

What's Your Story?

Rev. Joan Montagnes

Well, it's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon, our hometown... No titanic clash between political rivals, no oil pipelines threatening indigenous people or their sacred lands, no immigration raids ripping twenty-five of our neighbors from their livelihood and families, no war in Afghanistan, no police shootings in Iowa. The Bundies weren't acquitted. No bombs in Turkey, no refugees in crisis.

It has been a quiet week of pumpkin pie at the Chatterbox Café. The Lutherans are miffed with the members of Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility for putting up the crèche before Thanksgiving, on Halloween, somebody from St. Olaf toilet-papered the statue of the Unknown Norwegian, and everyone is getting their gear ready for ice fishing next month. Yes, in Lake Wobegon, it has been a quiet week. This is the story of the little town that time forgot, and the decades cannot improve. The reports are humorous and at times touching and thoughtful but nothing big happens here. And yet, somehow every Sunday afternoon, since 1974, the liberal listening public have gathered around the warmth of their radio to hear about the week that was.

In a way, it's a single story. The same characters and the same places. Pastor Liz, the Whippets Baseball team, and The Side-Car Tap. Regardless of what is going on in the world beyond the neighboring town of St. Cloud, not much changes in Lake Wobegon, in spite of everything else that is going on in the world. It's very comforting, a kind of paradise. But perhaps not the paradise for which we yearn.

Today the 4th and 5th graders are exploring a different kind of story. One that spans almost a century in only a few pages of a picture book. It is a story that

begins with a little African American girl in South Carolina who finds a rope under a tree. That rope takes on many roles and becomes a part of her family's history. It is passed down through the family for three generations; used for everything from jump rope games to tying suitcases onto the car for the big move north to New York City. The rope becomes a clothes line for drying a baby's diapers and it is even used to tie up a banner for a family reunion where that first little girl who found the rope is now a grandmother. Eventually the rope sits on top of the mantle as a prized possession, snaking protectively around family photos taken through the decades. In this story, a rope is used to frame a little girl's journey north during the Great Migration, when millions of African American families relocated from the South seeking better opportunities. Making a way out of no way. The story the rope tells is of a family powerfully adapting to change as they hold onto the past and create the future.

This is one story about one family and their rope. Families everywhere have rope and each tells a different story. But this rope that the 4th and 5th graders are learning about today happens to tell a story about a little African American girl growing up in the South in the 30s. The story, by simply never even hinting at it, reminds us that a story about a piece of rope found at the base of a tree involving an African American family in the South can be about more than lynchings. A story about a piece of rope can be about joy, self-empowerment, overcoming obstacles, and growing a healthy family. A rope can tell more than a single story, and there is more than a single story about a rope.

Storytelling is all about power: how the stories are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told.

If you tell a single story over and over again, you define a person, a people, a place as one thing, as only one thing, and that is what they become. Lake Wobegon is an isolated, white, relatively conflict-free town of hot dishes and lutefisk. Miss Nancy has lost her memory. A rope in the South can only be a stem for strange fruit.

Stories, you see, matter. They are powerful. They are used to dispossess and to malign, or just to simplify; but stories can also be used to empower, to humanize, and to help us understand diversity. Stories can break the dignity of a people, on purpose, or simply out of ignorance; but stories can also repair that broken dignity and enlighten the blighted mind. When we stop telling a single story about a person, about a group of people, about a place, then we realize that there is never a single story about anyone or anything. When we realize a rope can tie a man's neck in a noose, or tie a family together in love across time, or do a million other things; when we understand that we all contain a multitude of stories, sometimes contradictory stories, we free ourselves from the power of the single story and the world blossoms into all its magnificent variety and possibility.

When I find myself, as I often do in these wild, uncertain days, confronted with statements (say, political statements) that at best make no sense to me, and at worst feel truly, and deeply evil. When I hear a story that raises my blood pressure, my fear and my hackles, it is my spiritual discipline to seek curiosity as my guide. To wonder "What would make someone say such a thing?" "Why would anyone want to hear such a thing?"

And when I find curiosity difficult to invite into my heart, and I often do, I look to the old 1970s TV show Columbo for divine inspiration. Columbo, the show, always used an inverted detective story format. You saw the murder right off

the bat, so you knew "whodunit" right away. The plot revolved around how the murderer would finally be caught, so it's more of a "howcatchem," rather than a "whodunit."

If some neighbor of mine puts a political sign on her lawn and I just don't understand how she can do it, she's not keeping it a secret, she's telling me her story. There's no "whodunit" element. My job as a good neighbor is not to deny her story, or to tell myself a story about her. My job as a good neighbor, and a good citizen, is to understand my neighbor better. After all, on Wednesday we will still be neighbors.

The reason I reach for Columbo as my guide is that he was this shambling, disheveled, unassuming guy who was always getting in the way and tripping over himself, and like Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge, Columbo was always asking questions. His tagline became a walk to the door, and then, like a thought hit him, "Just one more thing..." And then he would ask another question. When I find it difficult to invite genuine curiosity into my heart I invite the baffled, disarming Columbo in, and ask questions that beg for confession, beg for the story. A story I honestly don't know.

There are, however times, when I am so full of anger and all my buttons are being pushed that neither curiosity nor Columbo want to come to my aid. At times like this, I keep my question for another time. A time when I am able to listen, really listen. My question then is not, "How could you vote that way?" My question is, "Who hurt you? What hurts? Tell me your story. And I will tell you mine."

It seems to me that the trick of becoming a community of story is to constantly guard against telling or listening to single stories that paint any part of

our community with a broad brush. Stop believing secondhand stories that you hear “on good authority.” Stop making assumptions, labeling, and getting in the way of yourself.

The stories we need, if we are to build a community, are the stories that are the breath and word of the Spirit of Life, stories that are the power that we call Love, stories we listen to with a curiosity as deep as the ocean and hear with the thirst of a hot desert gulping water on a rare rainy day.

When Dana told us her story last week of being with the people at Standing Rock, what she felt, what she personally experienced, we listened and we were transformed.

The stories we need, if we are to build the paradise of which we dream, will need to be your stories, the stories that fill your heart, engage your mind, and reside in your soul. Stories that come from all your memories: warm memories, memories from long ago, memories that make you cry, memories that make you laugh, memories that are more precious than gold. The memories, the experience of generations, we will need all these stories. For all this is you; complicated, blessed, fallible you.

I am not a big Garrison Keeler fan, but I believe profoundly in a world, a kind of paradise, where all the women are strong, the men are good, and the children are above average, a world in which every person is recognized as precious and with inherent worth and dignity, a world in which our interdependence is acknowledged and honored, a world of peace, mercy, compassion and justice. That is the paradise for which I yearn. Let us build a community of story, of your stories, of all our neighbor’s stories, and the stories of myth and poetry that speak truths louder than words. May the stories you tell be

held in the tenderest care, like warm eggs in a feather-lined nest. May you listen with a curiosity that fills your spirit and honors the Divine spark which resides in your neighbor's soul. And may all our sharings help us powerfully adapt to change in these wild, uncertain days as we hold onto the past and create the future.

For Further Study

Chimamanda, Adichie Ngozi. *The Danger of a Single Story*

[ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript?language=en)

Fox, Mem. *Wilfred Gordon McDonald Partridge*, Kane/Miller Book Publishers, 1995.

Woodson, Nancy *This Is the Rope: A Story from the Great Migration*, Jaqueline Paulsen Books/Penguin, 2013.