

A Life Story

Sunday morning address¹ to the New York Society for Ethical Culture, March 25, 2007
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WE WERE SORRY TOGETHER

When I was a kid, sometimes I did things I wasn't supposed to do, and I never told anybody. I wanted to tell. I wanted to say I was sorry. But I was ashamed and afraid. And so, I kept it a secret.

One day I was at Granddad's house, and I went into the living room and I saw the chair where Granddad read his books and smoked his pipe. A book was lying open on the seat of his chair and his pipe was there on the arm of the chair. No one was in the room, and I thought it would be fun to pretend to be Granddad. I sat in his chair with his book in my lap, and I held his pipe in my hand as if I were smoking it. I looked at my reflection in the glass doors of his bookcase, and there I was—Granddad smoking his pipe and reading his book.

When I was done pretending, I put the pipe back on the arm of the chair, but I guess I wasn't careful enough and it rolled off and fell on the hard wooden floor. I picked it up, and I saw that a little piece had broken off the mouthpiece of the pipe right at the end where Granddad put it into his mouth.

I felt terrible about that. But I put the pipe back on the arm of the chair as if nothing had happened, and I never said a word about it to Granddad. Every time I saw him after that, I was sure he was going to ask me, "Say, lad, do you have any idea what happened to my pipe?" But he never did. It was a secret. A secret that did not feel good inside me.

There was another time. This time I was in our kitchen all alone, and I noticed that there was a little hole at the back of the sink, between the sink and the wall. The opening was barely big enough for a mouse to go through, but I wondered how deep it was and where it went. I picked up my mother's butcher knife, the knife she used to cut meat. I held it by the end of the handle, and I pushed the blade into the hole to see how far it went. It went way in. Then all of a sudden, the knife slipped out of my hand and fell down inside. Clunk! It disappeared inside the wall.

I never told my mother what had happened to the knife. Sometimes I saw her hunting through the drawers in the kitchen and I thought she must be looking for it. I was sure she was going to ask me, "Have you seen the butcher knife?" But she never did. So, that was a secret, too. A secret that did not feel good inside me.

There was another time. I was alone in the bathroom. You notice, all these things happened to me when I was alone. But I did something my parents had told me never to do. I opened the medicine cabinet, and I took out a bottle of tincture of merthiolate. The merthiolate was a bright red liquid in a little bottle about the size of an aspirin bottle. It was medicine for sores, and when I fell or hurt myself, my mother would put tincture of merthiolate on the cuts and scrapes.

I carried the bottle into my bedroom, and I opened it on top of my bureau. Connected to the lid was a glass rod. When you held the rod up to the light and looked at it carefully, the merthiolate wasn't just red. You could see streaks of other colors, too--purple and

¹ The reader is reminded that this is the written text of an oral address and remains in that style. While the speaker's presentation marks have been redacted, there has been no attempt to edit it into an essay.

orange and green. It was wonderful to look at.

When I was done looking at the tincture of merthiolate, I went to put the lid back on, and I knocked the bottle over. I quickly picked it up and put the lid on. But there was a big red blotch in the cover on the top of the bureau. And it was getting bigger and bigger right in front of my eyes.

I put the little bottle back into the medicine cabinet and I closed the door. I felt terrible. This was not going to be secret. Mom was going to see it, and she would want to know who had done it. Did my little brother do it? Did my sister do it? Or did I do it?

Later that day, I was downstairs playing and Mom came to me. "I want you to come upstairs with me," she said. "There's something we have to look at." I followed her up the stairs and down the hall. I knew where we were going.

We walked over to the bureau and stood there. The blotch had gotten even bigger. "What happened here?" she asked. I tried to answer. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. It was just one of those horrible things that happen to you when you're a kid.

"I want you to tell me what happened," she said. "I'm not going to do anything to you. I'm not going to hurt you. But you have to tell the truth. It's important to tell the truth."

So, I told her. I told her how I had opened the medicine cabinet door and taken out the bottle of tincture of merthiolate. How I had carried the bottle into my bedroom. How I had taken the lid off the bottle on my bureau so that I could look at the tincture of merthiolate on the glass rod. And how I had knocked the bottle over when I was trying to put the lid back on. I told her everything. It was very hard.

"This bureau cover," my mother said, "your grandmother made it. She crocheted it and it was very beautiful. But I'm not going to be able to get the tincture of merthiolate out. I'm afraid it's ruined, and I feel terrible about that."

Then my mother did something that surprised me. She put her arm around me. "I know you didn't mean to do it," she said. "You didn't want to spill tincture of merthiolate on your bureau cover. It was an accident, and you must feel terrible, too. I guess we'll have to feel sorry together." she said. And she gave me a hug.

