospital
Bathtub	Sweater	Swimming pool	Jellyfish
Lightning	Donut	Guitar	Cactus
Shovel	Garbage	Map	Basket
Castle	Boots	Chalice	Tornado
Photograph	Yellow	Poster	Birdcage



Option B: Panel of Experts

In this improv game, which works equally well in person or through video calls, two or more people play the “experts” on a given topic and try to tell the story of a new development in their field. Here’s how it works: choose a subject from the list below. Then, one person acts as the host and opens the conversation with the other two or three experts.

Topic: Fashion

Host: Hello! Today we have two expert fashion designers joining us to discuss the hot new runway trend, wearing bagels as clothing. Fashion designer Jill, let’s begin with you.

Jill: That’s right! Bagels for clothing. It can be a little dangerous around a flock of pigeons, but the delicious smell makes it all worth it.

Isaac: Yes! I love it! In my bagel clothes, I don’t even need to sit down for breakfast. I can just turn my head and nibble at my shoulder.

Tips:

The expression, “That’s right!” is important, because it’s the big YES that moves the story forward.

Coach your experts to really sell their expertise, and to make silly, outlandish, or highly unlikely claims about their subjects. The next expert can’t disagree with them--no matter what’s said, they follow with, “That’s right!”

At first, it works best to have an adult or older child act as the host, to keep the story moving forward by asking questions or throwing out new possibilities if the experts get stuck.

The host will want to let the exchange go on a few times, while the idea still has energy, but wrap it up by thanking the experts for their time and saying goodbye when the ideas begin to wind down.

Here are some ideas for topics:

- Animal behavior experts discussing how dolphins have now learned to talk
- Geology experts discussing how the Grand Canyon suddenly turned bright green
- Education experts talking about the decision to replace all other school subjects with P.E.
- Cooking experts sharing opinions on the global decision to do away with chocolate
- Imagine your own zany scenario!



On the Message Board

A Monthly Reminder

The On the Message Board section lifts up a theme-related mantra, graphic, quote, or gesture for your family to carry with them throughout the month. Think of these “family sayings” or “family signs” as tools for the journey, reminders that help us refocus and steady ourselves and our kids as we navigate through life’s challenges and opportunities.

May’s Message: “And then...”

In every story, there is conflict, and there is compromise. There is the unforeseen, and there is the response.

In our personal stories, too, there are elements outside of our control--lots of them! When difficult things happen, it doesn’t mean we failed to manifest something more positive, or that we’re being punished for a past deed. Our Unitarian Universalist faith draws on the source of reason, and reason tells us that not everything in our life is cause-and-effect in a way that can be read straight, or manipulated. Rather, much follows the theory of chaos, where the choices we have in our lives are the result of past actions, some of which we were involved in, but many of which we weren’t.

And still, we are the authors of our own stories. How? Because we are empowered with the magic phrase, “And then...” We are the writers of our own responses. We are our own meaning-makers. The story of who we are can absolutely not be told without our active, intentional participation. We **always** get to say what happens next, because we choose it by how we respond.

He got a shocking diagnosis that threw his life’s plans to the wind. And then, he made a magnificent new life plan that included a daily song sun to the rising sun, taking up a new hobby of foraging delicious mushrooms, and spending two afternoons each week teaching piano at the after-school center.

Their loved one experienced terrible violence. And then, together, they learned how to grieve, how to hold space, how to process over and over again with patience and grace, how to accept help, and finally, how to create a network of support that serves as a model and example for everyone in their circle.

Her cousin started going to the same school as her, but didn’t want to hang out or be friends there. And then, with a teacher’s help, she started a double dutch club during recess and met a bunch of new kids in her class that she didn’t know well before. She discovered herself to be a leader and a creative rope jumper!

“And then...” are the magic words that open the door to our authorship, or responses, our lessons, and ultimately, our legacy.

