

*"Finding Our Way Home:
Stories of Voyage and Return"*
Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Church in Boston
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"You better not never tell nobody but God."

—Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*

"For the first 15 years of our lives, Danny and I lived within 5 blocks of each other and neither of us knew of the other's existence."

—Chaim Potok, *The Chosen*

"Marley was dead: to begin with."

—Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

In each of these opening lines, the message is clear: something has changed. With one sentence we are left wondering: What shouldn't be told? How do Danny and Reuven now know each other? Why does it matter that Marley is dead? *What happened?!?*

For writer Will Storr, all stories basically amount to "something changed." As Storr explains in his book, *The Science of Storytelling*, our perceptual systems basically simmer on a calm setting until change is detected. As Storr describes:

"You're walking down the street, thinking about nothing in particular, and then there's unexpected change – there's a bang; someone calls your name. You stop. Your internal monologue ceases. Your powers of attention turn on. You turn that amazing change-detecting machine in its direction to answer the question, 'What's happening?'" (13)

What is happening?! We are confronted with change and uncertainty all around us. We want a story that helps us make sense of things.

Jonathan Gottschall begins his book, *The Paradox of Story*, with a story. Faced with writer's block, Gottschall heads to the corner bar for a change of scenery to inspire his writing. Eventually he admits to himself that he's really there to, well, drink. Sipping his cheap bourbon at the far end of the bar, he observes the behavior of the people around him. Lips moving and closing. Hands gesturing. Eyes on the television screens where football teams race across the field and another where actors fill the screen with *their* moving lips and gesticulating hands. Everywhere people are telling stories, listening to stories, watching a story of competition or following actors as they tell a story. All of these people are not sharing bullet points or offering detailed algorithms. They are storytelling.

Story is not simple recitation of facts. You know what I'm talking about if you ever tried to read a religious scripture with 18 lines of "begats"—as in "Seth lived an hundred and five years, and begat Enos" (Genesis 5:6)—or if you ever sat through a history lecture with a list of dates and places strung together with "and then....and then..." Yes, all those begats, dates, and places may be true, but why do they matter? Story does not just deliver information; story conveys purpose. Story explores *why*.

Why did the English Puritans cross an ocean to found this church, this city?

Why did this church become critical of its religious roots and become Unitarian?

Why is Boston both known as a leader in the history of abolition *and* still struggling with significant racial segregation?

Why are *you* here today—online or in-person? What is *your* story?

As we will explore throughout the year, there are many types of story. Here at the beginning of the year, we start with stories of journey and return. For example, in *Little Red Riding Hood* a girl encounters a wolf as she journeys to her grandmother's. After the wolf cunningly distracts the girl by sending her deeper into the forest in search of flowers, he arrives first at the grandmother's house. While disaster ensues, in the end she and her grandmother both return to wellbeing. However, the girl is no longer as trusting of strangers or that the world is at it appears to be.

As we heard earlier in our reading by Jonathan Gottschall, stories seek to *sway* their listeners. [*Little Red Riding Hood*](#) sways the reader to be wary of strangers, to be cautious that the world is a dangerous place. In contrast, [*The Snail and the Whale*](#), which Ebonié shared earlier, *sways* us to set off to explore a bigger world and to have faith others will help if danger arises.

Story, like the force in *Star Wars*, is neutral. Story's power of *sway* can pull us in any manner of directions. Gottschall writes, "*Storytellers cast spells that grant them entry into our minds, where they change what we feel, which changes how we think, which can change how we spend, vote, and care.*" In other words, storytellers change the world.

When I chose Story as the theme for this year, I feared that it might ring too hollow and shallow amidst the political, economic, and social tumult. I feared that "story" would be dismissed as "mere words" in a moment demanding action.

Instead, this service and this topic arrive amidst a massive national debate over free speech. Two weeks ago, the name Charlie Kirk maybe would have rung a bell for me. And

while I knew the name Jimmy Kimmel, I had never watched his late-night show. Today, I suspect we all know both names. In response to the removal of Kimmel from the air, [Kristen Cox Roby](#), executive editor of our Unitarian Universalist magazine, published an editorial defending the importance of the free speech and the first amendment. Grounding her words in our religious tradition, Roby writes:

“As Unitarian Universalists, we believe in the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We covenant to learn, to question, to dissent. To see a comedian silenced under government threat should enrage us, not because we all agree with Jimmy Kimmel, but because democracy depends on protecting voices that those in power seek to silence.”

