

**Welcome.**

Good morning, I am....

This month we are reflecting on stories. I've come to view stories as beings of a sort in and of themselves. They guide us. They shape us. Sometimes they shape us so much that it feels like we are their tools and not the other way around.

In this way stories are like angels or demons. They possess us. They lead us, call us out or in. Sometimes they deceive. Sometimes they uplift. Some are skilled. Some are less so. Occasionally they run black ops, silently operating in our social and psychological systems beyond our awareness, exerting influence nonetheless.

For the purposes of this reflection, I want to think of stories as coming in 3 broad categories: the personal, the moral, and the cultural. Perhaps these fit the Integral Theory map I mentioned last week.

The personal stories are stories that you or your ancestors experienced. They are localized histories that have taken on the status of myth and are passed through your family or local system. The moral stories are more communal and may or may not have roots in history. This is the realm of fairy tales and myths, foundation stories, fictions, fantasies, histories, and parables.

Then there is the cultural, or meta, narrative. This is the narrative backdrop against which all the other stories take place. It is the unseen frame... or unseen lens... through which we view the world. Unlike the other stories, this one doesn't necessarily have the setting, rising tension, resolution structure. Or if it does, it is at a scale that is difficult for us to discern except when we, in the fullness of time, approach its edge as it comes to its natural conclusion or encounters some internally or externally generated boundary, breakdown, incoherence or inadequacy.

We'll explore each of these in brief and in turn. In fact, you notice our music this morning will progress through similar levels. But first, I'd like to bring in our SSA for the day, Rebecca Lindley to share a story with us. Rebecca, could you tell us a story that lives in your family, either from your ancestors or from your own life... a story that has shaped you.

And so, without further adieu, I give you... once upon a time...

**Reflection 1 - Personal**

I have a picture of my mom's dad showing me how to steal cookies from a cookie jar in the shape of a squirrel. That photo is a story in and of itself. The notion behind it has permeated

generations. It was celebrated to my niece and to my own kids. I can tell you, its celebration remains evident.

My dad's dad was a teacher and track coach in Indiana. I don't know a single thing about his wins and losses as a coach. I only know that he was the first in his town to welcome black athletes onto his team.

These stories are legendary in my family. Be iconoclastic (the cookie jar was almost literally an ikon and certainly contained the sacred). Teach iconoclasm. Do justice. Do the right thing regardless of consequence.

I can point to very real instances where these stories have guided decisions in my family system over generations. And perhaps these stories are updates of older stories lost to time. I'm blessed to have the ancestors I do.

Not all our stories are justice and mischief. There are some where the lesson is in how not to be.

I am sure you have your own family stories, passed down the generations, that have shaped your life and continue to guide you. Stories trickle through family systems and alter the lives of the living. Even the stories only whispered about do this. The uncle who did something taboo. The great aunt who floundered. Shame and loss haunt us even when they were not earned by us.

These are the stories we are less proud of. They lurk. And we ignore them at our peril. For they are as effective as the stories of which we are proud. But unlike the positive stories, which amplify in the telling, it is by ignoring them that these ghosts become demonic influencers. Their power grows in the shadows.

It's the same with congregations, by the way.

There is no exorcism to be performed. Recognition is the medicine. Without fear or judgement. Recognition without fear or judgement is the definition of compassion. The past-that-is-you will be healed by our recognition, compassion... and vigilance.

Take the famous story of Timothy Leary entrusting his brother to take his briefcase full of acid to the hotel whilst the Timothy gave a lecture. That lecture was interrupted however when a rattled MC informed Leary that his brother was on the phone, in a panic. It sounded like real trouble. See, he had eaten some of the contents of Timothy's briefcase and was now being menaced by a terrifying demon glaring at him from the ledge outside his hotel window.

"He wants to know what to do," said the bearer of the message.

Leary nodded knowingly. “Tell my brother” he said, “to open the window and invite the demon to tea.”

