



# *Soul Matters*

**November 2016**

***What Does It Mean To Be  
A Community of Story?***



## *What Does It Mean To Be A Community of Story?*

Our lives are not just made up of stories; they are also *made by* stories. This might be the most important reminder of this month. Indeed, who of us hasn't felt controlled by a story? Stuck in a story? Hopeless about the way our story will end up? Simply put, stories write us as much as we write them.

For instance, who can't relate to the friend that tells us that her family "clings to the story about how I'm the clumsy one." We've never seen our friend trip, not once. Or drop a thing, ever. And yet, somehow, when she goes to her parents' home or back to a family reunion, she spills coffee on at least one outfit, stubs at least one toe and stumbles down at least one step. There it is: the power of story!

Or think about our current struggles with economic or racial justice. The incredible income gap is described as "natural" or "the result of complex global dynamics over which we have little control." Similarly, the story of race in our country is told with an "entrenched" story arc. Talk about a debilitating way of telling the story.

So let's tell a new story! This is the message of our faith: We have a choice. Our stories are not predetermined. Remember that old theological debate our UU fore-fathers and mothers gave their lives for? Some said that God had predestined not just the big story of humanity, but our individual stories too. Some of us were slotted for heaven and others for hell. And God had written the list in ink. Nothing any of us could do about it.

"Well," said our spiritual ancestors, "that's a bit harsh, don't you think!" Forget this extreme fate-driven story, they said. Freedom has a much bigger role than we're giving it credit for. God is not so much the author of the story as she is the magical muse that needles and nags us to put our own stamp on the narratives before us. In other words, we come from a long-line of spiritual relatives who agreed with Shakespeare that "All the world's a stage," but then went on to clarify that it's an improv show to which we've all been invited.

So fate and freedom? This month is much more about the tension between these two than one might have thought, leaving us with questions like: Are you an actor conforming to the scripts handed to you? Or have you found your own way of becoming a director, a screenwriter, an author? How are you struggling right now to regain control of the storyline of your life? How are you and your friends working to regain control of the storyline of our community? Our country?

Or maybe control is not your work. Maybe your spiritual work is about finding a new storyline. Maybe retirement, divorce, illness or the empty-nest has closed the book on one story and is inviting you to leap into a whole new narrative. Does that leave you excited about what's to come? Scared? A bit of both?

Whatever it is. Wherever you are at. Don't give the storyline away. That's the message of our faith. And hopefully the gift of this month.

# Our Spiritual Exercises

## Option A:

### Remembering the Wisdom of Your Plot Twist

No one gets through life without a plot twist. Unexpected events happen to us all: a death, illness, a divorce or loss of a job. And it's not always something bad: we get a job offer out of nowhere, stumble into love or learn we are pregnant right away when we thought it would take awhile.

Good or bad, the unexpected event usually comes with an unexpected insight. An important value is clarified. A truth is written in neon lights. All those mundane worries and to do lists are put into perspective.

But over time, that moment of clarity often fades. The plot twist's wisdom is forgotten. Our resolve to remember takes a back seat to those daily to do lists once again.

This assignment invites you to bring the clarity back:

- **Reconstruct and remember the story of your plot twist.**
- **Make time to meditate on it, write about it or discuss it with a friend.**
- **Find an object that represents the insight of your plot twist.**
- **Place that object in a place you will see every day.**

Come to your group, ready to share your plot twist story and the object that represents the insight it gave you. Most importantly, explain to your group why or why not you've decided to keep that object in view for longer than just this month.

## Option B:

### What's Your Wizard of Oz?

Stories companion us. Most of us fell in love with a "made up" story in our childhood without which navigating our real life story would have been a struggle. For instance, one soul matters members shares that *The Wizard of Oz* was that for her. That lion helped her see that courage comes from community not simply from inside of oneself. The witch and the wizard warned her about types of people to look out for. Dorothy helped her see that answers are found by returning home not just by leaving it. All of them — Dorothy, the Lion, the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodsman, Toto — weren't just characters in a childhood fantasy but companions that accompanied her into and through real life adulthood.

What childhood story gave such companions and guidance to you? Our children would surely name *Harry Potter*. For us, other names likely emerge: *Little House on the Prairie*, *Nancy Drew*, *Sherlock Homes*, *Treasure Island*, *The Lion*, *The Witch & The Wardrobe*, maybe even *The Lord of the Flies* or *David and Goliath*.