A LIFE STORY

When I was a parish priest in the Episcopal Church many, many years ago, I worked at two very different churches. One was a cathedral-like Gothic church with a marble altar, elaborate wood carvings, and beautiful stained glass windows. The other was a Colonial structure with plain white walls and a simple wooden altar. But these churches had one thing in common. In both cases, the pulpit was elevated several steps above the floor where the people sat. And I preached over their heads.

The pulpit, after all, was a place for delivering serious messages – messages about divine righteousness and human frailty, about sin and salvation, suffering and triumph. I used little stories in my sermons from time to time, but they played a minor, supporting role. To be honest, they were hardly stories at all. They were more like illustrations to help me make my point and get across the important things I was trying to say.

But it wasn't just the setting that discouraged storytelling. I was part of the problem myself. I was still young, still in the pre-storytelling stage of my life. I had not yet lived long enough to build up a repertoire of stories. My perspective on life was still too poorly developed to appreciate the full significance of my own experiences and struggles and the human fireworks that were exploding all around me.

I was only in my twenties, only a few years out of childhood and adolescence. I think maybe, because I was still so close to them, the things that happened to me when I was a kid had not yet emerged and become stories. These memories were still glued together in a happy, undifferentiated blur. I'm not sure I really understood what a story is, where it comes from, or what makes it a story. I associated stories with children sitting in a circle on little wooden chairs. I didn't realize that the most devoted and skillful practitioners are white haired and weather beaten.

But new stories were landing on my doorstep even then, and unsolicited they were revealing themselves to me. I preached a sermon in those days that was based on a warning Jesus gave against finding fault with others. *"Don't judge others," Jesus said, "and then you won't be judged. For you will be judged in the same way you judge others, and the same measure you use on others will be used on you."*

My sermon ran roughly 20 minutes, but in those 20 minutes I don't think I added much of anything to a New Testament passage you can read in less than one minute. In fact, I don't remember anything I said, and I'm sure nobody else does either. But I do remember something that happened after the church service. I remember it because it was a happening, a story, a story for my repertoire of stories. At the end of the service, I stood at the door and greeted people. Many of them complimented my talk. But the most enthusiastic person in the whole line was a rather severe-looking woman who had come to church alone. "That was a great sermon," she said. "It was wonderful. If only my sister could have been here to hear it!"

While I was serving as a parish priest, my beliefs changed. Although I enjoyed being a preacher and a pastor and my parishioners seemed happy enough with my work, I came to the painful conclusion that, at its very heart, the message I was preaching and teaching simply wasn't true. It didn't stand up to historical scrutiny, and at many points, it wasn't consistent with what I was learning about the nature of universe.

On some level, I had known this for a long time. I had stumbled over many of these problems in college and in seminary. But like many of my peers in the ministry, I focused on those parts of my religion that made sense to me and avoided those parts that were troubling. I acted as if the Bible and the things that happen in the Bible belonged to a category of reality all their own and couldn't be reduced to either history or fiction.

But then I took part in a special training program that changed everything for me. It was ten consecutive days of something called sensitivity training. There were a dozen of us, and for ten days we spent most of our waking hours in one room getting to know one another and trying to mold ourselves into a little community that was governed by one basic rule – speaking as truthfully as we could at all times and demanding that level of honesty from everyone in the group. It was very intense.

For me sensitivity training got off to a bad start. From day one, the people in my group told me there was a huge inconsistency between the words I was saying and the messages I was sending with my eyes and my body language. They couldn't make up their minds which part of me to believe or whether they could believe anything.

Every session – morning, afternoon, and evening – ended with an evaluation – when one by one the group evaluated everybody in the circle. My evaluations all sounded the same. *I wasn't open and truthful. I didn't respond to what others were trying to tell me. I wasn't contributing to the group.*

It went on for two days. I was trying very hard to please them and get along with them. But the harder I tried, the worse it got. For a while I pretended it wasn't bothering

me. But finally I couldn't stand it any more, and I blew up. "Look," I said "I'm fed up with trying to please you. I've had it with evaluating and being evaluated. If you can't accept me for who I am and what I am, then the hell with all of you."

For a moment, the room was silent. You could have heard a pin drop. "Now you've done it," I thought. "That's the last straw. They're going ask you to pack your bags – and get out."

But then a fellow who was sitting opposite me in the circle stood up grinning from ear to ear. He came over to me and extended his hand. I took it. He pulled me to my feet and he threw his arms around me. "Welcome to the team," he said. And then one by one, they all came to me and hugged me. "Hello, Fritz. It's nice to meet you." "Ah, there's a real human being in there." "I think I'm going to enjoy getting to know you."

