The Stories We Tell Ourselves
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First Unitarian Church of Des Moines
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SERMON
As I watched the election results come in Tuesday night and things were not looking good for my presidential candidate and for the future of our country that I had been envisioning and anticipating, I had to pause the parade of bad news to share in the bedtime rituals of my daughters. For the 13 year old that amounted to a simple hug and a kiss. 13 year olds will only accept so much affection, you know. For the 4 year old, it meant our nightly routine of role-playing silliness, the reading of stories, and finally, a kiss on her cheek as her pillow pet bathed the ceiling of her darkened bedroom in color-changing starlight.

Seeing their faces as I bid them goodnight, I could feel my love for these lovely creatures, tender and strong. And I could feel my fear for their futures, too, my fear for the world that the results of this election will offer them and us, the world I knew we all must find ways to inhabit with courage in the days to come, no matter our politics. A world we love so much that we must do all we can to make it better.

I returned to watching the election results with Susan and, finally, much later than I wanted, I drifted off to a restless sleep.

I woke early the next morning, the way you wake from a bad dream, unsure of whether what just happened actually did. I got dressed and went out into the darkness for a walk. I wove my way through the neighborhood streets as the night sky slowly gave way to the morning light. I reached my turn-around spot, the highest elevation in a local cemetery and turned to see the orange glow of the rising sun in the east. Yes, this morning did look like a regular morning, even if it felt anything but regular. I thought of taking a picture of the scene to post on Facebook as evidence that the sun still rose after all, but I didn’t think my friends would be all that uplifted by a picture of the sun rising over gravestones.

Still, this cemetery, gravestones and all, has been a refuge for me throughout my more than 15 years in Des Moines. Often have I walked its roads, in all seasons, usually alone, except, of course, for the great cloud of witnesses who have their final resting places there.
It’s a park of our shared humanity, and I find it grounding. It offers me a needed reminder of our finite lives. A reminder that we all will, one way or another, return to the same shared earth, no matter our politics or our religion or our assurance that we are right or just or righteous.

I walked these same roads a lot following the events of 9-11, another time when I felt that everything had gone awry. I’ve walked them when I’ve been thinking through a challenge and I need to be reminded there is a world outside of my head, outside of my fears, outside of my always-limited understandings and perceptions. I’ve walked them when I don’t know what else to do. Wednesday morning was one of those times.

As I walked I took stock of my body, my emotions. I felt differently moving through the world than I had the day before. My stomach was on edge the same way it was when I learned my mother had died. My breathing was shallow, the same way it was after 9-11. This is grief, I thought. But, I also acknowledged, this grief was different. On 9-11 the attacks came from outside the U.S. They were happening to us. We were united in our despair. But these election results had come from within our nation. We were, it seemed to me at least, attacking ourselves. And the attacks, I feared, would not end with the election.

A few blocks from home, my cell phone buzzed. I looked down. It was a text from my brother in Pittsburgh. We don’t make the time to talk much, but when we do, it’s usually about politics. (We both lean to the left.)

One word was all he had sent. Four letters. All caps.

Beginning with F. Ending with K.

I texted a one-word reply: “Yep.”

What else can be said when a man who based his run for president on fear-mongering and xenophobia, is elected to lead our nation? What else can be said when an electoral majority of the country chose as our President the figurehead of a “movement” that denigrates immigrants and Muslims, objectifies women, denies the science of climate change, attracts and encourages white supremacists, demeans veterans and the disabled, chooses anti-gay advocates as advisors, peddles in conspiracy theories that used to be considered fringe ideas, and calls this “Making America Great Again?”

As I wound my way through the cemetery, my mind wandered to a series of memories from an eighth-grade American History class. Mrs.
Bates was the teacher. I liked her. She was kind of kooky. Wore colorful outfits. Loved civics. Got really emotional one class when we she told us about the assassination of President Kennedy. Any time adults cry, especially teachers, it is memorable for middle-schoolers. Looking back, knowing what I know now, I think it’s likely she was a UU. Maybe a Quaker. But whatever she was religiously, she definitely leaned to the left politically.

In our unit about the upcoming 1980 presidential election, Mrs. Bates wanted us to divide ourselves into Carter supporters and Reagan supporters so that we could stage a debate in advance of a mock election. My Ohio middle school was in a blue-collar part of our town. Lots of union families. Democrats. So most of my classmates wanted to be on the Carter team. I was not one of them. I won’t blame my dad outright, but I think he must have said enough dismissive things about President Carter that I assumed Reagan would be a better president. So I joined the small group of classmates supporting Reagan—all boys, all jocks, except for me. Already I thought of myself as a writer, so I volunteered to craft the speech for our candidate. My team gladly let me do the work and deliver my message. The day of the debate, I strode with confidence to the front of the class and gave an impassioned address declaring platitudes of greatness that would await our country were we to trade the nice, albeit inept, president we currently had for the swashbuckling change agent that was Ronald Reagan. [You may think this next part is funny. I think it’s kind of creepy.] I told my classmates an allegory of the United States as a congregation (!!). For four years, I said, the congregation had sputtered along with a well-meaning pastor who gave lackluster sermons, who spent too much time on the wrong things, and who lacked the leadership skills to actually grow the church. I predicted that a change of leadership could invigorate the congregation and lead to a richer life for all. It was a bunch of BS. But I believed it. And I told it well.

