



Soul Matters

Living Love Through The Practice of **Story**



Welcome to the Practice of Story

It's dangerous to tell yourself stories are tame. To treat them as something that lives only between the covers of a book. As something that can be easily kept on a shelf, taken down and put back up as we see fit. Stories are wilder than that. And more powerful.

This month is all about remembering that power.

Indeed, who of us hasn't felt controlled by a story? Stuck in a story? Hopeless about the way our story will end up? Simply put, our stories often write us as much as we write them.

For instance, the author [Rachel Naomi Remen](#) talks about how her family clings to the childhood story of her being the clumsy one of the family. Ask her adult friends and colleagues and they will describe her as graceful. They've never once seen her trip over her own feet or drop something. And yet, somehow, when Rachel goes back to her parents' house or attends a family reunion, she spills coffee on at least one outfit, stubs more than one toe and trips on more steps than she can count. By trying so hard to escape her family's narrative about clumsy little Rachel, she inevitably slips into it anew. Talk about the power of story!

That power plays out on a social level as well. Just think about our cultural struggles with economic or racial justice. The unconscionable income gap is often described as "natural" or "the result of complex global dynamics over which we have little control." Similarly, the story of race in our country is too often told as an "entrenched" story or minimized with a story about "how far we have come." The aim of all these cultural narratives is the same: to undermine action, and worse, to undermine our belief that things can change.

Which is why it's so important to remember that the ability to tell a new story has been at the center of our faith from the beginning. We rarely think of our UU history this way, but one of the beliefs that gave birth to our religion was the belief that human beings are authors of their stories, not passive characters in them.

It all goes back to that old theological debate for which our UU forebearers gave their lives. All around them people were saying that God had "[predestined](#)" not just the big story of humanity, but our smaller individual stories too. Supposedly, the argument went, some of us were slotted for heaven and others for hell. And God had written this list of sinners and saints in ink before the beginning of time. So there was nothing any of us could do about it.

"Well," said our spiritual ancestors, "that's a bit harsh, don't you think?!" And from there, they argued for a different way of seeing things. "Forget this extreme fate-driven story," they said. "Freedom has a much bigger role than you've been told. God is not so much the all-controlling author of the world's story as she is the magical muse that lovingly lures us to make our narratives our own." Shakespeare said, "All the world's a stage." Our spiritual ancestors basically said the same thing but with a friendly amendment added. And it went something like this: "All the world is an improv performance! Our job is to hop on the stage, pick up the storyline handed to us, and then put our own stamp on it!"

So fate and freedom. This month is much more about the tension between these two than one might have thought, leaving us with questions like: Are you an actor conforming to the scripts of others? Or have you found your way to becoming the director and screenwriter of your life? How are you struggling right now to regain control of your storyline? How are you and your friends working to regain control of the storyline of your community, and our country?

No matter which question is ours, the answer, friends, is the same: Don't give the storyline away.

Our Spiritual Exercises

It's one thing to analyze a theme; it's quite another to experience it. By pulling us out of the space of *thinking* and into the space of *doing*, these exercises invite us to figure out not just what we have to say about life, but also what life has to say *to us*!

Pick the exercise that speaks to you the most. **Come to your group ready to share why you picked the exercise you did, how it surprised you and what gift it gave you.**

Option A

Your Reverse Bucket List:

The Story of the Amazing Things You've Already Done

January is the time of New Year's resolutions and making plans for how we can make the story of our life better, happier or more impressive. One form of New Year's resolutions is a bucket list: a list of all the amazing things you want to do before you die. But there's a problem with this. By focusing on how we want to make our life story amazing in the future, we can easily lose sight of how our story is *already* amazing.

This is where a *Reverse Bucket List* comes in. A reverse bucket list is what it sounds like: the opposite of a bucket list. Instead of looking forward, it looks back. The gift of a reverse bucket list is how it makes us grateful for our life story *as it is*.

With all this in mind, give it a try yourself this month. For inspiration and guidance, check out examples [here](#) and [here](#). In particular, we encourage you to lean on [these five questions](#) as you think about what you want to include on your list:

1. What have you done that's interesting or different? (By your own standards, of course.)
2. What have you got right with relationships?
3. What's something you feel especially proud of?
4. How have you shown up for someone important—either yourself or someone you care for?
5. What's a hard thing you managed to see through and overcome?

Option B

A Life's Worth of Five and Six Word Stories

Writing [five and six word stories](#) has become popular in recent years for the way they pack such a powerful emotional punch in such few words. They also push the writer to distill the essence of what they are writing about. Check out some example five and six word stories [here](#) and [here](#).

With this as background, you are invited to use 5- or 6-word stories to distill the essence of *each chapter* of your life so far. How you break up the chapters of your life is up to you. You could use decades (my 20's, 30's, 40's etc.) or life stages (teen years, college, family life, middle age, retirement, etc.) or even key relationships (me and my parents, me and my siblings, me and my best friend, me and my partner, me and my kids, me and my job, me and God, etc.). Whichever approach you choose, write a 5- or 6-word story that captures something central about that life stage or relationship.