This month bring that formative fiction back into your heart and head. Your assignment:

**Identify which childhood story served as your guiding tale  
&  
bring in a piece of proof about how it influenced your life**

Don't make that second part of the exercise overly complicated. Your "proof" might simply be pulling the book or video right off your shelf and bringing it in. More than one of us are likely to pull out our Luke Skywalker or Princess Leia action figure from the attic. Some will surely bring in their video copy of *It's a Wonderful Life*. Yet another of us might bring in riding boots and explain how she traces her love of horses and her deep self-love back to *Black Beauty*.

The point is to simply take the time to look around your life and find some trace of that "fictitious" children's story in your literal adult world!

**Option C:  
Your Six-Word Faith Story**

Six-word stories are a common exercise in writers' groups because they vividly display of the power of brevity and encapsulation. Think of Caesar's famous quote: "I came. I saw. I conquered." (And it was only three words in its original Latin: *Veni, vidi, veci.*)

This month, you are invited to apply the power of pithiness to your spiritual journey:

**Describe your personal religious journey/story in six words!**

Here's some inspiration found from all over the internet:

*"Seeking him who loved me first."*

*"Born Jewish. Discovered bacon... still Jewish."*

*"No more Sunday school. Sleeping in."*

*"I've fallen and finally got up."*

*"Fairytale. Thought. Deliberation. Reason. Awakening. Atheist"*

*"Prayed every night; no one answered."*

*"I pray. She answers. Each time."*

*"Brainwashed, manipulated, guilted, awoke, objected, rejected."*

*"Realized Reality; Expressed Reality, Connected Others"*

*"Filled the emptiness; Emptied the fullness."*

Come to your group ready to explain your six word spiritual journey story. And feel free to use a few more than six words.

## Option D: What's Your Sentence?

If six words is not enough for you, try this exercise. Author and motivational expert, Daniel Pink advocates distilling the essence of your life's story down to one single sentence. It's a focusing device that connects people to clearer purpose.

Here's how Pink describes the exercise:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gw2xSdp4b0c&feature=youtu.be>

Here's how classrooms of children and youth took on the exercise:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UrLdUzeymal>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEpVaWZc-Ks>

After you come up with your sentence, figure out a way to keep it front and center. Carry it in your purse or wallet. Hang it by your desk. Leave it in your sock drawer or glove compartment in order to stumble upon it when you need it most.

Most of all, use this exercise to ask yourself: Do I know the purpose of my life's story? Or have I allowed my life to become a muddle of mixed and undeveloped storylines? Do I know central theme of my life or do the plotlines of others dictate my days?

Come to your group ready to share how the creation of your sentence helped you see or embrace something new about your story.

# Your Question

*As always, don't treat these questions like "homework" or a list that needs to be covered in its entirety. Instead, simply pick the one question that "hooks" you most and let it lead you where you need to go. The goal of these questions is not to help you analyze what story means in the abstract, but to figure out what a deeper awareness of story means for your daily living. So, which question is calling to you? Which one contains "your work"?*

1. What genre is your current life's story? Are you living a mystery? An adventure story? A romance? A thriller? Are you worried that your story is not interesting enough to be published? Is it a half-finished manuscript stuck in writer's block? Are you in the midst of going back and re-writing the ending?
2. What stories did your "elders" pass down to you? Have you cared for them and passed them on as those elders hoped?
3. What story does your family of origin tell about you? Does that telling leave you feeling seen or misunderstood? Celebrated or unfairly characterized? If mischaracterized, what are your plans to get them to reshape their telling of you? Or is your true story better served by just letting go of trying to change their unfair one?
4. Who do you tell your secret stories to? If the answer is "no one," might it be time to find someone? ("There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you." ~ Maya Angelou)
5. When has re-telling or re-writing your story healed or saved you? How might re-examining or re-telling a part of your story offer you healing right now?
6. What current cultural or political "story" strikes you as dangerous? How might you step up your commitment and efforts to challenge that dangerously false story? How might you double down on making sure that the true story is known?
7. How do you use story? When you tell stories, what is most often the purpose? To connect? To entertain? To heal? To conceal? To remember? To pass on? To teach? To gain power? To say thanks? Were you surprised by your answer?
8. Are you hiding part of your story from the person you say you "trust the most"?
9. Are you faking a story right now? Are you following a storyline that isn't really you? Does anyone else notice? Do you want them to? What's your plan for bringing this false story to an end?
10. What story did you walk away from? All of us think about that other life — that other story — that we turned down for the one we have now. Whether you regret your past choice or not, that road not taken doesn't ever really go away. It continues to be part of our story. Does that old road want you to return to it and give it another look?
11. Are there parts of your "old" story you need to reclaim or notice, before moving on? Many of our elders told us, "You don't know where you are going unless you know where you come from." When was the last time you made some room for remembering your roots?
12. What's your question? Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to hear it.

