

The Danger of a Single Story

By Reverend Jane Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD May 16, 2021

Sacred texts offer wisdom that passes through the ages, and as Unitarian Universalists we can draw insight from these stories. In the Christian Bible, it was told in Luke 10:25-37¹, a powerful, educated lawyer approached Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” The teacher replied that, along with loving God with all your soul, strength, and mind, we are all called to love our neighbors as ourselves. “And who is my neighbor?” the influential man retorted. Jesus responded in story:

There was a man traveling from Jerusalem to Jericho. Along this solitary journey, our traveler was viciously attacked by a group of robbers, left to die. In that moment, a distinguished priest was following that same road. When the priest saw the injured man, he went out of his way to pass him by and continued his journey. Shortly after a Levite stumbled upon the same scene of a dying man, and, just like the priest, passed him by without a care. Then a third man came to the scene – a Samaritan. A man from a social group largely seen to be immoral. This man – this Samaritan – met the bruised and bleeding traveler on the road not with disdain or indifference but instead with care and pity. He bandaged the wounds, doused his injuries in oil and wine. He took him to an inn to rest, using his own money to rent the traveler a room.

Jesus, after telling this story, turned to the distinguished lawyer and asked, “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”²

¹ New Revised Standard Version

² Luke 10:25-37 New Revised Standard Version

Love your neighbors as yourself, just as that Samaritan did. To give some context to this story, we need to understand that Jesus's target audience at the time of this parable carried great prejudice towards the Samaritans. The dying traveler was approached twice by esteemed men – a priest and a Levite. And yet these men did nothing – in fact, they went out of their way – across the road – to show their indifference. It was the marginalized – the distained – that met the injured stranger with love and compassion. This story is powerful because it reshapes the narrative of a condemned man – it reshapes the narrative of the Samaritan. It confronts a lie. This parable is powerful to Christians today because it is used as an example against prejudice and oppression.

This parable demonstrates the danger of a single story – a single, untrue narrative. This idea of a single story came from Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Adiche grew up in Nigeria, crafting childhood stories about a culture she had often seen in the books she read that seemed to be the norm: a single story of blond haired, blue eyed American children. It was only later, in her adult years as she attended university abroad in the United States, that she was met with a prejudice of single stories told about her – about people from Africa. Adichie was assigned a roommate who had grown up in the United States, only hearing about Africa through anecdotes and sensationalized news stories. Through the single stories painted in the United States about Africa, the roommate with deep American roots assumed Adichie was from a place of, and I quote Adiche here, “beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves and waiting to be saved by a kind, white foreigner.” This was the single narrative she was met with. And this intermingled with her work as a novelist. Her professors urged her to write of this single narrative of Africa in her novels; not acknowledging the intricate layers of narratives and experiences of the people and stories held within the continent of Africa. Adichie speaks of suffering in Africa in many ways, yes, but also of a people with a wealth of resilience, of strength. Adichie demonstrates how single stories show people as one thing, and then repeat this false narrative over and

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over until it is understood as fact.³ Just as we have seen with the Good Samaritan – the man who was expected to show disdain or indifference and instead met the bruised and battered traveler with care and love.

So, we have seen single stories of those from an unfamiliar place: Samaria and Nigeria. There are a wealth of single stories we are met with every single day, stories told over and over until understood as fact. Stories of gender or queerness, of disability whether physical or mental, of race or ethnicity or political party. Distortions or narratives bent and shaped intentionally into one simple to understand and yet painfully incomplete narrative, deprived of nuance and complexity, steeped instead in a pool of prejudice. We are offered a chance to reshape these stories, to untwist what has been distorted and reshape reality, creating, instead, an empowering, life giving narrative.

Let us explore the single story of gender and sexuality found pervasive in our culture. We see it in fairytales – in stories and anecdotes told to young children. These stories repeatedly illustrate a beautiful woman and a handsome prince, following the endearing couple in a story of overcoming obstacles only to be met with the “triumph of straight love.” We see this same narrative replayed repeatedly through the tales of Cinderella or Snow White or Aladin – condensing gender and sexuality into one, easily consumable, glorified norm. What would it be like if Sleeping Beauty fell in love with a woman? We are invited into the practice “queering,” of reimagining these stories to instead tell of a queer love, to meet these stories with questions disputing the norm – to retell them and reshape them.⁴

Queer author Ambrose Hall notes that, in these stories, these fairytales many of us have grown up with, damsels in distress saved by handsome male tropes, that in these stories gender non-conforming or other queer characters are presented as the bad ones or villains, she did not see herself reflected in

³ TED Talk - The Danger of a Single Story, Chimamanda Adichie

⁴ [Queering Fairy Tales | Erica Baron \(patheos.com\)](https://patheos.com/2015/05/15/queering-fairy-tales/)

these narratives. Hall writes of “queering” these stories that are foundational for many children. To retell them to create a positive, life-giving story. She writes of the healing and self-affirmation of re-shaping these stories of sexuality and gender norms – finding a hero who does not serve to erase her identity as queer but instead who shares this identity. Finding layers of complexity, reshaping those stories that erased or misrepresented life experiences of queer people. She writes of putting herself in a story that ignored her. Instead of the heteronormative tales of love, creating stories of “same sex love.” Instead of stories detailing what it is to be a handsome, heroic man or a beautiful, submissive woman, stories of “gender bending.” Re-shaping these stories that tell straightness and gender conformity as the norm – as that single story we are each fed to believe. Re-shaping these stories as life-giving stories to those of any gender or sexual orientation – bending narratives that instead glorify and find heroes in those who identify as queer. ⁵

We can all re-shape stories that ignore or villainize pieces of ourselves – rewriting ourselves as the heroic one. As the caring one. As the protagonist in the script of bravery and strength. Reshaping the characters of these single narratives.

