



Love Stories

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My family, like yours, kept its history – its name -- in the stories we told one another, one story attached to another. There were stories for holidays, stories for triumphs, stories for defeat, stories for special events and love stories. Stories could be told at any time, or asked for, but every year, as we made and signed the cards we would send out on Saint Valentine’s Day, we told, especially, the *love* stories that made us a family.

This was the story my Grandmother told about her wedding day. They were not rich and when they decided to get married, they simply took a streetcar downtown to the Justice of the Peace. In the streetcar on the way back to his house, they were suddenly both struck shy with the momentousness of what they had done. They looked around the swaying car, trying to think of something to say to one another. Finally Grampa pointed to a man pulling a handkerchief out of his pocket, preparing to blow his nose. “Watch that man,” he told his new wife. She watched, not knowing what she was supposed to look for. “See!” Grampa exclaimed, as the man accomplished what he had set out to do. “See what?” she asked. “Before he put it back in his pocket, he looked at what had come out of his nose. Now why do people do that?” We would tease Grampa about how *romantic* was his first conversation as a married man. Gramma would smile shyly and respond, “He got better.”

I always asked for the story of how my mother and father met; it was my favorite. They told it together, each adding parts to its whole. “My best friend, Melvin, was dating your mother;” Dad would start. “He’d given her a friendship ring, which meant that they were serious. I thought he was a lucky man because I’d seen her a few times and she was beautiful.” Here Mother and Dad would smile at one another. “Melvin played football,” Mother continued. “During one game, he broke his leg. He was in a

cast and couldn't drive, so we didn't go out much." "There was a big school party coming up," Dad picked up the story, "and Melvin asked me to drive him and your mother to the party. After that day I would drive them to the movies or wherever they wanted to go." "One day we had a fight," this from Mother, "and I gave Melvin back his ring. The next day I got a telephone call from your father asking if I wanted to go out with him." "I didn't want them to have a chance to make up," Dad would add. Then, they would reach out to one another and touch hands. "The rest is history," they would say in unison.

I used to worry about that story. How would it have been having a father named Melvin instead of John? What if he hadn't broken his leg? If Mother had married Melvin, who would I be? Would I even exist? Even at a very young age, I could drum up a lot of angst and wonder out of a good story. I didn't know it then, but I was beginning to tell myself my own story.

My father's mother used to tell her story on herself. Seems she was a good Christian woman without much worldly knowledge and when she married Pops, she did her wifely duty as demanded in her bible and presented him with five children in rapid succession, four boys and a girl. "Then," she would conclude the story, while her listeners smiled behind their hands, "my doctor told me how I was getting all those children, and I quit having them." Grampa Foerster had cancer in his later years and he taught Gramma to drive. She drove him wherever he wanted to go, even though women of her age didn't drive a car, especially if a man was in it.

Perhaps I should have listened to the family stories better, stories about how you choose with whom you fall in love, stories about why it's better to pick someone your family would approve and not to go looking outside the tribe. But I was a child of the movies and I preferred a more romantic story, like those I found in the dark of the theater. I dreamed of a great romance in which violins would be heard in the air over my head and the words 'Happily Ever After,' written in the clouds. I don't have to tell you how badly that worked out, do I?

These love stories I share were ones that could be told outside the family, told to friends to let them know how wonderful, or how dorky, your own family was. But there were other stories, forbidden love stories that were communicated by whispers, or by looks and nods in front of the children, but which we somehow absorbed, nevertheless. There were the stories about Great Aunt Blanche, my grandmother's youngest sister, who having no children, *worked outside the home* (sideways glance with grimace); who was the first in the family to *get a divorce* (cover mouth with fingers); and who later *had a boyfriend* (*Tsk, tsk, tsk; roll eyes*). I had liked Uncle Bill, the one she divorced. I missed his quirky sense of humor, and the haircuts he gave us for free in

his barber shop. But, according to the stories, when he moved out, he *went to live with another man* (raised eyebrow, shake of head).

You all have your own stories – family stories, personal stories. You all have the histories and the way things are supposed to be. Stories are the way behavior gets passed on in families. It's the way relationships are defined and expectations communicated. It's how you learn whether your actions are 'normal' or beyond the pale, according to your family. These stories become your guides for living and signposts to keep you on the right and proper path. Family stories are the seeds of your own stories, your love stories, your identity stories, your someday dream stories, your *name*. But sometimes you just have to change them, because one size does not fit everyone.

The idea that I would live happily ever after – I wanted that to be a true story. It was true at the movies. If you didn't look too closely, it was true of other people you knew. But it wasn't until I finally, and literally said, "If I can't rely on someone else to make me happy, I guess I'll have to be in charge of my own happiness," that I began to have a real life and real love stories. I'm sure that idea was somewhere communicated in the stories my family told, but sometimes you have to live the stories, even the ones without happy endings, before you can hear them, or believe them for yourself, or change them to suit you.

The thing about love stories is this: they can grow with you. You begin to understand them at a different level, understand the people who are the stories' characters. Gramma and Grampa Jonus had been together for 42 years when he died and had never run out of things to talk about. And their story continued after he died. Grampa told jokes – he preferred silly jokes and potty humor. "Did you hear about the guy getting ready for a date and got a big bump on his skull? Seems when he was putting on his toilet water the seat fell on head." And like an echo, following every one of his stories, Gramma would say, "Oh, Fred. Not in front of the children." When he died, Gramma began to tell his classic stories as if they were her own. And we who were adults by then, parents ourselves, would echo, "Oh, Gramma. Not in front of the children." But we would laugh at the stories, at the jokes, because that's how she kept him alive in her heart.

