

## The Power of Story

Readings: 'What the Heart Cannot Forget' – Jane Sutphen  
'In November' – Lisel Mueller

My son was 6 days old when same-sex marriage became legal throughout this country. When I heard the news, I was holding him, sitting on my couch, bleary-eyed and so so tired. When I heard the news, I started crying, tears mostly from joy, but with some exhausted tears mixed in. I was in Tennessee then. Like Michigan, it was one of the last holdouts where same-sex marriage was not legal. That was a day of joy.

After a few minutes of basking in that joy, I spoke to my sleeping son DeForest, telling him that no matter who he grew up to love, the state would recognize that relationship if he chose to get married. I told him that he would never even remember a time when that was not possible. In his world, same-gender loving people would always have the right to marry.

And that is true for all of the littlest ones in our church, in our community, in our country. The babies, the toddlers, the preschoolers will have no memory of the struggle to make same-sex marriage legal. They will never know a time when marriage equality was subject to popular vote. They will never know a time when this right was piecemeal, allowed in some states and not in others. They will hear our stories and look back in wonder, confusion and amazement that it was ever that way.

So today, I have a story from those bad old days.

In 2012, I was living in Minnesota. That November, the people of that state voted on whether to add an amendment to the state constitution to ban same-sex marriage. Same sex marriage was already illegal in Minnesota, mind you. There was a law against it. For some, that was not enough. They wanted to make it extra illegal, wanted this prohibition to be enshrined in the state constitution.

I was involved in the vote no campaign. I went to trainings on how to talk to friends and family and did some phone banking. At all of these trainings, the leaders of the campaign emphasized the power of story. There had been dozens of state campaigns like this one before, votes on whether same-sex marriage should be legal. This meant there has been dozens of chances to study how to best persuade the persuadable voters.

To move undecided voters, we were told not cite statistics or make logical arguments about fairness or justice. They told us to tell stories. When I was phone-banking for the campaign, I called up strangers and, if they were not firm in their position, talked to them about the same-sex couples that I knew. I told them about Laurel and Julie, Kierstin and Jenni, Jim and Ralph, and others. I told love stories – about my friends' love for one another and my love for them. I asked my conversation partners about the same-gender-loving people in their lives and the love

stories they could tell about them. And thousands of other people spoke to friends and family, and called up strangers, telling these love stories, about why marriage matters.

And it worked. That Election Day, just over three years ago, the voters of Minnesota voted no. A ban on same-sex marriage was not added to the state constitution – the first time a proposed ban on same-sex marriage had been defeated by popular vote in this country. The election brought so many people to the polls – and the no vote was so strong, that a few months later, the state legislature legalized same-sex marriage. Meanwhile, in Washington, Maryland and Maine, voters all made same-sex marriage legal. Again, this was the first time that popular votes had turned out this way. The campaigns in these states were also rooted in storytelling. Stories, not statistics, are what shift opinions. Stories, not argument, not logic, not discourses on fairness, are what made public opinion shift on marriage equality.

Stories are powerful. That is what I am here to tell you today. That is what the winner of the 'sermon on the topic of your choice' at last spring's church auction, wanted me to tell you today. Stories can be a powerful force for good; stories can also be dangerous.

At the TEDGlobal Conference in July 2009, Nigerian novelist Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie spoke on 'The Danger of a Single Story.' I encourage you to watch the video online. Perhaps you already have. Video of her talk video has been seen over 9 million times.

She begins her talk by talking about the stories she read as a child in Nigeria. The children's books she had were all British or American. Those were the stories she knew. When she began writing stories herself in early elementary school, all of her stories features blond-haired, blue-eyed children who ate apples and played in the snow. Never mind that Adichie has chocolate skin and dark hair, ate mangoes, and had never seen snow. Because the stories she read – and the uniformity between them, Adichie formed a single story about literature. Adichie assumed that all stories had to be about white children in northern climates. It was years before she realized she could write stories that reflected her own experience.