My team drooled with delight as I spoke, high fiving each time I turned a phrase that must have surprised and amused them with my confidence about things I couldn’t possibly be so confident about. The Carter supporters seemed annoyed, but I didn’t care. I had the admiration of a group of guys who, beyond occasional teasing, were previously uninterested in me. But something about that day did trouble me. Even then. And even still. It’s the image of Mrs. Bates watching me deliver my speech, pale with disgust over what I was saying, and how well it was going over.
To her credit she didn’t say anything negative to me when I was done. But she didn’t praise me either. She had the look of a woman who knew, through experience, that things that matter can always be overwhelmed with a forceful message delivered with confidence, even without the evidence or the moral clarity to back it up.

I think Mrs. Bates would be pleased with the man I became and where I have placed my allegiances in my life. How I have done what I can to promote fairness and equality, to, as we say, “Stand on the Side of Love.” She would be pleased, I think, with how I changed. Change is possible you know. For all of us. Change is possible. Even when it seems unlikely. Especially then. And that’s where I want us to focus this morning. On the possibilities of change, even in the midst of problems that seem impossible to overcome.

Knowing that this month we are invited to consider what it means to be a community of story, I’ve been thinking about a concept called the “problem-saturated story”, a concept that comes from narrative therapy, an approach to life’s challenges that invites us to not identify ourselves or others too closely with the stories of our lives that seem so drenched in problems that we can’t see anything but problems.

A problem-saturated story is one that we help create when we focus too much on blaming people for the problems we face and not enough on doing what we can to fix the problems. Sometimes we blame ourselves. Sometimes we blame others. But no matter where the blame is aimed, we (or those we love) are always victims. We can be so trapped in this blaming that we come to believe that we have only two options: --Do nothing and suffer or --Try to get the others (typically seen as villains in the story) to change.

Neither option is likely to help because both further entrench us in the problem-saturated story, creating a trance-like effect. We see only what reinforces the story and we miss lots of things that could help us inhabit a new story, and thereby start moving toward new possibilities.\(^1\)

\(^1\) Thanks to Lawrence Peers for sharing his papers, “The Problem Trap” and “Expeditions into What’s Possible”, from which my descriptions of “Problem-Saturated” stories have been drawn.
Has this election season been one big problem-saturated story or what? Given the social media squabbles even among friends, the reckless rhetoric from the rallies, and the smug assumptions about how and why people did or did not vote in expected ways, it’s been nearly impossible to see anything but the dominant narratives of division, disrespect, and blame aimed at those who see the world differently than how those in our like-minded bubbles do. And now that the election is over, at least half of the country seems further entrenched in the blame game. And given the reactivity I’ve seen from some of my friends on the right—those who can’t grasp why those of us who did not vote for Trump won’t just get over it and unite around him because, well we are Americans aren’t we?—I suggest many of them, even after the victory of their chosen candidate, are still entrenched, too. The stories so many of us are telling ourselves are still too much about what’s wrong with “those” people. And because we tend to be divided along ideological lines, rarely venturing beyond our communities of like-minded opinion, it’s easy to blame others. In fact, it is all but inevitable. And so we become more trapped, unable to see any options other than giving up or, metaphorically speaking, giving the finger, thinking that will change things. Of course it won’t, except to make things worse.

Problem-saturated stories appear to us to be completely factual rather than narratives created by a cherry-picking of facts. And so we easily succumb to their lure and become storytellers ourselves, making it even more difficult to step outside of the stories, to see all the facts, not just the ones that reinforce our helplessness and fears.

If, as a collective body, our nation would consult with a narrative therapist, I’m thinking we would be encouraged to do all we can to take a “balcony perspective” on what is happening right now. We would be invited to try, challenging though it is, to shift from being immersed in the problem-saturated stories that are trapping us in feelings of hopelessness or self-righteousness to being observers of the stories that are being told and that we ourselves are telling. We would be reminded that any time we are able to make a shift toward seeing our circumstances more objectively, even on a short-term basis, we will become less oblivious to reality, more capable of changing our own behavior, more ready to work on improving the problems that plague us, less interested in blaming others, and therefore more likely to limit our own contributions to the problem-saturated stories.
Instead of being too quick to assign blame for what ails us, we would do better to focus on the outcomes of what has been happening, giving particular emphasis to outcomes that do not line up with the dominant narratives of our problem-saturated stories.

By paying attention to times when there were successful or useful challenges to the dominant narratives, we can be encouraged by stories that better reflect the possibilities of our own agency and abilities to grow relationships and to effect change. We can see ourselves and our communities more completely, observing characteristics and possibilities that we may have previously looked past. We can discover more options for how we can behave differently going forward and contribute to more helpful outcomes.

We can, in narrative therapy terms, re-author the story we are living by incorporating unique outcomes or exceptions that we may otherwise not see.