If your child experiences a happening that seems to knock them off their center, and which initiates thoughts or feelings of loss of control or unmooring, you might remind them, “This is your story, you know. Something happened that you didn’t want to happen, but something is going to happen next. YOU get to fill in the, ‘And then...’ part.”



At the Bedside

At The Bedside activities engage the theme through storytelling. This takes place during the dreamy, almost otherworldly hour or so before children or youth drift off to sleep. Through stories and the questions and realizations that they prompt, we come to understand the nature of and our own place in the cosmos. But also, these selections invite you to remember, shape, and share stories from your own past, using thoughtful narratives to help your child weave the tale of who they are and whose they are.

The Storytelling Stone, by Joseph Bruchac

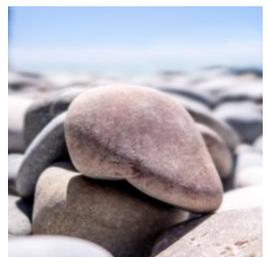
The night you decide to tell this story, bring a couple of smooth stones with you to your child’s room. Begin by handing a stone to your child, and asking them about it. What does it feel like? How old do you suppose it is? If a stone had a spirit, what might that spirit have to say? Then, you are ready to begin.

Joseph Bruchac is a storyteller, author, and poet, and a Nulhegan Abenaki citizen. “The Storytelling Stone” is well loved among his many stories and writings, and tells about Grandfather Stone and the formation of the first storyteller, young Crow.

You can find the full text of the story [here](#), excerpted from Bruchac’s book, *Return of the Sun: Native American Tales from the Northeast Woodlands*, Crossing Press, 1989.

For Discussion:

- Why do you think the people liked the stories so much? What do you like about stories?
- How did stories change Gah-ka’s life? How did Gah-ka change the stories?
- What kinds of stories are your favorite to tell? Which are your favorite to hear?



On the Porch

Raising a Child of Story Together

On the Porch supports sharing realizations, challenges and hopes around the theme with other supportive adults. Perhaps this happens on a literal porch or front stoop, but it could happen wherever parents and their circle of support gather and talk (online or in person) over the soulful parts of parenthood. The “A Sip of Something New” section invites you and your discussion partner to take in a new idea shared by someone else. The “Spiritual Snacks” section stimulates personal storytelling and the sharing of your own wisdom and experience.

A Sip of Something New

Author Daniel Pink had an exercise in his 2010 book, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* ([the RSA animation of which](#) was wildly popular--maybe you remember it?) asking readers to distill their life's purpose [into one sentence](#).

He taught three generations of children how to read.

They spent a lifetime learning the names of the wildflowers in their bioregion, and sharing that information with other eager naturalists.

She dedicated herself to being a good friend and neighbor.

They made music that made people think, made people happy, and made people want to take action for the greater good.

Individually, distill your life's purpose down to one sentence. Give yourself some time to do this--it can be tough. Then, set aside some time to share your sentence with your trusted conversation partner. Write the sentence big, and put it somewhere you are likely to see it. Challenge yourself to be accountable to that purpose, and to direct your efforts and energy toward whatever action you'd identified as the driving force of your life.



Spiritual Snacks to Share

Bring these questions with you when the time comes to hang out with your co-parent or buddies. Don't treat the questions as a list to go through one by one. Instead pick the one or two that speak to you the most. Treat the questions less as a quiz and more like doorways inviting you into the world of storytelling and memory.

Questions

1. What was the story of your role in your family of origin? Were you the funny one? The talented one? The troublemaker? How has that “story” informed your growth into the person you were meant to be?
2. What story or stories about your ancestors cause you the most pain? Which swell your heart with admiration and gratitude?
3. What story does your family’s favorite meals tell about who you are, where you come from, and what you enjoy?
4. What was the best read-aloud you ever experienced, either as a child or an adult? (This could have been a bedtime story, a theater table-read, etc.)
5. Do you notice the seed of a particular story in your child? Do you already notice a unique “story” unfolding in your child?
6. Which story of pandemic life do you think your child will most remember?
7. Whose stories do we need to hear more of right now, in this moment? Where are those voices to be found?
8. If the mix of today’s cultural events (Covid, racial reckoning, political division, climate change) were part of a book, what might the title of that book be?
9. What story (or tale, or myth, or anecdote) gives you strength when times are hard?