This is a humorous example, but this danger can be serious. Adichie shares that when she came to college in the United States, her roommate did not know what to make of her. Adichie was African – and she spoke English. Adichie was African – and she knew how to use the stove. The roommate asked to hear Adichie's music – and was surprised when it was Mariah Carey, an American pop star. Adichie says, 'my roommate had a single story of Africa: a single story of catastrophe. In this single story, there was no possibility of Africans being similar to her in any way, no possibility of feelings more complex than pity, no possibility of a connection as human equals.'<sup>1</sup> When the story we tell about a person, a place, an entire continent is a single story – or variations on a single story – we lose the ability to see things as they really are. We make assumptions and ignore new information that does not conform to our assumptions. We become reliant on stereotypes and generalizations.

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<sup>1</sup> Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. 'The Danger of a Single Story.' *TED*. Filmed July 2009. Retrieved from [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript?language=en)

So stories can be forces for good or forces for evil. As Spiderman's Uncle Ben says, "with great power comes great responsibility." As folksinger Ani DiFranco reminds us "every tool is a weapon if you hold it right." So what does it mean for us? In addition to how stories have the potential to shape lives, they can also shape our communities. What are the stories we tell about People's Church? About Unitarian Universalism?

One of the powerful stories we tell about People's Church is the story of Caroline Bartlett Crane. I know some of you know her story better than I do, but not everyone does. Caroline Bartlett Crane was the minister of People's Church from 1889 to 1898. She was a powerhouse. She led the church in founding Michigan's first kindergarten, vocational training programs for men and women, a gymnasium for women, a daycare, a cafeteria and a club for young African Americans in this city.<sup>2</sup> After she left the ministry, she became deeply involved in public health advocacy, which she called municipal housekeeping in an effort to make it more acceptable for a woman to be involved in this area of public life. Her legacy shapes this church to this day, in the stories we tell about ourselves and the way we do church. This congregation's commitment to social justice and social service carries on that legacy. She led our church in changing its name from First Unitarian Church of Kalamazoo – think about that acronym for a minute – to People's Church. She wrote the bond of union which every member of this church signs when they join the church. Her story is a powerful, positive story in this church.

Crane was part of a group of women Unitarian ministers known as the Iowa Sisterhood. Most of them served in Iowa or neighboring states. They supported one another in their challenging vocation. Before Crane came to Kalamazoo, she served a church in Sioux Falls, Dakota Territory for about a year. On the days she wasn't preaching, usually one of her sister clergy filled the pulpit. One Sunday, a male preacher was leading the service in Crane's absence. A young girl cried out, scandalized, "Look, mama! There's a *man* up there in the pulpit!"<sup>3</sup> This was in 1887 – a little girl thought only women could be ministers. That is a powerful story.

And that story matters. This congregation has welcomed women ministers – Caroline Bartlett Crane, Marion Murdock, Julia Budlong, Minna Budlong, Jill McAllister, Pam Allen-Thompson and now me – for generations. That is a powerful story, a powerfully good story. Even now, many Unitarian Universalist women ministers deal with sexism, sexual harassment, microaggressions and undermining because of their gender in their churches. I have experienced that in previous congregations I have served. That has not happened here, not even once. Thank you. I think that is true here in part because of the powerful stories you tell about women ministers, that you have had so many, that you have remembered them so fondly. Of course, this congregation has also been ably served by men. You all know that people of all genders can be called to

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<sup>2</sup>Lohrstorfer, Martha. 'Caroline Bartlett Crane: Minister and Civic Leader.' *Kalamazoo Public Library*. Septmeber 3, 2005. Retrieved from <http://www.kpl.gov/local-history/biographies/caroline-crane.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> Tucker, Cynthia Grant. *Prophetic Sisterhood: Liberal Women Ministers of the Frontier 1880-1930*. San Jose, CA: Authors Choice Press, 2000. Kindle Edition. Location 892-893.

religious leadership and your image of what a minister looks like is not bound by gender. That is a powerful story.

And I plan to honor this story and carry it forward at my installation next spring. An installation is the special service and ceremony in Unitarian Universalism that celebrates that the church has called a new minister. One of my best friends from seminary, Rev. Megan Lloyd Joiner-Clark is a Unitarian Universalist minister serving our congregation in New Haven, Connecticut. She is the great great great grandniece of Jenkin Lloyd Jones, who preached Caroline Bartlett Crane's ordination and installation at the First Unitarian Church of Kalamazoo 127 years ago. She will preach for this special service which will happen on Saturday May 21, 2016. Mark your calendars.