When Grampa Foerster died, Gramma became the one who drove all her friends around; the only one in her circle of friends who knew how to drive. She became a seasoned traveler, driving all over the United States. She confided in me one day, "If Clemence hadn't encouraged me to learn to drive a car, I'd be an old lady like the rest of my friends."

Mother and Dad always held hands and did not eschew public displays of affection. When Mother, who had a temper, got so mad at my father and she couldn't hold back, she would yell, "Damn you . . ., Honey."

Love stories are told in families, but they are always told in religious settings as well. Whatever the faith, whatever the doctrine, love is a value that is always lifted up. One of the lines I use in my wedding ceremonies, when speaking to the bride and groom about the gravity of this step they are taking, is this: *Although your loved ones would give your happiness to you, they cannot. You must seek it, create it, preserve it for yourselves.*

Seek it, create it, preserve it. That has the bones of a great love story. I might add, *let it grow*, to make it even better. Because here's the thing about love: the more you give, the more you have. And here's the thing about love stories: the more you tell them, the better you can understand them. The better you understand them, the easier it is to change them from good stories to great stories.

Wouldn't you like to be a fly on the wall as the military tries to retell the *Don't ask, don't tell* story? Don't tell your love stories? That's oppression. That's dehumanizing. Great Aunt Blanche refused to be oppressed when speaking about love. She brought her boyfriend Curtis home and introduced him to the family. "His wife is in a mental institution," she told them (in front of the children), "and we'll be living together." And they got married after her death and they lived happily ever after. And thank goodness her love story became part of my story or, who knows, I might still be living in the abusive marriage I found myself in when I failed to notice that the story his father told of how a wife should be subjugated to her husband, was likely the same story his son would tell. You've got to listen to the stories that come into your life.

Stories are important. Our own stories, that tell of our lives, are important, when we take stock of who we are and *who we might become*. Our family stories are important as guideposts, but we have to learn to reinterpret them in light of new understanding, new experiences, new possibilities. Author Michael Blumenthal wrote, "Whatever the story is, it goes as it goes, and there are vicissitudes in it, gardens that need to be planted, skills sown, the long hard labors of prose and enduring love. Deep down in some long-encumbered self, it is the story you have been writing all of your life, where no Calypso holds you against your own willfulness, where you can rise from the bleak island of your old story and tread your way home." Home, where the best stories are told.

It's nice to know who we are, even if the story of our life isn't a totally happy story. It's even nicer to know that we can change the story, that it doesn't have to stay the same throughout our lives. I mean if the story you were given was, say, "No one in

this family is successful in love,” you can change that. You can simply add, “Until now.” Or you can change the definition of successful. Or you can say, “I love you especially because you’re not perfect.” But you can’t not tell your stories, because without them, who would you be? And when you can finally tell your story – your love story, your life story – with you as its hero, for that’s how the best stories are told -- then you realize you are morally obligated to tell it to others so they can benefit from your experience. That’s a real love story, when you can share your whole self, when you can bear witness to the healing powers of love. When you can harness love’s power to help others, that’s a *new* love story.

You know the song the choir sang a little while ago? *Standing on the side of love. Sometimes we build a barrier.* That’s what we do when we don’t tell our love stories, when we can’t listen to a love story different from our own. (Think Aunt Blanche. Think Uncle Bill. You have them in your family, too.) *Corrupted by fear, unwilling to hear.* That’s sad. That’s just wrong.

The UUA has recently introduced a new social justice program called “Standing On the Side of Love.” The brochure says, *We believe that people should not be dehumanized through acts of exclusion, oppression or violence because of their immigrant status, race, religion, political views, sexual orientation, gender identity, or any other identity.* In other words, we believe that people should not be dehumanized through acts of being unable to tell their stories, their love stories. I hope we hear a lot more of this program because it requires of us only that we tell our own stories and stand as witnesses while others tell theirs. And I wouldn’t be surprised if we do. One of the two employees of the UUA who are bringing this story to the member churches is Adam Gerhardstein, who grew up in First Church. Look for it. Listen for it.

But here’s my Valentine’s Day love story to you. Everything we do as a religious community, and as individuals from this religious community, whether it is taking care of each other, listening to one another, helping one another, crying with, laughing with, singing with, taking our stories out on the street to help strangers who are our brothers and sisters, everything we do depends upon the strength of the love stories that each of us tells ourselves. Because if we do not love ourselves, we cannot, CAN NOT, love one another, help one another, hear one another. That’s what we learn when we tell our love stories. That love grows exponentially from love. And we know love through our stories, even the stories of the absence of love, for in them are the seeds of love discovered, love renewed.

My great grandparents came to this country after the fall of the Bohemian Empire, displaced persons with nothing but each other. Grappie had a mustache that he said hid a scar he got fighting a duel over my Bubbie. Bubbie would play the piano on my

back as I lay across her lap, and she would sing to me in Bohemian. I know now that love stories are true even if they are told in a language I don't understand. I didn't always know what they were saying, but I knew they loved me. From them I learned to swear in Bohemian; and I know the Bohemian word for beautiful: *kresny*. It was always in the stories they told to me.

I was never sure that all of the love stories my parents told were exactly true. Whenever we would ask how Dad proposed, Mother would say, "He called me on the phone and said, 'Will you marry me?' and I said, 'Yes, I will. Who is this?'" But I continue to tell it because it tells me a great deal about who they were when they laughed together and who I am because of their love.

You may not have gotten any cards for Valentine's Day, or sent any for that matter. But do this for yourself. Tell someone at least one love story today, an old story or a new one. It doesn't really matter. It's the telling that counts.