

IN THE TELLING

A sermon by F. Jay Deacon

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The story is in the telling. How do you tell it? Where do you start? stop? What do you include, leave out?



The threads that run through the story of a person or a people or a nation or a congregation: can you see them? It can take a subtle, an attentive eye to see the threads of continuity.

And — to see those threads — to follow the story-line — is really important if you're *still composing the story*.

The story up to now comes from our memories. How did we get here? When we understand that, we can ask: And where is this story going?

Some of you have been a part of the congregation for a lot of years. Do you remember departures of ministers — tough times, disruption, bitterness? Momentum lost? A difficult interim period?



Houses of worship are places full of memories, places that evoke memories. When I walk into one, what I see and hear is only partly real. I can still hear Dr. Van Dyke, the Presbyterian minister who came to my parents' church just as I was born and who stayed there for forty years. I can hear him intoning elegant (though somewhat vacant) platitudes from that august pulpit, feel a

THE READINGS

From: Mitchell Chefitz, The Seventh Telling

Stephanie had a defiant look about her. Sidney had not heard that story before. She wondered how he might respond. He made time for himself by chanting a soft *niggun*, a wordless repetitive tune. Moshe had taught them, whenever in doubt about how to continue, chant a little, and that's what Sidney was doing.

Why hadn't Sidney ever told that story before? Perhaps it was her own story . . . that opened the way Her stories were doing something. They were having an effect. Where they would go, what they might stimulate in Sidney, what they might stimulate in her, she did not know, but she was encouraged by the process.

The romance stories had been Stephanie's for some time. The words had become comfortable, familiar. Comfortable and familiar no longer suited her purpose. Comfortable and familiar were not conducive to learning or growth. She paused to consider her stories.

In this storytelling Sidney no longer made the rules. If *he* could assign new forms to old stories, *she* could bring new stories to light. It was only a matter of courage, the courage to tell those stories she knew but had not yet told, and the courage to descend deeply enough to discover those she didn't yet know.

Mitchell Chefitz. *The Seventh Telling*. New York: St. Martin's, 2001, 27, 30, 32, 58.

From Otta Scharmer, in a remarkable book he co-authored titled Presence:

At that moment, with everything gone, I suddenly felt released and free to encounter that other part of my self, the part that drew me into the future — into my future — and into a world that I might bring into reality with my life.

It evoked a question in me that still remains: What does it take to connect to that other stream of time, the one that gently pulls me toward my future possibility?

Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers. *Presence. An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society*. New York: Currency/Doubleday/Random House, 2004, 79-82.

certain electricity in the air which, every Sunday morning, seemed to signal that something important was going on.

And the remembered sounds and sights and feelings come back to me when I walk in *here*. Really, I don't see or hear exactly what any other person sees or hears in here. Nor do you. Nor does anybody. The UUA used to have a religious education curriculum called "The Haunted Church." The place is haunted.

Until it was finally sold three or four years ago, if I went back to that house in New Jersey where I grew up, if I went back to visit that house where Dad died, where Mom lived until the Alzheimer's got too bad — I wouldn't see that house as you would, or as Mom or Dad did. It was haunted. When I walked through the door, there were scenes of my father and mother and sister and brother and grandparents when they were much younger and I was very small. Have you ever been with someone you thought you knew well, and you go back with them to such a place in their life? And something has come over them. You can only imagine what they are seeing and hearing.

We live in a flow of time between past and future. We experience something that seems like the past and something that seems like the future, but what is it? And what, really, is our memory?



When I'm in London, I always notice the cameras. Thousands of cameras. Actually, there are a million CCTV cameras in London. Someone reaches into a pocket in front of them and snatches a wallet and, when it works, a policeman appears, suddenly, apparently out of nowhere, and they have the evidence. You can see what happened. It's all on a disk.

Or there are those videos, so many videos, we've seen them so many times, the planes hitting the towers.

Maybe memory is like that. Is it all there somewhere, like a hard drive, like the

Nixon Watergate tapes, like an old e-mail? Guarding its secrets and its hard facts?



Do we still have our past? Is it all contained somewhere within our minds, an accurate record carefully preserved by memory?

Some, trying to get a grasp on some illusive past trauma, hope it is. And many years later, they claim a suddenly acquired recall in living color, so graphic and real, some buried horror. And they go, maybe, to be hypnotized, hoping to get the details. Maybe, they'll take it to court.