## Reflection 2 - Ethical

Once upon a time... 2012 to be exact, folks at Ohio State University ran an experiment wherein they asked people to put themselves in a character’s place while reading various stories. They found, for example, that, “When people identified with a protagonist who voted in the face of challenges.... (The readers) were more likely themselves to vote later on.”<sup>1</sup>

It is quite natural for us to identify with stories transmitted in the web of culture. They are not about us by name. And yet they are about us as people. Our identification with them means they shape our sense of our decision making.

For that reason, I’ve named this category of stories the Moral. All stories are normative, that is norm making. But this is the category where we are intentional about the social and personal outcomes of the tale. No stories here about the rebellious cousin’s moon shot Mexican drug deal that worked against all good sense. That’s a family story. Moral stories are more universal.

This is the realm of the hummingbird, the fiddling Emperor, the Good Samaritan. I’m going to say it is also the realm of the big myths. Jesus, Krishna, Spider Woman, Coyote Stories, the Big Bang and Evolution belong here. As does Hansel and Grettle, Camelot, Johnny Appleseed, Jim Morrison and Star Wars.

Aphorisms belong here too. Like the taoist one about the value of the clay pot being its emptiness, the point being that emptiness draws forth being or... something.

Of course, just like with personal stories, not all of these tales are all good. Likewise, they can be deployed at our convenience as much as they deploy us. For instance, the myth of the rugged individualist belongs here. But that myth was both never really true, definitely has been deployed at our convenience, and also came into being at a time and in a place where the resources appeared infinite thus lending it credence. Yet, while never really true, it came to guide an entire swath of our decision making and has indubitably contributed to the dire situation in which we find ourselves.

It’s also true that some of these tales are good for a time. But only for a time. And as they enact change upon their contexts, as they change the very fabric in which they are told, they must change themselves or become toxic to the context they created. Call back to last week’s reflection.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://aeon.co/essays/once-upon-a-time-how-stories-change-hearts-and-brains>

Pretty much every story with a title belongs in this category. And while many are wise, many are errant, out of date, or even malevolence masquerading as principle. Of course this presents a puzzle of discernment. When selecting (or being selected by) the stories we wish to speak to and for us, we must be discerning.

We must beware of sourcing to fit our whimsy. For that raises the likelihood that we lack discipline and act irresponsibly, all the more easily slipping into the mundane sort of narcissism that leads to reactivity, fractious relationships, ignorant othering, denial, poor governance, planetary destitution and a what's-in-it-for-me consumerist participation in one's life. And we don't want that. I sometimes think we should treat stories like we were interviewing them for a job. Let's look at their resume and check your references.

Of course this also applies to the contemporary cousin of fairy tales; punditry. Hey, that's me! Incidentally, NSUC will soon be offering a series of workshops that will explore the discernment required to discover accurate sources in a media environment assaulted by misinformation and attention seeking. It's worth devoting some time to, for, as we have noted, these stories craft how we behave.

Though even as I say that I am reminded of that famous Princeton seminary study from 1970. They gathered a bunch of seminary students together and told them each to prepare a presentation. Half were told to preach on the story of the Good Samaritan, half were told to present on the kinds of jobs seminary prepares people to perform. That's a short sermon!

Anyway, they were sent, one at a time, to different buildings across campus to deliver their talks. Some were told they would get there on time. Some were told they were running a bit late. Some were told they needed to be there, like, right now. Then, the Dungeon Masters running this game put a man asking for help and holding his gut directly in their path.

Some did stop to help him. Most did not. Turns out there was zero predictive correlation regarding the group that had been meditating on the Good Samaritan rather than their career. The one thing that made a difference was in the student's understanding of how much time they had. So, in apparent contradiction to all I've been saying this morning, the show runners determined that narrative pump-priming was not a factor in behavior.

But actually, if they had thought about it a little more, they would have realized that this conclusion was flawed. In fact, what this experiment reveals to me is not that stories fail to impact us, but rather that a deeper level, a more fundamental, less conscious level of story is operating us.