When you are done, ask yourself how this exercise caused you to view the chapters of your life in a new or deeper way.

Option C

The Stories Held by Your Home

Our homes don't just provide us shelter. They also hold and contain our stories. The old family couch helps us hold on to our father who sat there finishing the crosswords after work. The living room is where we took the picture of our daughter and her prom date. The phone in the hallway was the one where we first heard the news of the diagnosis. The kids' room contained their cradle, bunkbed and eventually the big "Keep Out!" sign on the door. The fireplace kept us warm after the break up. The kitchen table speaks of so many good friends who fed us with much more than food. In short, each room in our house has a tale to tell. Even a *few* tales to tell!

So, this month, use your creativity to explore these stories held by your home (either your current home or childhood home). Here are suggestions for how to go about it:

- Take a picture of each room in your current house or find pictures of a previous house or your childhood home. Then write a paragraph about a memory that happened in those rooms and what it meant to you. Consider placing each picture and paragraph on a single sheet and assembling them all into something akin to a scrapbook.
- Walk around your house and record yourself and/or a family member telling a story connected to each room. Make copies of the recording and give it to other family members as a gift.
- Paint or draw a representation of your home (or a past home of yours) with a single word written within each room that captures the emotion connected to it.

Here are some things to think about as you go about this exercise:

- Which room represents the "heart" of the house for you?
- Which room contains the most memories and what does that say about you and/or your family?
- Do any of the rooms have a distinctive voice?
- Is there a room in your house that has yet to feel like it is yours?
- Did your house/home heal you in any way?
- What did this exercise teach you about "home"?
- If you were to thank your home for the gifts it gave you, what would you say?

Option D

The Stories Held by Your Body

It's not just our homes that carry and contain our stories. It's [our bodies too](#). A scar tells the story of a courageous moment, and one equally laced with fear. Our wrinkles speak the tale of time and contain the gift of a many-chaptered life. Our mannerisms voice the narrative of the imprint our parents made on us. Our aches can tell stories of endurance or neglect. Our curves can speak stories of self-love or shame.

To honor our [story-laden bodies](#), pick one aspect of your body and explore the story it holds by...

- Telling its story in poetry or prose.
- Writing a thank you letter to it, for all it enabled you to experience and/or for all it did to care for you.
- Writing an apology letter to it, for how you may not have appreciated, loved or cared for it as much as you wish you had.
- Write up what you think it would say to you if it could speak. Or how a conversation between the two of you would go.

Come to your group ready to share your written piece as well as how this exercise altered or enriched your relationship with your body.

Option E

Where You're From, According to Them

Poet George Ella Lyon wrote a beautiful poem called, *Where I'm From*. You can read it [here](#) and listen to it [here](#). Over the years, thousands of writers, students and religious groups (including Soul Matters groups) have used her poem's structure to write their own version. It's a powerful way to explore and gain new insight into the story of where you are from. You can read some of those personal re-writes [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

Since we have done this as a Soul Matters exercise before, we're inviting you to do it again, but with a twist. Instead of you writing your own version, have **someone else** write **your version!** Pick someone who knows you well. The goal is to explore the way our story changes depending on who holds it. It also is a way to think about how we modify our story depending on who we tell it to.

Here's the template we've assembled to make writing it easier:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ZFfjVGEN2PHHZIdBbw59NFeZ9bwqRo6QNZh_pHwrFvw/edit?usp=sharing

Be sure to give your chosen person not only this template but also Lyon's original version of it and one or all of the example re-writes hyperlinked above.

Option F

Ask Them About Stories

One of the best ways to explore our monthly themes is to have conversations about them with people who are close to you. It's also a great way to deepen our relationships! Below is a list of questions to help you on your way. Be sure to let your conversation partner know in advance that this won't be a typical conversation. Telling them a bit about Soul Matters will help set the stage. *Remember to also answer the questions yourself as they are meant to support a conversation, not just a time of quizzing them.*

- In your family of origin, what story was told about you? Were you the funny one? The talented one? The troublemaker? The quiet one? The clumsy one? The rebel? The leader? The smart one? The "good" one? The difficult one? How has that story about you lived on, either by supporting your growth and relationships or by hindering them?
- What's your fondest memory of being read to as a child?
- If you had to put the current stage of your life into a genre right now, what genre would it be? Mystery? Romance? Thriller? Fantasy? Young adult? Fiction? Non-fiction? Satire? Self-help? Travel?
- What story told by or about your ancestors has shaped or supported you the most?
- What stories of survival, hope and connection are carried [in the scars](#), [aches](#) and shape of your body?
- Have you ever been healed or saved by a story?
- What is one story you hope will be told at your funeral?

Option G

Which Companion Piece Speaks to You?

Sometimes we come across a quote, song, article or movie and it perfectly captures what's going on for us right now or allows us to view our current circumstances in a new light. With this in mind, spend some time this month going through the *Companion Pieces* section below to **find the one piece that speaks most powerfully to you**. Come to your group ready to share the piece you picked, why it called to you & the journey it took you on.