But our minds hold a little secret, which I exposed last week! Here it is: *Our minds make up our memories as we go!*

Our memories cannot yield up an accurate record of the past, no matter how real and graphic they seem. Memory is a kind of illusion, more like dreams that we had previously realized.

Dreams seem pretty convincing.

There have been mornings when I dreamed I woke up, got out of bed, showered and dressed and had breakfast. But I was still asleep, which meant that I had to go through the whole darn routine all over again, for real.

Primitive humans couldn't tell the difference between their dreams and reality. As Otto Rank has noted, they would go to sleep at night and dream of fathers, mothers, grandparents and ancestors, and friends who had already died — and concluded that they were still alive, as ghosts or spirits. They believed in what they saw, literally. Sometimes we take our memories literally, too.

Memory, we now know, is a present activity of the mind. Something we do. In the present. It is not a tape, not a photograph, not a computer disk.

During any particular experience, the mind begins by finding — or formulating — a pattern of meaning and weaving a scenario around it. No two people experience the same thing in exactly the same way. The mind spins

a scenario by which it structures its own experience. It includes the details that fit. It excludes the details that don't fit. It invents a few details to fill in the gaps. That's what you start with.

After you have told the story for the insurance company, about what happened after you began making the left turn, can you ever again remember — or could you ever imagine — what the other driver might remember? what you might have seen, had the doors of your perception bit more open?

Over time, the mind keeps re-writing new drafts of the story, drafts upon drafts. Of course, we believe them—or at least the latest draft our mind composes. Oh yeh — I remember as if it were yesterday!



The great 20th-century spiritual teacher Krishnamurti said that we hardly experience anything at all in the present because we insist on contorting the *present* around our *memories*.

But of course, there is no place we can possibly exist but the present. There just is no place else, though I have known people who thought otherwise.

Memories exit not in the past and dreams are not in the future. We are remembering and we are dreaming and we are in the present doing our remembering and dreaming. That is because our minds are trying to make a future out of the material given.

We remember what we do and we remember in the way that we do because of what we need right now. We dream what we do and in the way that we do because we are trying to make a future out of the material given — now.



So we go on writing our story, but the story line can get stuck, hung up.

I remember a small group I participated in for awhile — a therapy group. I got a chance to notice something I might not have noticed in myself because it was too close, but I could see it in people I hadn't known before. They gathered every week and told the same story.

Over and over, reinforcing their official story. It got real stale. Stultifying. A stagnant pond of frozen memories. Let us remind ourselves of why we have a perfect right to be so resentful, how we've been gypped, how the road is intersected just in front of us by a brick wall.

The only breakthroughs came when somebody started to tell the story differently. Maybe a subtle difference at first. Noticed the brick wall had a door in it. Emerson said "in every wall there is a door." Then the story-line has different meanings.



In the Judaeo-Christian Bible, the entire game is telling the story — it's HOW you tell the story, where you start, stop, what you include, leave out.

Maybe you've noticed that the modern-day fundamentalist reduces the story to a series of doctrines. So I was really quite delighted a few years ago to read a fairly obscure novel called *The Seventh Telling*, by a Kabbalistic rabbi. The novel is set at a kind of weekend religious retreat. It's led by a couple — a Sidney and a Stephanie, and toward the beginning, Sidney says something important — he says

There is no greater hindrance to growth than belief.

We harden the *story* into a *belief*. But what matters is not, What do you believe; no. What matters is, What story do you tell and how do you tell it? *What happens if you tell it differently?*

What story is beyond questioning, poking around at, reexamining? The stories of the Judaeo-Christian Bible are just that, stories, and not history. Is that terrible? I don't think so. What's terrible is when those stories are made to function like history, dogma, settled fact. But look — there are more than 50 gospels that we know of — just *four* of which the young Church, that was still trying to establish its place and authority in the world, allowed into its Bible, because those four told the story the way the Church *wanted* it told. And look — each of *them* tells the story differently.

They cannot be reconciled. Behind each of the

gospels there is a community trying to understand and to interpret the world, creating a story they're going to tell about themselves, and they start with a story that somebody somewhere created, and they tell it differently and, as a consequence, the message is different in each one.

Sometimes you have to question the story. If they really accepted the fact that there was no Red Sea crossing, no glorious battles in the name of God massacring the heathen, then maybe they' stop doing it now.



And what is the place, in our stories, of *hurt*? There is a kind of defensive pride, hurt pride, that colors our memories. Your hurt, defensive pride says, This is Unfair. Why should this happen to me?