And while it is that story that has increased food supply and literacy levels and general wealth, it is also the story out of which we must now evolve. For, snarling presently at the window, it has delivered us to the brink of personal, societal, and planetary ruin, while delivering that very apocalypse in toxic previews to untold millions on the way.

Shall we invite it to tea?

### **Reflection 3 Cultural/Meta**

So those curious Ivy Leaguers figured that the concept of time was more determinative of compassion than the meditation on a story. But of course they did. With all due respect, I would make a counter argument.

In my view, what those folks missed was that a deeper story overrode the ethical story of the Good Samaritan. Indeed, that story, told by the Nazarene, was a story counter to the more fundamental narrative at play even then. That's right, there are deeper stories than those conveyed to us by allegories embedded in religion. There are deeper stories against which and in which religions arise.

These are the largely sub-conscious stories that convey how we conceptualize the self and the world and whether or not there is a difference. Our story has long held that there is not only a difference, but a separation. My favorite philosopher, Charles Eisenstein, has noted that we exist in the story of separation.

The story of separation sees all as other. Everything; rocks, trees, ecoranges, races, individuals. Its remedy, according to Eisenstein, who riffs off of Buddhist teacher Tich Naht Han, is the story of interbeing. The interdependent web of existence. The interdependent web of self. Or as I like to say, I am of thee. You are of me.

The of is important. We are not one. But we are codependent, on each other, on the world, mutually co-arising. E pluribus unum. Out of many, one. A multitude of notes, one harmony.

Interbeing allows for and encourages individuality (otherwise, we'd all be one). Whereas the story of separation encourages individualism, which, if you look closely, actually discourages individuality in its pressure to conform so as to win the game separation produces; reductionism, necrophilic materialism, zero sum thinking and power-over-systems of domination and oppression to secure a false freedom for the separate "one."

Separation is the subconscious world view that causes people to step over the wounded on their way to deliver a sermon on helping the wounded. It is self interested, success above all, more

toys wins, and time obsessed. But as Eisenstein has noted, “Scurrying from one thing to the next, servant of the schedule, the modern human never feels quite sovereign.”

Where interbeing yields sovereignty through connection, the individual of the separation paradigm is always a slave. This is the spell we are all under. We need a new spell.

Last week I suggested that the thesis-antithesis dynamic of modernism and postmodernism needs to produce a synthesis. It is, admittedly, oversimplifying the matter to limit the ingredients of the synthesis to those two world views. I imagine the so-called pre-modern perspective has much to bring to the birthing of a new paradigm.

Afterall, what interbeing will do is reanimate the world. And the “pre-”modern has some wisdom there. As my buddy Eisenstein writes, “excess materialism is not the problem... we actually need to be more materialistic not less; that is, to hold matter sacred in all its forms, especially its living forms. Banishing sacredness to a non-material realm, no wonder modern society desecrates the material.”

I am of thee, you are of me will carry us from an isolated, non-empathic experience of self into an empathic experience of self and a more erotic (eros based, love based) engagement with the world. A deep earth narrative.

So how do we get there? Well... we can recognize the stories operating us, check out their resumes and... there are techniques, methods of cultivating this new and ancient story of interbeing. Mostly they involve techniques of paying attention with more than one’s senses. Paying attention to one, then some, then everything with... our feelings.

And then, it is also important to say, I don’t know. The crush to know is the same crush that caused good samaritans to just be samaritans. Immediacy is part of the story of separation. I don’t know creates a space that feels, in and of itself, to be revolutionary.

That’s not to say that there is no urgency here. We are in a pickle as a civilization. Our story has run its course. A new story grapples with the old, seeking emergence. But maybe we can’t force it.

On the other hand, if enough of us grok it, not just know it, but feel it, not just see the lens but see through the lens, maybe the day may yet be saved.

How do we do that? With empty clay pots? Or maybe... just pot.

I don’t know.