Storytelling for Communities in Transition TOOLS

I have served congregations during times of interim, and "settled" ministries, and in both cases, I have told pretty much the same stories. I wonder: Is there ever a time a community is *not* in transition? If it is not in transition, if it is, say, "stuck" somehow or appears to be unchanging, it has been my observation that it's simply on the edge of transition. Maybe it has pressed the pause button, but the delay does not alter the inevitability of change, the one universal constant. Whether consciously in the midst of transition, or poised to intentionally enter one, every community - as an emotional system - has an ebb and flow, a rhythm to its life.

Stories serve communities, in my opinion, in *all* times and points along the wave. If the interim period of a congregation is typically understood to be a time of emotional turmoil, than there is certainly no tool is more appropriate for navigating such times - and more effective.

Preparing to Tell Stories

Over the years, I have developed my own process for telling stories. It is, at least to me, a very simple one, and yet I am often told that people are amazed by my ability to tell a story from memory, and even insist that they themselves could never do it! Of course I don't believe that. I think everyone has their own process, and there are excellent resources out there. I will share these resources at the end. But perhaps my process will be helpful for others learning to tell stories from memory. The process of

the steps I use do not necessarily fall in a particular order; often they happen simultaneously or overlap.

- Barebones, or the Structural Skeleton

The key to memorizing a story, at least for me, is to be able to record the simplest outline of plot and elements. This follows storytelling tradition from ancient times, when people remembered entire epics and genealogies of their culture. One of the benefits of cultural tales is that this method is embedded in the structure of the story itself through repetitions, such as events occurring in threes, a common device.

I do not try to remember a story from beginning to end. Instead, I first memorize it as a whole, a chunk with the beginning, repetitions, and end, and that's *it*. The details and nuances, such as figurative language or the characters' emotions and inner monologues, come spontaneously when I tell the story out loud.

So my skeletal structure for, say, a story like Jack and the Beanstalk might look or sound something like this:

Cow for beans.

Mother throws beans.

Jack finds beanstalk, climbs up.

Giant's wife. Hiding.

Golden harp.

Goose.

Chased down.

Cuts the beanstalk.

Mother and son rich.

I may write out this skeleton, or I may just try to recall and repeat it to see if I can. There have been times I have actually written one-word item lists on my hand, because there were many elements that would be easy to forget!

(I have had to do this, for example, with the Celtic story from the Mabinogion, where Arthur's knights encounter 5 important power animals. Because they don't have the same cultural significance to me, I know I will need help remembering them.)

- Multiple Versions & Primary Sources

This is why I like to read multiple versions of stories, and especially to read them in primary resources, or as close as I can get. Many stories that storytellers will find are in children's books, where they have been told in a literary manner - meant to be read, not heard - with details and nuances in beautiful but complex language by the author.

The more descriptions and details there are, the more personal they are to the other author and less so to me, and therefore the harder the story will be to commit to memory. So I prefer to read the simplest versions I can find, *in addition* to these literary versions that may exist, or may tease out themes for me to reflect upon as I develop my own telling.

Also, I get to compare common elements across different versions, and find some that are used in one version, but left out of another. This repetition of elements helps enormously with memorization (especially where they are visual elements like objects or people), and it also provides more variety of choices to think about what elements I want to include in my version.

Cultural research will also reveal significance behind details that at first may appear arbitrary; the number of times a linden or rowan tree are referenced in European fairy tales has to do with the cultural understanding of the spiritual, magical significance of those specific trees. Understanding those cultural references will enrich the telling as they engage the teller in the process of discovery.

But the other reason it is important to read multiple versions and original source material is to avoid cultural misappropriation. Even the story of *Mussa and Nagib*,[1] which clearly has MIddle Eastern names, fails to mention a reference to Allah found in earlier versions.

Whether or not the teller chooses to mention Allah, what are the implications of leaving out this cultural detail, when presenting this spiritual wisdom tale to a Western audience? What, on the other hand, would be the implications of telling a story that references a religion often maligned in our culture, and with which many of us are much less familiar than others? These

[1] As found in the *Tapestry of Faith* curriculum “Moral Tales”

kinds of things are important for a storyteller's personal integrity and faithfulness to the spirit of the story, as much as from a social justice standpoint.

- Cultural Research

The most common fallout from failing to research the cultural context of a story is to fundamentally misunderstand the story. This happens because the story is told from the dominant cultural lens of the teller, complete with invisible assumptions that may completely deviate from the traditional wisdom the story means to convey.

This happens especially with American indigenous tales. There is a popular moral story attributed vaguely to "Native Americans" about two metaphorical wolves battling inside every human being, one supposedly good, and the other supposedly evil.

The story implies the triumphant wolf will be the one the person chooses to "feed." Upon researching this story, however, I found that it is not indigenous at all, and in fact comes from the evangelical tradition, as it was originally penned by Billy Graham! (And the original is very problematic in its portrayal of an "eskimo," to the point that it is almost unrecognizable when compared with the most popular version told today.)

Here the problem is taking a clearly Christian view of morality, and imposing it falsely on a completely different spiritual outlook, giving the impression that the values of the dominant culture are universal. Considering the history of colonialism of indigenous cultures by the West, this is a grievous

continuation of exactly that same cultural violence, which seeks to erase these cultures and all that makes them unique.