The Extra Mile

The Extra Mile section is for families who want to continue exploring the theme of the month through larger adventures, more complex projects or simply through additional modalities not otherwise included in the packets. The Extra Mile suggestions often surpass what is considered an “everyday moment” in a family, and may involve more preparation, planning, or time to accomplish. A bit more effort, but well worth it!

Making Story Baskets

Some stories will come to have special places in your family. If you have a few beloved stories, begin with those. If you don't, take a look at [this list](#), which was compiled from many UU religious educators' favorite and most often told stories, stories that seemed key to understanding some important aspect of UU theology.

What we're going to do is make our story-sharing experience a little bit richer, a little bit more fun, and a little bit more memorable.

Once you have a story or two you'd like to work with, gather a few objects that might help bring the story to life. Maybe it's an animal toy, or a few toy buildings. Maybe it's a length of yarn. Maybe it's a few smooth stones. Go shopping amongst your child's toys, find materials out in nature, or check out thrift stores.

For the month, put these objects (and maybe the books, or printouts of the story that they accompany, if you don't have the stories memorized) in a basket or bag in a place where you often snuggle or casually hang out as a family. Throughout the month, read or tell the beloved story together a couple or a few times. Invite your child to play with the story basket as you do. Some families like to add a little something to the basket each time, too. Our richest stories have so many different themes, lessons, and ideas in them that you could conscientiously choose different things each time in order to lift up a new aspect of the story.

An example might be, for the story Stone Soup, for you first to add a couple of stones to the basket, then a few dried beans or play-pretend foods, then a few different people or little houses. Subtly, this moves the focus from the stone itself being the novelty, to the food that nourishes the travelers and the villagers, to the villagers themselves and the community they make together. Be creative with this, and invite your child to think what could be added with each retelling, too.

Here's a link that has specific suggestions for how to use your story basket, or you could keep it casual, like fidgets for your child to hold as you read:

<https://www.theempowerededucatoronline.com/2018/11/story-bag-basket-or-prop-box.html/>

The Moth

The Moth is a public radio program featuring truly wonderful storytelling, mostly from non-professional storytellers. As a family, you might particularly enjoy [“All at Sea”](#) by Tim FitzHigham, or [“Great Balls of Sugar”](#) by Lizzie Peabody.



Blessing of Story

Blessed are the playwrights, script writers, poets, authors of all kinds on page, stage, screen, and across airwaves, for through them, we know story.

Blessed are the bookmakers, the pamphlet staplers, the blank notebook fillers, the digital creators and curators, for through them, we know story.

Blessed are the illustrators--painters, drawers, paper and fiber artists, photographers--for through them, we know story.

Blessed are the stage performers--actors, dancers, comics, magicians, singers, acrobats, and musicians--for through them, we know story.

Blessed are the interpreters, the caption transcribers, the audio readers, for through them, we know story.

Blessed are the translators, within and across generations, for through them, we know story.

Blessed are the story keepers and storytellers, those who make space in mind and heart for the stories that teach, that sustain, that warn, that spread wisdom. Like seedbanks, they keep safe the germ of who we once were, and who we may yet be.

And blessed are the listeners, those of us who take the nourishment of stories into our very selves, we who let stories change us, who ask the question that begets all great sequels and other imagined futures: "And then what happened?"



Connect with more Inspiration for your family, and for you!

Parents can Join our Facebook and Instagram pages for
daily inspiration on our themes:

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/soulmatterssharingcircle/?ref=settings>

Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/soul_matters_circle/

Parents and youth will want to check out our music playlists on the monthly themes.

One playlist is one [Spotify](#) and another on our [YouTube](#) channel

Credits

Soulful Home packets are prepared by
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