

“In Celebration of the Stories that Bind”
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We begin with a story from Bruce Feiler, who wrote this reflection about contemporary life:¹ “I hit the breaking point as a parent a few years ago. It was the week of my extended family’s annual gathering in August, and we were struggling with assorted crises. My parents were aging; my wife and I were straining under the chaos of young children; my sister was bracing to prepare her preteens for bullying, sex and cyberstalking.

Sure enough, one night all the tensions boiled over. At dinner, I noticed my nephew texting under the table. I knew I shouldn’t say anything, but I couldn’t help myself and asked him to stop. Ka-boom! My sister snapped at me to not discipline her child. My dad pointed out that my girls were the ones balancing spoons on their noses. My mom said none of the grandchildren had manners. Within minutes, everyone had fled to separate corners.

Later, my dad called me to his bedside. There was a palpable sense of fear I couldn’t remember hearing before.

“Our family’s falling apart,” he said.

“No it’s not,” I said instinctively. “It’s stronger than ever.”

But lying in bed afterward, Bruce began to wonder: “Was he right? What is the secret sauce that holds a family together? What are the ingredients that make some families effective, resilient, happy?”

One perspective on this family scene—which most of us might be able to recognize as somewhat familiar with a few tweaks in detail—comes from the psychologist Marshall Duke, who studies myth and ritual in American families. He says that the single most important thing you can do for your family is surprisingly simple: make sure you develop a strong family narrative.

When he began his research in the mid 1990s there was a plethora of studies and analysis about what was heralded as the breakup of the family. Divorce, mix-raced marriage, single parenting, gay families. Lots of handwringing about the family unit’s impending destruction and the wide social and moral collapse it foretold.

Around that time, Marshall Duke’s wife, another psychologist named Sara Duke, was working with children with learning disabilities. She noticed something about her students. The ones who knew a lot about their families tended to do better when faced with challenges.

Marshall Duke was intrigued by this observation. Was it accurate? What other factors were important here? So he and his colleague, Robyn Fivush, set out to test her hypothesis. They created a “Do You Know?” scale that asked children to answer questions including: Do you know where

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/fashion/the-family-stories-that-bind-us-this-life.html?_r=0

your grandparents grew up? Do you know an illness or something terrible that happened in your family? Do you know the story of your birth?

A relevant question for Margaret might be: "Do you know why bats are part of family vacation lore?"

Their overwhelming conclusion, which was also based on taped dinner table conversations and other interactions with the whole family systems of the subjects, was that more knowledge had a positive impact. The more children knew about their family's history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem and the more successfully they believed their families functioned. The "Do You Know?" scale turned out to be the best single predictor of children's emotional health and happiness.

That's interesting enough. But the second round of their research was even more illuminating. Two months after they completed this first round, September 11th happened. Sad as the circumstance was, the researchers recognized a rare opportunity.

The families they studied had not been directly affected by the events, yet all the children had experienced the same national trauma at the same time. The researchers went back and reassessed the children.

"Once again," Dr. Duke said, "the ones who knew more about their families proved to be more resilient, meaning they could moderate the effects of stress." Why does knowing something like where your grandmother was born help a child deal with a sprained ankle or even violence en masse? "The answers have to do with a child's sense of being part of a larger family," Duke said. Psychologists have found that every family has a unifying narrative. Those narratives take one of roughly three shapes. First, we have the ascending family narrative: "Child, when we came to this country, we had nothing. Our family worked. We opened a store. Your grandfather went to high school. Your mother went to college. And now you..." Second is the descending narrative: "Sweetheart, we used to have it all. Then we lost everything."

Experts say that the most healthful narrative is a third one, different entirely from the other two. It's called the oscillating family narrative: "Dear, let me tell you, we've had ups and downs in our family. We built a business. Your grandfather was a pillar of the community. But we also had setbacks. Your uncle is in prison. We had a house burn down. Your mom lost her dream job. But no matter what happened, we always stuck together." It's not about the story being a perfect one (how could perfection be anything but a toxic lie?); it is about there being a story.

Sociologists call the building of a narrative that explains what the group is about sense-making. Children with the most self-confidence have what researchers call a strong intergenerational self. They know they belong to something bigger than themselves. This is what Wendell Berry made poetic in our responsive reading: "Memory, native to this valley, will spread over it like a grove, and memory will grow into legend."

In other words, it is important to remember, share, re-tell, revise and embody stories. A traveling exhibit called *A Stone of Hope: Black Experiences in the Fox Cities* gives us a chance to do that this week while it's at the Fellowship. It's visiting our Legacy Room from the History Museum so I hope you will check it out after the service and then come to the reception with chief curator Nick Hoffman here on Thursday at 6:00 p.m.

The story it tells is one you might not know, even if you've lived locally for many years: Before 1900, the Fox Cities were home to a growing Black population of Civil War veterans, small business owners and community leaders. Losing hope, most Blacks left the area by 1920 due to increasing harassment from police, racial exclusion at hotels, racial covenants barring home ownership and minstrelsy advertising and entertainment.

