

A few weeks ago we reflected on our individual story and how the narrative we hold for ourselves is not only the lens through which we see the world, but also our best shot at agency. In other words, the best shot we have at free will lies in the story we understand and create about ourselves. Our story determines - pre-determines really - our reaction to events in our lives. And if we want to transform unconscious reaction to conscious response, we can do so by managing the story we tell to ourselves, about ourselves.

Whether or not and how you respond to, say, a person being bullied in your presence is determined by whether or not the story you hold for yourself maintains that you are such a person and the strength and integrity of that story. Do you run into the burning building? Are you a victim? Are you a helper? Are you a wellspring of kindness?

That last one is, of course, from our covenant. And you can see here how our covenant is a kind of magic, in that it begins to shape our consciousness and actions. A promise is a kind of story. And stories are magic.

Mind you, just saying it is not enough. You have to know it. You have to know it in such a way that when you do not act in accord with your story it is a significant and obvious cause for self-reflection and adjustment.

So that reflection was the first of a three part series on story that is meant to prepare the ground for a program we will be participating in later this year. Part one; story of self as it relates to self. Part two (today); story of family as it relates to self. Part three; story of land as it relates to self.

A pertinent question then is what is meant by self. In this case, I do not mean to imply that identity is the same as a storied self. I'm thinking that identity is more like a subset of story. Like story, identity can determine our actions. And while it can be fluid, I see identity more as a snapshot of a moment in your story.

Story, meanwhile, has an arc to it. Story presumes transformation. It is a lens that not only determines our response, but is itself responsive to how our response worked. Thus your storied-self is more sprawling than your identity, more encompassing, more winding; spooling itself out over a lifetime.

The thing is, these three levels of story - self, family, and land - and their interdependence with one another, are - as we mentioned in part one - you. These stories are a self. Family as self. Land as self. So I should really title today's reflection, "The Story of Family as Self."

So by self I do not mean identity but a story, not a moment, but a life, a field, an interdependent ecology of meaningful events and responses. The mythologist Martin Shaw reminds us that, “In many tribal stories and indigenous tales, there is an implicit understanding that what we call *psyche* or *soul* does not live in a person, but that we live *within* the psyche or the soul. And the tribe, collectively, respond to and develop their lives through that awareness...”

I put it to you that the soul within which we live is understood, at least in part, by our narratives. The soul in which we live - that field of meaning and response - is our story. Our topic today is the story of self as family-story. It is not only in relation to the upcoming program and the other two reflections in this series, but it is also in relation to our liturgical calendar, which is part of the story we tell as a church.

Next week is our All Souls Sunday; a day on which we re-presence our dearly departed, our ancestors and those who have gone before. Importantly, when I speak of ancestors and descendants and even family, by no means do I limit that to genetics, though of course genetics plays a significant role. Ancestry could just as well be lineage and influence by other intimate means; nature and nurture being dance partners rather than binaries.

In any case, the way we speak of our ancestors reveals ourselves to ourselves. They are both mythic and historical and therefore hold deep and profound truth for us. Our ancestors - which is to say our family stories - which is to say our selves must be acknowledged, reckoned with, thanked, and often enough healed of hurts that, being deceased, they are no longer able to heal on their own; leaving us as the living medicine for the dead. They live in us. Their triumphs and transgressions live in us. And we live in them, for they are our story, our psyche, our soul.

This is not to say that they must be heroic. There's room for the heroic. But the heroic must be accompanied by the real. We aren't looking for cartoon characters. If the heroic is not accompanied by the real, then all we will have witnessed is propaganda. And propaganda is ever and only the tool of the despot: the despot in this case being the unconscious story pulling our strings.

Likewise, their transgressions must be understood through the lens of their traumas and contexts. If not we will have no way to repair them but only be oppressed by them.

If we do not acknowledge, thank, and heal the hurts of our ancestors and the characters in our family story, we will live at the whim of unconscious forces of presumption or pain. It is as Shaw describes: “...if you don't have ancestors, you have ghosts.”

So when I ask, “What's your family's story?” I am inviting you into stewardship of your life. I am inviting you into relative sovereignty by reckoning with your family story. I am inviting you

into healing yourself by healing your ancestors. The path of healing begins in diagnosis, in investigation, in reckoning with what is and how it came to be.

What stories did your family tell; about themselves and their ancestors? What stories in general were important to them? What stories were they a part of? Were those stories true? Did they have integrity? What was their effect? Do they need healing?

Our ancestors' response to events in their lives and the ensuing consequences were determined by the stories and soul in which they lived. Healing them, healing ourselves, and healing the world begins with discovering our ancestral story and reaching out with both compassion for their contexts and accountability for their actions.

As a meaningful bonus, the family narrative you explore becomes a means of connection, a way to represent and re-present or re-presence your ancestors and pre-presence your descendants, which is to say your whole soul. The stories about your ancestors are also the stories your ancestors told and, as Shaw points out, "Myth and story put you into the presence of the old ones who have told the story before you."

What is your family's story?

So here's how I'm turning some ghosts into ancestors. My father's lineage arrived on this continent some 100 years before the American Revolution. They were political and religious refugees from Scotland as they were part of a Presbyterian religious rebellion against monarchical authority in the church that evolved into a more broadly anti-authoritarian movement known as the Covenanters.

So I am here because of religious principles and anti-authoritarianism and I just happened to go to a Presbyterian seminary. Talk about ghosts. At least they're friendly ghosts.

Or are they? Duhn duhn duhn! Like most Europeans early to this continent, we definitely were party to settler colonialism, rode the coat tails of genocide, and benefitted from slavery. And while we know some dates and places, the motivations and dynamics of personal relationships are more mysterious. And at some point, both prior to our arrival on Turtle Island and in the time between then and now, my conception of my ancestors necessarily broadens from persons to "a people."

Persons are often lost to history. A people, however, endures more visibly. And so, "what is your family's story," at some point will also be, "what is your people's story?" And that highlights a very important aspect of engaging with your family and ancestral stories. For whether you are

connecting with persons or a people, you are connecting with story. Thus one of the most powerful tools of ancestral and even more immediate family healing is your imagination.

Performed responsibly, the use of imagination is, in fact, an act of direct experience and well within the jurisdiction of truth. For your imagination is an inheritance as well. Your imagination is the fruit of seeds planted by your ancestors. Imagination is lineage. It is connecting. It is the bridge by which you may extend compassion and gratitude and reckon with what needs accounting for.

Weeks ago we considered that if you want to change your life, change your story; change the lens through which you engage with the world. Family and ancestral stuff, by comparison, isn't so simple. Your personal story lens will determine how you interact with your family story. And that, in and of itself, presents profound opportunities for healing one's self and cultivating a little more sovereignty in one's life.

But your family and ancestral story is less malleable than your personal story. Yet it is in no less need of attention; not just for cultivating the agency available in knowing how the story influences you, but - just as importantly - your ancestral and family story is in need of attention for its opportunity to cultivate gratitude, healing, compassion, and justice for them through you. After all, you are the nexus of your ancestors and descendants. By this effort do we live into our mission here at All Souls to heal ourselves and the world.

We will do so in ceremony next Sunday. I'll see you - and your ancestors - then.