# Recommended Resources

As always, this is not required reading. We will not analyze or dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to companion you on your journey this month, get your thinking started, and maybe open you to new ways of thinking about what it means to be *a community of story*.

## Story

**Definition:** a narrative, either true or fictitious, in prose or verse, designed to interest, amuse, or instruct the hearer or reader; a narration of the events in the life of a person; a report or account of a matter

**Synonyms:** tale; account; chronicle; narrative; fable; myth; autobiography

## Wise Words

There are no true stories; we are making up every one of them. ~ **Pema Chodron**

There are only true stories. We are discovering the truth in them. ~ **Christina Baldwin**

Hidden in all stories is the One story. The more we listen, the clearer that [universal] Story becomes. Our true identity, who we are, why we are here, what sustains us, is in this story. The stories at every kitchen table are about the same things, stories of owning, having and losing, stories of sex, of power, of pain, of wounding, of courage, hope and healing, of loneliness and the end of loneliness. Stories about God. In telling them, we are telling each other the human story. ~ **Rachel Naomi Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom***

If you don't know the kind of person I am and I don't know the kind of person you are a pattern that others made may prevail in the world and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.  
~ **William Stafford, from his poem: "A Ritual to Read to Each Other,"**

There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you. ~ **Maya Angelou**

Listening is soul work. It can help the living find the meaning to go on in the midst of trying circumstances, and it can help the dying accept the brevity of their lives. Without listening, there can be no story. And without stories, we cannot complete the unfinished work of healing. ~ **Richard Stone, *The Healing Art of Storytelling***

Stories are told as spells for binding the world together. ~ **John Rouse**

Think about every memorial service you've attended. When they read the eulogy about the person's life and accomplishment that is just the "what" of their life. The thing people want to hear at a memorial service, the thing that brings comfort, stirs memories, invites tears and laughter, are the stories. The novelist Edmund White says "when a person dies a library is burned." The stories become the "how" of a life, and that is how, over time, we remember the person who is gone. ~ **Liz Hill, Soul Matters minister**

The truth about stories is that that is all we are. ~ **Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories***

Those who tell the stories, rule the world. ~ **Hopi Proverb**

Storytelling is dangerous to those who profit from the way things are because it has the power to show that the way things are is not permanent, not universal, not necessary. Having that real though limited power to put established institutions into question,

imaginative literature has also the responsibility of power. The storyteller is the truth-teller. ... We will not know our own injustice if we cannot imagine justice. We will not be free if we do not imagine freedom. We cannot demand that anyone try to attain justice and freedom who has not had a chance to imagine them as attainable. ~ **Ursula K. Le Guin**

I spent my whole life deeply connected to spirituality and faith – I even preached the homilies at both my confirmation mass and my high school baccalaureate – but I never even imagined myself in religious leadership until I experienced my own female minister. The priests of my childhood had created in me this limiting story of what ministers looked like, what they knew and talked about and cared about. Which is to say, they certainly didn't wear skirts, they weren't feminists, or moms, they didn't study performance art or appreciate queer theory, or queer anything or anyone, and definitely didn't love pop culture or fashion as much as I did, and do. But then suddenly, I discovered a new story in my female skirt wearing feminist minister. ~ **Rev. Haley, Soul Matters Minister, from her sermon, [The Danger of a Single Story](#)**

Research consistently shows that stories mold us. The more deeply we are cast under a story's spell, the more potent its influence. In fact, fiction seems to be more effective at changing beliefs than nonfiction, which is designed to persuade through argument and evidence. Studies show that when we read nonfiction, we read with our shields up. We are critical and skeptical. But when we are absorbed in a story, we drop our intellectual guard. We are moved emotionally, and this seems to make us [open to seeing each other and life anew]. ~ **David Zahl**

## Videos & Podcasts

### **"The Danger of a Single Story"**

**by Chimamanda Adichie**

Our lives, our cultures, are composed of many overlapping stories. Novelist Chimamanda Adichie tells the story of how she found her authentic cultural voice — and warns that if we hear only a single story about another person or country, we risk a critical misunderstanding.

