



Purposeful Wanderings

A Monthly Newsletter for Clients and Friends of **The Road Not Taken**

©2019 Bradford L. Glass • www.RoadNotTaken.com

Vol. 18, No. 5 -- May 2019

What's Your Story?

"Owning our story and loving ourselves through that process
is the bravest thing we will ever do."
– Brené Brown

Talking Story is tradition in Hawaii. It's a foundation of *aloha*, that pervasive spirit Hawaiians truly feel and live about the universal connectedness we share ... with one another, with the rhythm of life, with the eternal, with a higher power, with the land, and with our own souls. If *aloha* is the pulse of life, then *talking story* is the tapestry on which life is set. "Talk story," as Hawaiians call it, doesn't try to persuade; it doesn't have to 'go somewhere.' Yet *story* holds distinct purpose – it's the carrier of **meaning**. In talking story, we can begin to make sense of our world, and in turn, our authentic selves, at a depth uncommon in western society. (It seems that our need to "get somewhere" has cut us off from the part of ourselves that might best help us "get there.")

Have you ever thought of your life as a *story*? You know, with a theme, a challenge or three, a celebration or two, and some character development (that would be *you*). It need not be a Hollywood production, (though it might be.) What matters is that it's **your** story. You *live* this story; you *tell* this story; and (perhaps a bit unsettling) you have *created* this story, too.

What if you were to stop for a while, step back from your life, and view things as an observer, rather than as a participant alone? As audience in your story, you create a sense of separateness from it. This frees you from everyday attachment to details, which allows you to **see** your story at work. You see how the story you *live* may differ from the story you *tell*. With practice noticing, you come to see how your life is a remarkable reflection of the consciousness you've brought to it – you've *created* your story into being, through thoughts that have lighted your path. Of course, this means you have the capacity to create your "tomorrow story" anew, every day.

Two major consequences of this idea: (1) if you can be the audience in your movie, then you can be *director*, too; just change the script to steer your life in new directions (an upcoming article); (2) bring depth and peace to your connections – with others, and with yourself. How? An example: When a comment from someone bothers you, if you knew they were just "living **their own** story," as they do every day, this might allow you to release the judgment you hold for them. And hey, if you also realized that your being bothered in the first place was a result of you living **your** story, this might allow you to release *your* reactivity as well. Such awareness can offer peace and freedom – by not taking things personally. (It's almost never personal, no matter your story.)

Early lessons told me I had to get things right, *be* right, and fix anything that was wrong – lessons so powerful they *became* "my story." After 30 years of stress from taking on such a futile pursuit, I saw the fallacy my life had become. The messages still live inside me, but I don't listen so much these days. The sadness of my story has given way to compassion for stories of others. So, when someone tells me what I *should* have done, or questions how I possibly *could* have done what I did, I stop. I hear them in a different way. They're just *living their story*. Perhaps their attempt to make *me* wrong will give *them* just enough energy to survive another day. It no longer needs to be up to me to point out that they've misidentified the enemy. I've learned, often painfully, that my best strategy for their judgmental behavior is to live **my** story, no matter what. My story: "Thank you." Or, as a friend says, "When someone tells me, 'You know what you should do...' I say, 'yes, thank you, I do.'" I love it.

Underneath the story line lives your authentic truth – who you really are. Both *seeing* life as story and *talking* story help you find that truth. And when you do, you find peace. Why? Because truth isn't filled with stress. Truth doesn't need to yell. Truth doesn't need to defend itself. Truth simply **is**. Falsehoods and opinions, on the other hand, have no firm foundation of their own, so they survive only with a constant supply of energy from the external world, the energy of defense. So the next time you hear a lot of contention, argument or yelling, look for the un-truth that's searching for a defense.