We see the danger of a single story pervasive in our lives today: single stories of hate and racism. Single stories of black bodies that lead to police violence and perpetuate racism. Stories of Islamophobia following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Violence against Asian Americans after lies fed about the COVID-19 virus. I think, too, about the political divides that have severed the country – single stories about what it means to be a democrat or a republican. Let us take the Christian message presented in the parable of the good Samaritan and instead of meeting this Samaritan – this marginalized person – with an expectation of wrongdoing, to instead reshape that into a life-giving message of affirmation and

⁵ [Why Telling Queer Myths, Folklore and Fairy Tales is an Act of Healing | by Ambrose Hall | Th-Ink Queerly \(thinkqueerly.com\)](https://thinkqueerly.com/why-telling-queer-myths-folklore-and-fairy-tales-is-an-act-of-healing/)

love. To take these narratives of fear or disdain and instead re-shape these single stories into complex stories of faith, culture, abuse, and love. To connect with our own faith of Unitarian Universalism and see the inherent worth in each and every person. To connect with our Universalist roots, a people of faith who understood each person to be loved by God and saved to heaven. Let us connect to the Unitarians whose faith called them to see the intrinsic goodness in each person. To see the complexity of a life-giving narrative, instead of the simple, easily digestible, single-stories we are each surrounded with.

I share with you some of the words of Mexican poet José Olivarez, from his poem, *Story*

there's two ways to be a Mexican writer

that we've discovered so far.

you can be the Mexican writer who writes about tortillas

or you can be the Mexican writer who writes about croissants

instead of the tortillas on their plate.

(can you be a Mexican writer if you're allergic to corn?)⁶

I see this as a question posed to reorient the simple, easily digestible, single story of what it means to be Mexican. A question posed by a man confronting this stereotypical narrative of tortillas and corn. The poet continues,

there's two ways to be a Mexican writer that are true

⁶ *Story* by José Olivarez

& tested. you can write about migration

or you can write about migration.

(can you be a Mexican writer if you never migrated?

if your family never migrated?)⁷

He demonstrates migration as a seemingly fundamental experience of one who identifies as Mexican, and he challenges this through the questions posed. What does it mean to be Mexican? What does it mean to defy these too-simple stereotypes? What does it mean to create one's own identity, independent of the norm? What does it truly mean to be Mexican?

We heard early the single story fed to a tiger. The tiger was trapped in a cage, repeatedly told she was weak and ugly. And this story she was fed kept her trapped in a cage that in reality she could escape – she was held within the bars of a single story she had heard about herself. When this story she had been told was disputed – when the lion advanced and assured her she was indeed a capable being worthy of love and respect – this gave her the strength she had always, truly had inside her, and she overcame the bars confining her to this entrapped space. She was met with love and acceptance and found freedom.⁸

We each have single stories we tell about ourselves – stories that are perpetuated as we grow up saturated in simple narratives repeated over and over until it becomes a truth. We each have strength in telling our stories – reshaping our narratives and sharing these reshaped narratives with others – just as

⁷ *Story* by José Olivarez

⁸ *The Beautiful Tiger* by Christopher Buice

Adichie reshaped her narrative – just as the tiger reshaped hers – just as Ambrose Hall “queered” fairytales.

In her poetry, Laura Hershey answers the question, what do you risk by telling your story? Perhaps, “No one will understand, their eyes become fences.” Perhaps “Your happiness will be called bravery, denial.” Perhaps “Your sadness will justify their pity. Your fear will magnify their fears.” And yet, she writes,

Someone, somewhere

will hear your story and decide to fight,

to live and refuse compromise.

Someone else will tell

her own story,

risking everything.⁹

I think of the stories I am committed to telling, stories to reshape a narrative. Stories of being a female identified clergy person in a position traditionally held by male- identified people, showing up to the pulpit in heels and a dress, both feminine and in a position of authority. I think about demonstrating this to other little girls we can overcome limitations. Working with other woman-identified ministers to reshape the traditional idea of authority, to lift up some unique strengths of women, to empower our ability to be as feminine as we desire in the process.

I read an article in the New York Times recently about young women choosing not to have children – defying those gender norms, those single stories of folks who identify as “woman.” Single stories tell us

⁹ *Telling* by Laura Hershey

that the most important thing a woman can do is to have a child. And while there are many mothers who find this their meaning in life – and that is beautiful – there are many other people who identify as women who simply do not. And that is beautiful too. There is nuance to these stories.¹⁰

We heard so many tales this morning about single stories perpetuated by the human constructed lie that is race. Folks from Samaria or Nigeria or Mexico – whose race or country of origin carries with it a simple, false narrative, that it is our job to actively dismantle. To reshape these stories into a life-giving narrative. To hear, just as that tiger did, that we are each strong and beautiful. We are each capable of charging through those bars that surround us and find freedom – the freedom to love both others and ourselves for exactly who we each are.

We may tell ourselves stories of harm; of suffering. We may have experiences that caused us deep pain. I invite us to re-shape this narrative as well, and reconstruct these stories as stories of healing, of overcoming, of thriving. An invitation to reshape and reform the stories we tell ourselves about our past and craft a tale of resilience.

I invite us each to be the story of unexpected love in the world, just as that Samaritan shattered the lies that defined him.

May it be so, and Amen.

¹⁰ [Female and Childfree, In Pictures - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/17/us/politics/female-and-childfree-in-pictures.html)