<http://tinyurl.com/jobdkb9>

Read also this excellent reflection inspired by Adichie's TED Talk by Soul Matters minister the Rev. Haley: <http://tinyurl.com/jjybb59>

### **Two organizations that collect stories: StoryCorp and The Moth**

**StoryCorps'** mission is to preserve and share humanity's stories in order to build connections between people and create a more just and compassionate world.

<https://storycorps.org/>

**The Moth's** mission is to promote the art and craft of storytelling and to honor and celebrate the diversity and commonality of human experience. <https://themoth.org/>

### **"We are the stories we tell ourselves"**

**by Shekhar Kapur**

Where does creative inspiration spring from? At TEDIndia, Hollywood/Bollywood director Shekhar Kapur ... pinpoints his source of creativity: sheer, utter panic. He shares a powerful way to unleash your inner storyteller.

<http://tinyurl.com/j6vxok7>

### **"The Dance of Storytelling"**

**by Ish Ait Hamou**

Ish writes, directs and dances stories. His life's journey of storytelling pushes the boundaries and creates a new and important art: "the dance of storytelling".

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2s7-Ghrzx3E>



## Articles

### **“The Stories We Tell Ourselves”**

by Terri Schanks

“The stories of a person, a family, a culture, a country — they hold us, bind us in ways which are potentially fruitful or harmful, and give us an identity.”

<http://www.onbeing.org/blog/the-stories-we-tell-ourselves/7634>

### **Neil Gaiman on Why Scary Stories Appeal to Us, the Art of Fear in Children’s Books, and the Most Terrifying Ghosts Haunting Society**

<https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/03/20/neil-gaiman-ghost-stories/>

### **“Tell Me a Story” by Richard Hamilton**

“Our brains seem wired to try to seek out a narrative. It is how we make sense of the world.”

<http://www.dailygood.org/more.php?n=5837>

## Movies & Television

### ***Boyhood***

Epic in technical scale but breathlessly intimate in narrative scope, *Boyhood* is a sprawling investigation of the human condition.

<https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/boyhood/>

### ***Big Fish***

If you come from a family of storytellers, there’s no better (or worse) way to celebrate the tradition than by watching *Big Fish*.

[http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1127787-big\\_fish/](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/1127787-big_fish/)

### ***The Thin Blue Line***

Yes, it’s called a documentary but this is really one of the best detective stories you’ll ever encounter. A great adventure into how deeply we can believe that we possess the “truth of the story” but still be wrong!

[http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/thin\\_blue\\_line/](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/thin_blue_line/)

### ***Monumental Myths***

Travel across the United States in a 1965 Airstream Trailer as filmmaker Tom Trinley visits historic sites and monuments unveiling the many sides of history not told on the landscape or in history books. On-camera appearances by Howard Zinn, James Loewen, Lonnie Bunch and Adam “Fortunate Eagle” Nordwall. Inspired by “Lies My Teacher Told Me” and “A Peoples’ History of the United States.”

Full Movie here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cQIMrw8gSVQ>

### ***The Untold History Of The United States***

There is a classified America we were never meant to see. From Academy Award®-winning writer/director Oliver Stone, this ten-part documentary series looks back at human events that at the time went underreported, but that crucially shaped America’s unique and complex history over the 20th century. From the atomic bombing of Japan to the Cold War and the fall of Communism, this in-depth, surprising, and totally riveting series demands to be watched again and again.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tNM9l0FRgCI>

[http://www.watchseries.ac/serie/The\\_Untold\\_History\\_of\\_the\\_United\\_States](http://www.watchseries.ac/serie/The_Untold_History_of_the_United_States)

### ***Race: The Power of an Illusion***

“In producing this series, we felt it was important to go back to first principles and ask, What is this thing called “race?” - a question so basic it is rarely raised. What we discovered is that most of our common assumptions about race - for instance, that the world’s people can be divided biologically along racial lines - are wrong. Yet the consequences of racism are very real.”