After that, I stopped trying to please them, stopped trying to impress them. I gave myself to the group...and it was wonderful. I was rewarded with a quality of caring and community I had rarely experienced in the church or anywhere else for that matter. It was like going from living in black and white to living in color. I was learning what it means to tell the truth. It's not just a matter of sticking to the facts. It also has to do with getting in touch with your feelings and tapping into another kind of knowledge – the things you know in your gut.

I think it was this new concern for being honest and real that finally swamped my Christian faith. I was no longer able to dodge all the doubts and misgivings I'd been living with. Increasingly, I had the feeling I was engaging in a sham. One Sunday after church I went back to the house. I stood in the hallway at the foot of the stairs, and I made myself say it – and say it out loud: "You don't believe this stuff any more."

I went out on my bicycle after that. Alone. I often ride alone, but this was the loneliest bicycle ride I ever took. It felt as if a caring presence had gone out of the world. It was my road to Damascus. A conversion experience – but a very different kind of conversion from the one born-again Christians talk about.

A conversion, I found out, is more than a shift in beliefs and ideas. It's a change in the way you experience your life, a powerful discovery of your own reality. Because I had just experienced a major turning point in my life, I suddenly became aware of my life as a great drama, an unfolding narrative. My life was transformed by the fact that I now had a story to tell – not a batch of ready-made stories about Abraham and Moses, Jesus, and Paul, but my own story, a story I myself was creating.

As many of you know, after leaving the Episcopal ministry, I worked for almost 30 years as a writer and producer at Public Television stations in Harrisburg and Detroit. In these television productions, I helped a lot of people tell their stories – handicapped people, people on welfare, a man who was dying of cancer, doctors and nurses who provided charitable medical care for the poor, peacemakers who were trying to deal with the causes and effects of family violence.

Toward the end of those 30 years I found an unlikely partner who lived 500 miles away in the Detroit area. Mike Donofrio was his name. As a producer, Mike held himself to very demanding professional standards, but he was also a soft-spoken, gentle human being. Mike balanced my weaknesses – especially in the editing room, and our joint productions on violence prevention and parenting education garnered a half dozen Michigan Emmys. It was the most successful period in my entire television career.

I was the proposal writer for our two-man team, and I began working on a proposal

for a Public Television series I was really eager to do. It was a proposal for a storytelling series, a series in which ordinary people would tell the story of a pivotal event or relationship in their lives which had a profound effect on their beliefs, their values, and their outlook. Each would tell the story of an event or encounter that helped make them who they are today, a turning point in their lives that was as important to them as my conversion experience was for me. People would tell these stories in their own words and we'd support their stories with photographs, film clips, video segments, drawings, and reenactments.

On the surface, I was hoping the series would come across simply as a batch of human interest stories, good voyeuristic entertainment that would sneak up on people. But our stealth objective was to use the stories as a vehicle for looking at people's moral values and how they took shape in their lives. The concept was based on the conviction that our moral development is not primarily the result of moral instruction or exposure to great moral principles. We were assuming instead that our moral awareness grows out of encounters with other human beings, often, in fact, out of largely non-verbal real-life contacts. We were going to use stories to explore the deeply human process of moral and religious development. We were going to venture into the most intimate, most moving, most important things that happen in our entire lives.

But we were operating on another hunch, too, the belief that when we examine the character of our lives in this close-up way, we'll discover that morality is far more subtle and all-encompassing than we've generally assumed and that widely accepted moral principles and traditional virtues only scratch the surface. People's stories would reveal a morality that resides in deep human qualities that are part and parcel of our personalities – in qualities like compassion and emotional sensitivity, a capacity for love and intimacy, a sense of self, a passion for life – in qualities like a strong awareness of the interdependence of all living things, an appreciation of beauty and mystery, and a sense of awe.

We often act as if people in the modern world are in a terrible state of moral decline, as if we're all going to hell in a hand basket. But in fact, in many respects people are actually becoming more tolerant, more understanding, more moral. The series would celebrate the goodness and depth of ordinary people. It would show that human goodness is alive and well. It would rescue morality from the moralizers. I wrote a first draft of the proposal and we sent it out to some television pros to review it. Mike and I also started a search for a celebrity host, someone whose name and reputation could help us sell the series to a possible underwriter. Our first contact, by the way, was Hugh Downs, who had been co-host of 20/20. Unfortunately, it turned out he still had a contract with ABC and was not available.

And then I got a stunning phone call from the production manager at Detroit Public Television. Mike Donofrio was in the hospital with a mystery brain infection. And only a few days after that I heard that it was due to a bacterium which seemed to be resistant to all available drugs. He was not expected to live. I sat down immediately and wrote one of the most emotional and loving letters I have ever written to anyone. Mike's wife read it to him in his hospital room. And a week later, it was read by the priest at his funeral.