On Thursday morning, I learned that there would be a vigil that night for Charlie Kirk on the Boston Common as well as a counterprotest. After an evening meeting, I walked to the Common to witness and, if needed, to support other clergy in de-escalation. (Work for which I have been trained.) Arriving shortly after 8pm, the Common was dark. Two parallel lines of metal fencing marked off a section for the vigil. Most of the vigil attendees stood together some distance off listening to speakers. A significant number of police stood along the outer fence line where counter-protesters shouted toward the vigil attendees. And some vigil attendees gathered on the inner fence-line to shout right back.

As I stood alone watching the scene, a younger man (30's maybe?) asked me who the two groups were. Quickly he identified himself as a Ukrainian refugee who had just arrived on the train from New York City. Conversant, if not fluent, in English we talked for several minutes about the groups in front of us, as well as the war in his home country. As we tried to talk with nuance about violence and politics in the U.S. and in Ukraine, it was clearly important for him to make a distinction between killing to protect an individual in immediate danger—like “a woman and child”—and killing as a soldier for what he called “the political.” For him, choosing if or when to kill was no theoretical matter. For me, listening to his story against the backdrop of the vigil shifted something in me.

This week something changed. Certainly, this whole year there has been tremendous, rapid change. What's happening?! What comes next? Will there be more political violence, more shooting? There will certainly be more shouting, more op-eds, more podcasts, more stories told from pulpits and bar stools, neighborhood cafes and church coffee hours. And through all of these stories, there will be a force seeking to *sway* our feelings, our thinking, our actions. I'm doing it right now!

Being aware of this *sway* doesn't change the need for story or the need to make sense of what is happening. Earlier this week, the *New York Times* announced a new series by

editorial director David Leonhardt exploring a “new story” for our nation. *“America was founded on a story,”* writes Leonhardt, *“[America] began as a story that Enlightenment thinkers started telling in the 1600s and the founders then told to themselves and to the world. They risked their lives for it.”*

And yet, the founders were flawed. For example, Leonhardt lifts up Thomas Jefferson’s denunciation of “every form of tyranny over the mind of man,” but also states that Jefferson’s enslavement of people has rightly left a lasting stain on Jefferson’s legacy. Our nation is riddled with such contradictions and failures to fully embrace the promises of freedom so long extolled. Still, that founding story *“with all its beauty and, yes, its terrible contradictions — has remained part of our national fabric.”*

The founding story may remain, but new stories have also emerged. As Leonhardt explains, *“Every important social and political movement has told a story. The abolitionists did. So did the Progressives and the Whigs, the suffragists and the civil rights marchers, the advocates for disability rights and for marriage equality.”*

Stories sway people. In this moment, what stories might we help to tell to sway our neighbors, family members, friends, or strangers towards a more peaceable path? What stories might move us towards societies without assassinations of political figures on the right or the left, without school shootings that have preschool parents asking about school security protocols, and without wars that drive men to flee conscription, that hold people hostage for years, or that displace tens of thousands of families without food, shelter, or healthcare? What stories might we tell to instead promote peace and justice, love and equity?

The stories we tell and are free to hear matter, because stories sway our feelings, our thoughts, and our actions.

The first right protected in the First Amendment is freedom of religion—freedom not only to choose your own religious expression, but also freedom from the state telling you what you must—or must *not* believe. Make no mistake, the seeds of this idea began in no small part *here* at the First Church in Boston. And nearly 400 years later, the principle of a free pulpit and free pew remains steadfast. As I am free to speak my words from this pulpit, you are free to agree or to dissent. This matters. This matters because this freedom reflects the truth that each of us has our own inherent worthiness and dignity to think and choose—a God-given right if that language resonates with you.

Protecting and *expanding* these freedoms has been our story as a church and a nation. We are not the same church with the same feelings, beliefs, or actions as the Puritans who founded this first church in 1630. Something changed. A lot has changed. Why?

As we journey together into a world still both beautiful and broken, frightening and full of possibility, may the stories we tell *sway* others to preserve the freedoms for which our ancestors sacrificed greatly and that still enable human dignity today. May we find in our founding story as a church a deep and abiding tether to the values of freedom and mutual love. May we not lose faith that there is yet another chapter to the story.

May it be so. Amen. Blessed Be.