[http://www.pbs.org/race/000\\_General/000-00-Home.htm](http://www.pbs.org/race/000_General/000-00-Home.htm)

### ***A Prairie Home Companion***

A celebration of the power of storytelling.

[https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/prairie\\_home\\_companion/](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/prairie_home_companion/)

### ***The Fog of War***

A sad but mesmerizing exploration about how power and war almost always leads one to twist the story.

[http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/fog\\_of\\_war/](http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/fog_of_war/)

### ***Stories We Tell***

Families create their own narratives. Stories are passed on from generation to generation, and in this way the past continues to live, but it can also be obscured or distorted. Family arguments often come down to who "owns" the narrative, or which version is decided upon as the "true" one. Sarah Polley's fascinating documentary, "Stories We Tell," is ostensibly about her mother, Diane Polley, who died in 1990. A powerful and thoughtful film, it is also not what it at first seems, which is part of the point Polley appears to be interested in making. Can the truth ever actually be known about anything?

<http://storieswetellmovie.com/>

## **Books**

### ***The Truth About Stories* by Thomas King**

"Stories are wondrous things. And they are dangerous." In *The Truth About Stories*, Native novelist and scholar Thomas King explores how stories shape who we are and how we understand and interact with other people. ... With wry humor, King deftly weaves events from his own life as a child in California, an academic in Canada, and a Native North American with a wide-ranging discussion of stories told by and about Indians. ... King reminds the reader, Native and non-Native, that storytelling carries with it social and moral responsibilities. "Don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now."

<http://tinyurl.com/jd2gz25>

### ***The World Is Made of Stories* by David R. Loy, a Buddhist writer**

In this dynamic and utterly novel presentation, David Loy explores the fascinating proposition that the stories we tell

— about what is and is not possible, about ourselves, about right and wrong, life and death, about the world and everything in it — become the very building blocks of our experience and of reality itself. Loy uses an intriguing mixture of quotations from familiar and less-familiar sources and brief stand-alone micro-essays, engaging the reader in challenging and illuminating dialogue. ... Reminiscent of Zen koans and works of sophisticated poetry, this book will reward both a casual read and deep reflection.

<http://tinyurl.com/jf9x56l>

### ***Everything Is Illuminated* by Jonathan Safran Foer**

With only a yellowing photograph in hand, a young man sets out to find the woman who might or might not have saved his grandfather from the Nazis. Accompanied by an old man haunted by memories of the war, an amorous dog named Sammy Davis, Junior, and the unforgettable Alex, a young Ukrainian translator who speaks in a sublimely butchered English, the young man is led on a quixotic journey to discover the truth of another's story that ends up helping him see the truth of his own.

### ***Life of Pi* by Yann Martel**

When Pi is sixteen, his family emigrates from India to North America aboard a Japanese cargo ship, along with their zoo animals bound for new homes. The ship sinks. Pi finds himself alone in a lifeboat, his only companions a hyena, an orangutan, a wounded zebra, and Richard Parker, a 450-pound Bengal tiger. Soon the tiger has dispatched all but Pi, whose fear, knowledge, and cunning allow him to coexist with Richard Parker for 227 days while lost at sea. When they finally reach the coast of Mexico, Richard Parker flees to the jungle, never to be seen again. The Japanese authorities who interrogate Pi refuse to believe his story and press him to tell them "the truth." After hours of coercion, Pi tells a second story, a story much less fantastical, much more conventional — but is it more true?

***Kitchen Table Wisdom and  
My Grandfather's Blessings: Stories of  
Strength, Refuge, and Belonging***  
by Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D

In *My Grandfather's Blessings*, Rachel Naomi Remen, a cancer physician and master storyteller, uses her luminous stories to remind us of the power of our kindness and the joy of being alive.

*About Kitchen Table Wisdom:* This remarkable collection of true stories draws on the concept of "kitchen table wisdom" — the human tradition of shared experience that shows us life in all its power and mystery and reminds us that the things we cannot measure may be the things that ultimately sustain and enrich our lives.

<http://tinyurl.com/js5na5h>

**List of books for children and families  
about story:**

<https://amzn.com/w/66JE9U4CP03W>

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