Exercise: I invite you to “talk story,” sharing with others that which holds meaning for you. Think of it as an opportunity to regain a bit of what you’ve lost (of yourself). Life’s everyday complaints, opinions, anecdotes and drama may have their place, but right now, you’re up to something bigger. Partly because this is a lost art, and partly because we’re uncomfortable with introspection, it may feel awkward to know where to start. *The hardest part of talking story is slowing down enough to allow story to unfold.* So take a bit of time, slow down, ponder the sources of meaning in your life; explore your story. The more you share with others, the more you receive in return. Simply allow the experience of storytelling to guide your next steps. Here are a few topics you might consider; pick one that touches you, or choose your own. Allow the conversation to flow its own natural course.

- **Personal culture** – What holds meaning in your life? How do your sources of meaning fit together in a way that makes you who you are? How does your personal culture sustain you during life’s inevitable trials?
- **Silence** – What is the role of silence in your life? Is it a source of inspiration or is it a source of irritation? How does your relationship with silence help define who you are?
- **Community** – How is community at work in your life? Of what communities do you feel yourself a member? Why? How does each community help sustain you, and how do you help sustain each community?
- **Nature** – Do you see yourself as a part of nature or separate from nature? Does the way you live match the way you see yourself? How is your life a representation of the interconnectedness of all life?

And then ... try out this month’s ideas for yourself. Next time you feel angry, upset, offended, etc. with someone else’s behavior, **stop** ... look ... listen. *Name* the behavior you find unacceptable. *Name* the emotion you experience. Then ask yourself how their behavior is really just *telling you something about their story* ... instead of being some purposeful attack on you. Then (and here’s the fun part) ask yourself how your response is really just *telling you something about your story*. This opens a path of learning, rather than the more common path of using your emotion to justify your upset. Later on, perhaps well after the fact, see if you can trace your emotions back to the perhaps-ancient thoughts, lessons, beliefs and experiences that *created* those emotions. Learning.

If you doubt this idea or practice, play it in reverse. Recall the last time someone was critical of you. (You know the drill – you *should*; why *did* you; how *could* you; why *didn’t* you; if only you had ...) Did you get upset? Did you become defensive? Did their behavior “ruin your day?” (or even an hour?) If *yes* to any of these, see if you can discover the false belief you were attempting to defend. This invites a level of objective honesty uncommon in our everyday experience, so be patient with yourself; I promise ... it’s in there. This is a huge opportunity to, as Brené Brown suggests in this month’s quote, “own your story, and love yourself through the process.”

Life lessons from nature: It’s spring. Go for a walk in the woods. Be an observer. Just notice how things work. If you’ve ever read any of Muir’s or Thoreau’s work, you likely know that both were very astute observers of the natural world. So, for a morning, be a modern-day Muir or Thoreau. Gaze outward; just notice.

As you walk, see what you discover ... as if for the first time. There’s possibility everywhere. You don’t need to work at finding it; just learn to not miss it when it shows up. Ask questions. Why does this tree have branches on one side but not the other? What’s underneath the leaf litter, and what value might it serve? Chickadees and nuthatches share the forest here in New England; how do their body plans tell you the way they divide the territory of a single tree? Make up your own questions. As you walk, you’ll know what they are. Questions are like that; they aren’t all known ahead of time. (When they are, we call it a science project.) Now, take the same walk, a few days after the first. This time, turn your gaze inward and observe the world *within* you. Who are you? How have you come to “fit” in this world? How do your thoughts define who you are? Are you your thoughts? Or, as Joseph Campbell suggested, ask yourself, “Am I the light bulb ... or the light ... or the energy that lights the light in the bulb?” It’s not about the answer; the value comes from pondering the question for a while.

Book of the month: *Flatland*, by Edwin Abbott. An 1884 classic about *perspective*. Abbott describes a world of two dimensions. Everything is flat – land, buildings, people. It’s all flat. Until a sphere shows up out of nowhere and upends their nice little safe world. Of course, this “new perspective” changes everything (new perspectives do that), and life changes for everyone. Parallels to “story,” to “viewpoints,” to our habituated ways of seeing. Even his “1884 viewpoint” is a bit of “perspective” in itself. Reminds me of the movie Pleasantville. And if you’re on Cape Cod, you’ll find this book at the Market Street Bookshop in Mashpee Commons; 508-539-6985.