The exhibit also addresses Appleton's past sundown custom and racial exclusion from 1915 to 1961, and how the Fox Cities emerged from this mountain of despair during the Civil Rights Era.² It's a powerful story! For me, it helps to demonstrate how Appleton has moved forward in wondrous ways, while also reminding me that more work toward equality is still sorely needed. When you check out the panels of pictures and text, keep your eye out for the photograph of the building on Superior Street with the big KKK banner. That's also the former home of the Fellowship.

When I was looking at the exhibit a couple days ago, it occurred to me that all the people who lived here historically and whose images and actions are reflected in the display couldn't have known that their daily lives would one day be memorialized in this way, caught in time for us to use as a storytelling and reflection tool.

We all constantly encounter stories, even if we don't necessarily think about them being part of a larger community narrative. When I purchased a home last year I acquired a washer and dryer. I no longer go to the Laundromat off Wisconsin Avenue.

Here are things I don't miss: lugging heavy stuff when it's icy out. Racing there after an evening meeting so I have time to complete the washing and drying cycles before they close at 11:00 p.m.

But here is what I do miss: getting to watch people and witness random life stories—even playing small unimportant roles in them from time to time. Once I gave a child a coin for the vending machine and his eyes lit up like I was Oprah giving him a car. And the conversations I've had! Is the young man who came out to his family, was kicked out and taken in by his new boyfriend's extended family even though he didn't speak much Spanish and they spoke hardly any English doing ok? I can only hope so.

Probably most impressive was the retired couple who came in with more loads than I can even describe, making trip after trip after trip to their huge van and then explaining to me the complicated system that allowed them, incredibly, to do laundry only every four months, when literally everything made of fabric in their home was soiled.

Then there was the three-generation family who always seemed to be there. We never spoke directly but finally, after well over a year, they began nodding politely and gravely as they tended to their wash as well as to the huge moving mass of toddlers in their charge. I find myself wondering if maybe they have noticed that I no longer come there.

Duke and his research convinces me that stories are psychologically important. Simple tales from my Laundromat days help anchor me in my own life, making me secure in the knowledge that I have a past and a trajectory. They help me make sense of my local community, and in this way I contribute to a larger story of who we are in the Fox Cities, just as *A Stone of Hope* seeks to tell the story of who we have been historically.

² <http://www.myhistorymuseum.org/a-stone-of-hope.html>

But stories aren't only psychologically relevant. They're spiritually important as well. After all, isn't the idea of being connected to something larger than ourselves the very definition of spirituality? Telling our tales, whether they are true, fictitious or in-between, is the closest we can ever get to watching the infinite different ways we have/could/should evolve. My sister Rose once expressed this to me in a lovely, thought-provoking way when she said, about narrative, "It's the only way we can see all our possibilities."

My friend Temim Fruchter has written about this too. She is a radical Jewish musician and activist. In my opinion she's also a really important up-and-coming poet and essayist so you might just see her name again one of these days! She says: "I guess one thing is: stories are containers. Spirits and spirituality maybe need containers. It's why language is so exciting to me, always pushing to find shapes to contain our uncontainable things, drives, emotions, connections, prayers. Our narratives connect us to one another in tangible ways. They provide beautiful homes, too, for the things that wouldn't otherwise find a way or a place to show themselves."

This month's theme of tradition has helped us reflect on our Fellowship traditions throughout Roger's long, happy and productive ministry here. It's been a gift to have almost a whole year to say goodbye. I have especially valued that we have taken the time to explore some of our specific traditions, talking about how they started and when, how they have served us in the past and how they might change in the future.

One of many great Fellowship traditions is our themes, even though it's only a few years old. We're heading into another year of getting to work with them in all sorts of programs. Want a preview? September through May, they'll be: invitation, letting go, ancestry, expectation, resistance, desire, liberation, creation and blessing.

Now I'd like to add something new to our themes: a common read. Here is how it will work. If you donated a book today, you need another one, right? If you didn't, you probably were just thinking that you need a new book anyway. I hope you'll consider reading the best selling story *Kindred* by Octavia Butler, who's widely considered one of the most important American authors. It has some adult themes so will probably make most sense for high school ages and up. It's an incredibly compelling story and we'll base a service on it in November, when our theme will be ancestry. You can pick up a used copy in our bookstore for a few bucks or get it elsewhere. If it sounds fun, I hope you'll make time to read *Kindred* this summer or fall. I'm excited to re-read it.

Stories are so full of meaning, whether they tell of extended family drama on summer vacation, trips to the Laundromat or hometown discrimination. I hope that you will ask yourself what stories you might tell on your behalf, that illustrate your own oscillating narrative of the ups and downs that make you *you* and make our community ours. Together, let us find ways to tell and hear and celebrate the stories that bind us. May it always be so!

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