

SHARING OUR STORIES

March 8, 2009

HEBREWS 11: 8—40

Winston Baldwin

The writer of the book of Hebrews in the Christian Scripture talks about faith as being the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.—*Hebrews 11: 1*

The writer, whomever he or she may have been, is describing faith as having about it the elements of mystery and future. This mystery and future is demonstrated in the lives and stories of people whom the reader is called to recognize in stories, beginning with the story of Cain and Able, on to Abraham and Sarah, then to Moses, Samson, David, the early followers of the Jesus movement and then to Jesus himself. *The point is that faith is interpreted and passed on as story.*

One way that we are related to one another is through sharing our stories with each other.

The Epistle to the Hebrews is written to a church in crisis. Therefore, the writer of Hebrews creates a story of long trust in God, a story of the presence of God in the midst of the ordinary.

Diana Butler Bass, in her study of vital mainline Protestant congregations, found that the practice of sharing stories, she call this “*spiritual testimony*”, is one of the five characteristics vital, growing, congregations have in common.

“Faith communities live into and interpret the stories.” says Butler Bass. This is what is happening in the Epistle to the Hebrews. It is what happens, or fails to happen, with us as well.

Bass tells of her visit to the Church of the Redeemer UCC, across from Yale Divinity School, New Haven, Conn. In 1996, the church was divided by conflict, running out of money, and threatening to close. What saved the church, says Butler Bass, was the practice of its members giving testimony in worship about their experience of God. This is what the writer of the Epistle of Hebrews is doing with the congregation in crisis to whom she or he is writing. It is a recalling of the stories of the faithful. Shared stories create community around themselves.

Butler Bass says: “At most of the congregations I visited, I heard people speak of faith—offering their testimonies to the power of God in changing their lives and their communities.”

Have any of you ever been to a karaoke bar? One of the things that happens at a karaoke bar is that people sing their shared stories. Over and over on Friday and Saturday night, the same folks sing their songs.

The common sharing creates community. Before the music starts, they greet one another, hug each other, laugh and joke with one another. Once the singing starts, they support one another, no matter how bad the singing gets. The singing is not what makes it happen, what makes it happen is the sharing.

What stories do you remember and share?

What stories give you meaning in the sharing of them?

My family told stories, stories that they and their extended family and neighbors lived. As a child, I can remember crawling up on mom's or dad's or grandma's or grandpa's lap saying: "Tell me about when you were little."

I had heard the stories over and over, some I could remember as well as they, but I could not tell them like they could. They were their stories which were becoming my stories in the sharing.

Those stories located me, told me what I could expect. Those were the stories that communicated what was valued, stories about dealing with life in both the bad times and the good times.

Those stories gave me perspective and a sense of transcendence. *Mostly, what came through the stories was relationship, being related and located in life.* What came with the stories was a sense of security.

What stories do you remember and share?

We share our stories with one another and the sharing creates community. In the short time I have been here at First Parish Church, I have heard stories, stories in small group gatherings, stories about the life of this congregation and individual stories. I have sat at table with you and shared stories of who we are, where we originated, the sharing of formative events in our lives.

Sharing stories can change the world in which we live. The way the people in the Jesus movement understood and interpreted their stories describing their relationship to Jesus changed and is changing the world. The Gospels tell stories about Jesus healing people, sharing meals with them, and in the process, something happens.

Something new can happen in a visit, a new way of relating develops, a new pattern of behavior emerges, a problem is solved, relationships are repaired, life begins anew.

By sharing our stories with one another, we can, as the Apostle Paul says: "Weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice." This, says Paul in his letter to the faith community at Rome, is one of the characteristics of a community of faith, listening to each other's stories. By hearing each other's stories, we can become a community of support for each other.

Hearing one another's stories means we can be changed by sharing our stories. If someone hears us enough to weep with us and to laugh with us, we are already changed by the relationship.

The Theft of the Spirit: A Journey to Spiritual Healing, is a book by Carl A. Hammerschlag, M.D., 1993, University of Arizona School of Medicine and one time chief of Psychiatry with the Indian Health Services. In the book, Hammerschlag talks of the Hopi tradition of three sacred figures called *the Children*, three human like figures, made of wood, estimated to be two thousand years old. They were/are used in the spiritual initiation ceremonies. They were stolen.

Hammerschlag says: “A culture without symbols, rituals, and myth is a culture without morality. Through stories, ritual, and symbols a culture shares its spiritual legacy. A culture that reveres life maintains its myths and symbols; without them we dehumanize the life we live.”

He goes on to say: “A culture that upholds material wealth and technology as its only sustaining values worships death and stagnation. A culture that allows materialism and technology to determine its priorities devalues life and the spirit, and leaves no room for mystery, dreams, and growth.”

Our spirituality is that which connects us with the universe and creation itself. The mystery of the universe and creation is made known in sharing our spirituality, our interest, and our passions with one another.

Spiritual testimony is sharing our stories. It is a sharing we do, not because we are obligated, guilt ridden, or shamed into sharing. We share because we want to share it with a sense of joy and fulfillment. Spiritual testimony is sharing that which gives us meaning.

When we do not share our stories, we lose the connection, the spirit, and therefore, the community. As Mary said in worship planning this week: “Testimony is about witnessing to hope.” –Mary Beard

Several years ago at the kickoff event of the yearlong celebration of its 150th anniversary, First Central Congregational UCC in Omaha, NE. held the opening worship for this celebration, outside, in a public park, by a lake, on a hillside overlooking the lake.

There was a jazz band, the sanctuary choir, banners, kids playing, folks telling stories of the history of the congregation, and spiritual testimony. It was quite a celebration.

One of the most memorable and certainly the most powerful things that happened at the celebration was a spiritual testimony given by a young woman whose name is Tara. Her story went something like this:

Tara and her partner, Erica, are an openly lesbian couple who, at the time, had one son. Tara and Erica are spiritual folks whose connection to a faith community is important to them. When their son was born, they could not get a congregation to baptize their son because they are a lesbian couple.

Tara told of the various reactions they received from the churches as they went from church to church seeking fellowship and acceptance. What they received was hurtful rejection and condemnation.

Someone suggested they seek out a UCC congregation. She said they found First Central Congregational UCC, who said “yes,” we will be happy to baptize your son. Tara told how that simple, unqualified “yes” changed their lives.

There was not a dry eye in the place when she finished. Her testimony of their story reminded us all who we were together as a community of faith and how important sharing our stories is for the life and hope of the congregation.

Two years later, we baptized Tara and Erica's second child around the baptismal font with both sets of Roman Catholic grandparents looking on and participating in the baptism . It was quite a moment in the life of the congregation because we all remembered Tara's testimony in the park.

The writer of the book of Hebrews in the Christian Scripture says that faith is the assurance of things hoped for....

As Mary says: "Testimony is about witnessing to hope."

Sharing our stories is our witness to hope.

Amen.