Earlier in the service, Terry told us how she re-authored her own narrative, how she refused to give in to the problem-saturated story of being let go from a job she loved, how by reminding herself of her own history and agency, she ended up with a different outcome for herself and her family. And having traveled that journey successfully, she was able to apply what she learned in other problem-saturated stories going forward.

Here’s another story of re-authoring. On Saturday some friends of mine, a same-sex couple with children, had their Hillary Clinton sign defaced, with the word “Fag” spray painted in black across it. This heartbreaking and fear-inducing vandalism definitely fits the problem-saturated story that Trump supporters are bigots. No one would argue it doesn’t. But rather than merely retreat to blame, sorrow, and fear, my friends left the defaced sign in their yard and added two more colorful signs. One that read “PROUD” and the other that read “Love Trumps Hate.”

They re-authored the story. Acknowledging support they had received from their community, they shared on Facebook:

“Thank you to all who have called and sent messages; it means more than you could possibly know. Love will ALWAYS trump hate. Our children have seen the hateful word sprayed on our sign, but they have also seen us take a stand against ignorance and hatred. We will not sit silently. We will not allow our children
see us do nothing. We will love. [We] hope everyone chooses to do the same."

Painful though the vandalism was, they did not internalize the effects of the problem-saturated story. Rather, they tapped into their own resilience and answered with love. My friends acted courageously in the face of hatred. They refused to shrink in fear. And they inspired those around them to tell a different story, too. With their response, they taught all of us that there are more options than the problem-saturated story may lead us to believe.

Wednesday Rev. Erin organized a gathering in this room of diverse leaders of area organizations that serve communities who are feeling threatened by the results of this election, people who have been targeted in the past and who fear they may be targeted more in the days to come. The stage was filled with speakers. The room was filled with citizens. We gathered to listen. We gathered for strength and solidarity. We gathered to re-author the story we are living. Rather than tell stories of oppression and blame, each speaker rose to tell stories of perseverance and possibility, stories that inspire confidence through their reminders that all of us who believe in fairness and equality can make a difference by organizing around our values, by standing up to wrong-headed, fear-based scapegoating and bigotry-based attacks on our shared humanity, by owning and declaring our collective inherent worth and dignity. It was a powerful evening.

One more story. Perhaps you’ve heard by now that following the “Brexit” vote earlier this year, many people in the UK were concerned for their refugee and immigrant neighbors who were facing attacks from Brits emboldened to commit xenophobic abuse. During the height of these attacks, many people wanted to show solidarity, support, and offer safety to one another. They decided to start wearing a simple safety pin on their coats to indicate that they were a friendly face, and that others fearing persecution would be “safe” with them. Already in the US in the wake of this election and the news that persecution has begun, people are starting to wear safety pins to show those threatened by the hate and fear mongering of our future President and many of his supporters that they will do all they can to stand up against xenophobia, racism, sexism and ableism. The safety pin is merely a symbol. It is not an action. Action is still up to us. However, the safety pin could be a powerful symbol depending on how things unfold. And it can be a reminder that we can re-author this story we are living with love.
Even with the despair I felt earlier this week, I can already feel myself growing stronger because of these stories and others like them. They remind me to do what I can to gain a “balcony perspective”, to refuse the easy answers of the problem-saturated story, and to seek narratives more in line with the powerful stories of liberation and justice-making from our collective past. We have more options than just giving up or giving the finger. We can engage. We can organize. We can build relationships. We can create new stories. Just as those before us did who worked for abolition, and women’s suffrage and unions and civil rights and a woman’s right to choose and marriage equality, even when times were bleak and their success seemed unlikely. We can change the narrative. We can change ourselves. And we can do it together. We can do it by facing our problems head on. We can do it by choosing to re-author the stories we are living and the stories that we tell.

I continue to grieve for my country. But I will not be stuck there. I will do as my friend Connie Ryan, the executive director of The Interfaith Alliance of Iowa, says she will do.

"I will choose to look at politics through the eyes of the marginalized and disenfranchised. I will choose to look at its impact on people whose lives are defined by the color of their skin, sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, proximity to poverty, gender, physical and intellectual ability, and health status. I will choose to be compassionate and understanding of the fear and the anger, for I feel it, too. I will vow to fight with peaceful resistance any effort...to carry out policies or laws that will harm people...that do not respect the dignity and worth of all... I will do so as a person of faith and as someone who loves my country.” [adapted]

And I will remind myself, no matter how problem-saturated our collective story becomes, to heed the wisdom of the sociologist and life-coach Martha Beck who tells us:

"Remember that troubled times are our allies in awakening. They compel us to access the deep, untroubled beings that we really are. The hero engages with destiny only on the road of trials. Each of us is the central character of our own story,
and right now, it’s true, the road ahead looks long. Let’s use it as a chance to grow wiser and stronger, to become heroes we’re all meant to become."

I will choose to grow wiser and stronger. I will choose to become more compassionate, more responsive, more ready to become the hero I’m meant to become. That’s the story I will live. That’s the story I will tell. How about you?