"You are the best, most moral human being I have ever worked with," I wrote to him. "You are both honest and kind. Whenever you told me that something I had scripted wouldn't work, I could react without feeling even the least wounded or defensive – because there was never any malice in your comments. I was free to try out any idea that came into my head and free to ditch it in the blink of an eye. I've always felt safe

working with you. I became a better producer and a better human being in your company.”

Afterwards I realized that my relationship with Mike Donofrio was just the kind of story I wanted to tell in our proposed television series. It was a story about one person having a profound formative effect on another...even in the middle of life. Some stories are wonderfully joyful. Some are sad. And some are simultaneously joyful...and sad.

The stories I hunger for are not illustrations of some great lesson or philosophical insight. They stand by themselves. They carry their own messages and their own insights and deliver them with convincing power. Stories speak to both halves of our brain. They address our emotions as well as our minds. They are a way of sharing life's deepest truths and growing in our grasp of them even after we've heard the story many times. Stories bind us together as human beings. They proclaim our love for life, and for one another, in our happiest times and in our darkest hours. Telling stories and listening to them are as vital to our existence as taking another human being into our arms and making love.

We have been educated to think that logical analysis is a surer and more reliable way of getting at the truth than storytelling. Strip away the extraneous details, we demand. Get rid of emotional baggage. And get down to the facts. That's fine, but I also I think sometimes there's a powerful connection between stating the facts in the form of a story and telling the truth. Truth is not only measured by logic and consistency. It is also measured by how well our thoughts and memories come together to form a credible story. Or as one quote I've come across recently puts it: *The universe is not made of atoms...it's made of stories.*

There's a conflict that goes way back to beginning of Ethical Culture and continues to this day. On one side of the conflict are people who have joined ethical culture because they're thinkers and because they're people who want to stand up for what is just and true. They don't want anything to do with language, music, and rituals that smack of religion. On the other side are people who may not be at home in traditional religions, but who are looking for a fellowship that satisfies many of the same inspirational needs that traditional religions serve.

Storytelling is for both groups. Stories challenge orthodoxies and expose hypocrisies in ways that mere argumentation can never do. Stories can be deceptively iconoclastic even while expressing deep respect for the religious dimension of human nature. Stories help us find our common ground. They show us how shallow our divisions are – and how we are all people of the mind, all people of the heart.

Throughout history religions have revolved around stories. Stories of the gods, their affairs, their enterprises, their wars. And these stories are explanations of how everything came to be and why things are as they are. In the religion I grew up with the entire history of the world was presented in stories. Stories about how God created the world and stories about how God has been working throughout human history to bring about a new and more perfect world. They are epic stories, stories with a universal significance.

In Ethical Culture we have abandoned these larger-than-life stories about the gods, and we have turned instead to our own stories. Stories about you and me and the life we are making together. It's a humbler, more intimate form of storytelling, but these stories turn out to be a way of discovering the ultimate within the intimate, the universal in the particular, and the deepest truths in the simplest of human narratives.

There's a story I came across recently that shows just how much weight a story can carry and how it can convey truths which are almost inexpressible in any other form. I

found the story in a book entitled *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart*. It's a true story from the pen of a psychiatrist named Rachael Naomi Remen. Dr. Remen had a very challenging patient, a young man who had been treated for bone cancer. In order to save his life the doctors had amputated one of his legs at the hip. He was only 24, and he was very angry about losing his leg when he was so young and bitter about having to go through the rest of his life like that. Dr. Remen worked with him and she used imagery, painting, and deep psychiatry to help him deal with his grief and his rage.

It took a couple of years, but finally he not only began to come around, he started visiting with others who were coping with similar losses. He visited a young woman, a woman who was about the same age he was. It was a hot day and he showed up in running shorts, and his artificial leg was visible. But the woman was so depressed over losing both her breasts that she wouldn't even look at him.

In an effort to cheer her up, the nurses had left a radio playing in her room, and there was music on the radio when her visitor arrived. Desperate to get her attention, the young man unstrapped his artificial limb and began dancing around the room on one leg snapping his finger to the music. She looked at him in amazement and burst out laughing. "Man," she said, "if you can dance...I can sing!"

A year or so later, Dr. Remen and the young man sat down and reviewed the work they had done together. At one point, she pulled out a file that contained drawings he had made in the early stages when he was very angry. "Look at this," she said, and showed him a drawing he had made when she asked him to draw a picture of his body. He had drawn a picture of a vase, and running through the vase, was a deep black crack. He had taken a black crayon, and grinding his teeth with rage, he had drawn that crack over and over again.

He looked at the picture and he said, "Oh, it isn't finished."

"Why don't you finish it then," Dr. Remen said, and she handed him a box of crayons.

He picked a yellow crayon. And pointing at the crack, he said, "You see here where it's broken, this is where the light shines through." And with the yellow crayon he drew the light streaming through the crack in his body.



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