I would think it doesn't need to be said how ethically problematic that is from a Unitarian Universalist pulpit, but from my own experience as a teller, and my observation of others when faced with revelations like these, is that the convenience of having "the perfect story" for the theme is so strong a temptation, that it very easily takes priority over the need to continually resist the inherent racism in our very congregations, by virtue of the historical injustices we have inherited.

I think a teller must ask themselves if the right story is really more important than making the harder, less convenient decision to practice what we are literally preaching. In my opinion, leading by example is also religious education, in which case it is much more important than telling the perfect story.

Aside from the very serious issue of ethical considerations and continuing perpetration of oppression,[2] there is also the fact that not doing due diligence with even a little research leads to missed opportunity - to learn from a different wisdom tradition, maybe look at a situation from a different perspective.

Perspective is such a useful and powerful storytelling tool, especially with difficult topics and during times of conflict, that it would be a shame miss the opportunity to examine assumptions that may very well need to be questioned.

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[2] I have not talked much about whether or not it is even appropriate to tell stories of another cultural, especially of a marginalized culture. That discussion is beyond the scope of this piece, but there are excellent tools out there to navigate these hard decisions. See the resources section for some of them.

This is the whole point of “world religions” as one of the Sources of Unitarian Universalist faith building.

- Practice Tellings

What commits an original, spontaneous telling to memory is the actual muscle memory that comes from practicing the story out loud. Practicing does not necessarily mean practicing perfectly, nor does it mean word for word or in the “finished” version - assuming there is one; I generally find a telling always has some spontaneity created in part by the unique situations and the relationship of the listeners to the teller.

Practicing for me usually means trying to recall the barebones structure and list the important elements. If there is time, I do try to practice actually telling the story. Ideally, I would tell it to a few practice listeners, such as family or friends, or other worship leaders like the minister, before finally performing it. But at minimum my practice is really about recalling details. Once I can see them in my mind, the descriptions are there and will flow out naturally.

But practice is always a good idea, and especially for people for whom memorization may be a challenge. The first one or two tellings may be messy, uneven, or bland, so it’s better to get those out of the way so that it will come out much more polished in front of an audience, complete with nerves and stage fright!

- **Other things…**

I’ve hopefully shown how valuable personal reflection is in making a story your own. That is the key, in my opinion, to telling authentically. It is better to tell

a story from a genuine place of interest, wonder, and inspiration, than to try to tell it word for word the way someone else has. Reading multiple versions and doing research will naturally lead to personal reflection. And that's the fun part of the process, anyway!

Narrative markers (such as wording the repeated elements the same way) and figurative language are also important and helpful tools for making the storytelling event effective and authentic. Storyteller and coach Doug Lipman talks about centering the story around the image that stands out to you most...starting there as a place for inspiration and around which to develop your telling of the story.

Powerful imagery is important for memorizing, but also for your listeners. If your story is written with abstract words and language, or complicated description, make sure to change out that language for language that evokes an image.

Listening to a person tell a story requires much more of this than reading one; people have to remember different characters, and they are more likely to remember them by a characteristic, then by simply hearing the names over and over again. The "stooped, old elder with his crooked cane" is instantly more memorable than "the older man."

Some Helpful Resources

- Books and authors, further reading

        - Doug Lipman, storyteller and storytelling coach. Author of *Improving Your Storytelling: Beyond the Basics for All Who Tell Stories in Work and Play* and *The Storytelling Coach: How to Listen, Praise, and Bring Out People's Best* among others
        - *The Healing Heart* storytelling series on applied storytelling in families and communities. A collection of real life applications written by the storytellers who used them.
        - *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* by Thomas King; excellent resource on thinking about cultural implications of stories and who controls a narrative.
        - *Suddenly They Heard Footsteps: Storytelling for the Twenty-first Century* by Dan Yashinksy
        - *The Way of the Storyteller: A Great Storyteller Shares Her Rich Experience and Joy in Her Art and Tells Eleven of Her Best-Loved Stories* by Ruth Sawyer
        - Storytelling books and collections by Margaret Read McDonald
        - *A Good Telling: Bringing Worship to Life with Story*, an excellent resource for worship leaders by Kristin Maier
        - *Inviting the Wolf In: Thinking About Difficult Stories* by Loren Niemi and Elizabeth Ellis, a must have resource on process and the ethical responsibilities of a storyteller
    - Story repositories (lists, databases, cultural information)

- The National Storytelling Network, a professional storytellers organization. Many resources are shared here, and membership includes access to the Greenwood Folklore Database, an excellent perk. www.storynet.org
- Storytell listserv - a discussion email list of storytellers around the world, also through the National Storytelling Network. You do need to be a member to subscribe, but no additional dues are required. The archives of this listserv are an incredible resource for finding stories on a particular theme or with specific elements. https://storynet.org/groups/storytel-listserve-discussion-group/
- An excellent UUA resource on cultural (mis)appropriation, particularly the section on “Considerations for Cultural Borrowing.” https://www.uua.org/multiculturalism/introduction/misappropriation. Also “Beyond Holidays: Learning and Worshipping Without Appropriating” found here: https://www.uua.org/multiculturalism/introduction/misappropriation/ga-workshops/beyond-holidays