A deeper place in us says, through the tears, What is the invitation in this breaking-open pain? What does this time invite me to do? What commitments of mine does it call on me to renew? What new commitments does it demand of me? How does it challenge me, invite me, to change, to grow? What is it that suddenly becomes important, urgent? What is it that life has been revolving around as if it were so urgent that I now can see isn't very important at all, and how am I still organizing my life around it as if it were? What is most precious to me, and what am I prepared to do and commit and give for it?



Are you worried about what happens next? What will become of Unity Church? The deepening sense of community and spiritual presence, the spiritual hunger, the stimulation, the vision? What will become of it?



We have to look backwards: we have to, if only to reëxamine our story, question it, hold it on different angles and see what sort of story it might be. And then look clearly ahead, knowing what is precious and vital and urgent in it. You are writing your story.

I earnestly hope that, in your telling of the story, these 139 years of Unity Church, or 152, depending on where you begin the story — that those years now past will flow on, as a mighty stream, coursing through the days to come with a force and splendor previous generations never dared to dream.



There is a story line in that novel, *The Seventh Telling*. There is this rabbi, Moshe, into kabbalism, a Jewish mysticism, and there is his wife, whose cancer was supposed to have been removed, 100 percent, but he has seen something in her chart the doctor has dismissed, but he sees it, and meanwhile, his life-work is in crisis, too. You don't know that yet when you read this passage:

Sitting in his study in the early morning darkness, he held the chart in his left hand and opened his right, staring at it as if something were missing.

He summoned his breath back into control, settled into his chair, and allowed his eyes to survey the room, from the bookcase to the left, across the wall of charts, to his desk, the computer, the globe, the wastebasket. The crumpled letter.

The letter was an invitation for him to teach a course about the Kaballah . . . He had not offered such a course in years. . . . Out of habit he had discarded the letter. Yet he had awakened early in the morning to retrieve it.

Moshe positioned himself more comfortably in his chair. He had an exercise to do. Between any two points in the universe, between any two points in any of the worlds, flows a straight line. He would surrender conscious thought so he might be moved by the most subtle of influences, that his perspective might change. The two points, the cancer marker and the invitation to teach, were still separate. He needed to shift his perception until the line disappeared, until one could be seen within the other. At that point he would know the connection for a certainty.²



There is new life and there is a new world that call to us. It's present in our story and it's present in the dreams and it's even present in the anguish but we can't hear it or see it —

Not without something the Buddhists call *Cessation*. Full stop. The stuff whizzing around your head comes to a halt. Learning to see and hear more than we did before. May we be freed from our pre-formed assumptions and frameworks.

What we bring to the present and future is what we know, and what we know is mostly the past, our past, the story as we habitually tell it. Maybe we think we know pretty well how to repeat it, but when we try, repeating it over and over like a piece of memorized doctrine, it has no life, no potency.

So we have to ask Otto Scharmer's question, Otto Scharmer who with his colleagues at MIT, in their book *Presence*, ask: *What does it take to connect to that other stream of time, the one that gently pulls us toward our future possibility?*

In both memories and dreams, we are looking for what it is that is trying to come into being.

And in the present, this present moment, if we are attentive enough — we can see this present, where we are, from inside the future that is trying to come into being out of the material given in this present.

And we will have to see that story line as part of a much larger story. And we will have to begin to see, not from outside of things, from *outside* this aching world of possibility, but from *within the whole*. This whole aching world, so full of possibility, of which I am a part, of which *we* are a part. Hang back and observe, observe, observe — asking, What's fundamentally going on here?

Where does my life, where does our life, where does Unity Church — belong in the making of this future?

You can't rush it. *Observe . . . until . . . you see.*

Now you're not looking from the past you think you know so well — but from a future that has not yet unfolded.

You retreat and you reflect, cease the habitual thought-patterns and suspend the habitual solutions, and see where the dots converge, hear more deeply.

When you see it, it commands your life irretrievably.

If we can do that, our lives, and the life of this congregation, will be great, magnificent, powerful.

Do we want to do that?

Do we want to enter the place that lowers the walls between us, shifts our intentions, and opens to us a vision from the heart of reality and not from the margins?

Do we want to know the joy George Bernard Shaw meant when he said

This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose you consider a mighty one, the being a force of nature, rather than a feverish, selfish clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.²

If we do, let's begin today, because that is where our future possibility lives, embedded in this very moment, *now*, where

our stories,

and the whole aching promising world of which we are a part,

and the power that inhabits the tension and urgency of the moment —

Intersect:

waiting for us to bring into being the possible future.