And now a more challenging story – a single story that is dangerous. Since the merger that founded Unitarian Universalism in the 1960s, we have been a denomination made up of many upper middle class people. Our denominational culture has been an upper middle class culture. Not entirely, not everywhere, but mostly. A Pew Survey in 2007 –and this was the most recent data I could find that lists us as our own entity, not lumped into the 'other' category –showed that about 40% of Unitarian Universalists in this country had household incomes above \$75,000 annually. The median household income in this country that year was around \$46,000. We have among highest percentage of upper income families among all the faith groups surveyed. Only Orthodox Christians, Jews, Hindus, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians have a higher percentage of high income families.<sup>4</sup> This is a powerful story about who we are—and it can be a dangerous story if we allow it to be the only story about who we are.

Income is not the only indicator of class. Class is about income, but also about expectations, goals, and values. The true story is that while upper middle class people are overrepresented in our congregations, there have always been people of all classes, all income levels, all education levels in our congregations. Sometimes, we forget this reality.

Recently, I was part of an online conversation among Unitarian Universalist ministers about class – and this upper middle class assumption – in our congregations. We told stories about moments in church life when people did not live up to our highest aspirations about inclusion, our promise to affirm the worth and dignity of all people. Friends, these stories broke my heart.

I heard stories of people assuming that everyone in their church had travelled internationally, that everyone has read extensively, that everyone works the day shift. I heard a story of someone praising a fellow congregant's simplicity – not owning a car, having a limited amount of clothing – thinking it was a voluntary lifestyle choice, not realizing that their fellow congregant was living in poverty and a car or more clothes were not something they could afford. I heard a story about a congregation where people who lose their jobs stop coming

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<sup>4</sup> 'Religious Landscape Survey.' The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. February 2008. Retrieved from <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2013/05/report-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf>. Pages 58-61.

because they don't think they will be accepted if they don't have an identity based on their job, if they can't contribute as much financially.

Here is the story that I offered. In my 20s, I worked at a congregation as their youth ministries coordinator. At least once a month, I had this conversation with a church member, a different person each time. The member would say, "I'm so glad you're here. I would love for this church to have more young adults." I would respond with, "Thanks. I'm glad to be here. You know, there's a community college just a mile from here. I bet if the church did some outreach or started a campus ministry, you could bring a lot more young adults to the church." And every single time, the congregant said in response, "but Unitarians don't go to community college." This breaks my heart. Not only was this attitude keeping that church from reaching out to people who might be longing for Unitarian Universalism, it drove away the people in the church who attended that community college – including the several bridging youth who enrolled there every single year. That church had formed a single story about who they were – a group that not only had all gone to college, but had all gone exclusively to four year colleges. It wasn't a true story, but they believed it nonetheless.

A year ago, I read *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit* by white American educator Parker Palmer. This provocative paragraph has lingered with me ever since. He writes, "There is no such thing as a 'homogenous white congregation.' There are only groups of white people pretending that they have no critical differences among themselves for fear that their 'community' would crumble if they opened their real lives to one another. Why would anyone with a visible difference want to join a group of people who look like each other but cannot embrace their own invisible differences?"<sup>5</sup>

To be clear, I'm not saying that this unwillingness to name differences is true at People's Church. I'm still new; I'm still figuring you out. But I have spent enough time in Unitarian Universalist congregations and other predominately white spaces where this is true, that I wonder about this place. Are we able to be open about our real lives with one another here? Do we pretend that we are more similar than we actually are? What do we think are our common experiences, shared by everyone? Are they really? I'd love to know your experience of this here.

The only single story about Unitarian Universalists that is true is that we are Unitarian Universalists. We are diverse in ways seen and unseen, in ways known and unknown. When we pretend we are one thing – all college educated, all Democrats, all eating organic or all well-read – we are falling prey to the danger of a single story. We are not so different from the roommate who believed that Africans couldn't use the stove. We are telling ourselves and our children that our story is only about one type of person – that there are certain choices that are

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<sup>5</sup> Palmer, Parker. *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011. Page 138.

out of bounds. And while there are certain choices that are out of bounds, community college is not among them.

So may we harness the power of story for the works of love, justice, and inclusion.

May we seek out multiple voices so we avoid the danger of a single story.

May our church be a place to listen to one another, be real about our lives, and connect across difference.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.