Your Question

This list of questions is an aid for deep reflection. How you answer them is often less important than the journey they take you on.

So, read through the list of questions 2-3 times until one question sticks out for you and captures your attention, or as some faith traditions say, until one of the questions "shimmers."

Then reflect on that question using one or all of these questions:

- *What is going on in my life right now that makes this question so pronounced for me?*
- *How might my inner voice be trying to speak to me through it?*
- *How might Life or my inner voice be trying to offer me a word of comfort or challenge through this question?*



1. In your family of origin, what story was told about you? Were you the funny one? The talented one? The troublemaker? The quiet one? The clumsy one? The rebel? The leader? The smart one? The difficult one? The "good" one? How has that story about you lived on, either by supporting your growth and relationships or by hindering them?
2. What's your fondest memory of being read to as a child?
3. If you had to put the current stage of your life into a genre right now, what genre would it be? Mystery? Romance? Thriller? Fantasy? Young adult? Fiction? Non-fiction? Satire? Self-help? Travel?
4. If you were to put the story of your *childhood* into a genre, what would it be? And what moment pivoted your life from that genre to another?
5. What story told by or about your ancestors has shaped or supported you the most?
6. Twenty years from now, when we tell the story of our current political situation, how do you think that story will differ from the way you are telling it today?
7. Is it time to forgive your story for having a life of its own?
8. What do you leave out of the telling of your life story that wants to be let back in?
9. When it comes to the story of your life right now, which best describes you: A character in it? The author of it? The editor of it? The bookseller/promoter of it?
10. Authors go to great pains to write "in their own voice." So far, have you written your life story in your own voice?
11. Have you ever been healed or saved by a story?
12. Is it possible that your story of facing headwinds is blinding you to the many winds at your back?
13. What stories of survival, hope and connection are carried in the scars, aches and shape of your body? What might it mean to thank your body for the stories it has carried?
14. As your child's identity started to bloom, what story did you tell yourself about how their life would unfold? Were you close?
15. What is one story you hope will be told at your funeral?
16. **What's your question?** Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to find it.

Companion Pieces

Recommended Resources for Personal Exploration & Reflection

The following resources are not required reading. Nor are they intended to be analyzed in your group. Instead they are here to companion you on your personal journey this month, get you thinking and open you up to new ways of embodying the practice of story in your life.

Wise Words

Stories are told as spells for binding the world together.

John Rouse

There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.

Maya Angelou

I now see how owning our story and loving ourselves through that process is the bravest thing that we will ever do.

Brené Brown

When we deny our stories and disengage from tough emotions, they don't go away; instead, they own us, they define us. Our job is not to deny the story, but to defy the ending.

[Brené Brown](#)

At some point we have to understand that we do not need to carry a story that is unbearable. We can observe the story, which is mental; feel the story, which is physical; let the story go, which is emotional; then forgive the story, which is spiritual.

[Joy Harjo](#)

storytelling is a way to give someone an experience they haven't had yet, or maybe didn't even know was possible.

[adrienne maree brown](#)

Those without power risk everything to tell their story and must. Someone, somewhere will hear your story and decide to fight, to live and refuse compromise.

[Laura Hershey](#)

The question is not so much 'What do I learn from stories?' as 'What stories do I want to live?'

[David Loy](#)

I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'

Alasdair MacIntyre

You are the main character in the story of your life, but other people are the main characters of their own lives. And sometimes you can find healing just by playing a supporting role in someone else's experience.

Timothy Kurek

A good story is one that makes you good, or at least better.

[Daniel Taylor](#)

Listening to both sides of a story will convince you that there is more to a story than both sides.

Frank Tyger

My story is not a pleasant one; it is neither sweet nor harmonious, as invented stories are; it has the taste of nonsense and chaos, of madness and dreams — like the lives of all who stop deceiving themselves.

Herman Hesse

Those who tell the stories, rule the world.

Proverb, exact source unknown

anyone who's organized for any period of time knows, if we don't have a story that people can see themselves a part of, it doesn't matter how good our data and our facts are, people are not going to radically change.

[adrienne maree brown](#)

When you uproot myth [and story], dogma is the result.

[Katharine Weinmann](#)

Humans don't fight over territory and food; they fight over imaginary stories in their minds.

[Yuval Noah Harari](#)

It is precisely because great narratives seduce us that the best stories deserve the greatest skepticism.

Derek Thompson

A story is a trick for sneaking a message into the fortified citadel of the human mind.

Jonathan Gottschall

Fairy tales are more than true: not because they tell us that dragons exist, but because they tell us that dragons can be beaten.

Attributed to G.K. Chesterton

What if the creation story in Genesis had featured a flawed deity who was understanding and sympathetic rather than autocratic and rigid?... What if the animals had decided on their own names? What if Adam and Eve had simply been admonished for their foolishness?... What kind of a world might we have created with that kind of story?

[Thomas King](#)

I see my dad through my own filter and then present it to the world as whole, when really it is inherently inadequate—full of the holes of my own limitations. My story of my dad is my story of my dad and me. Always.

[Courtney Martin](#)

Most of us spend most of the time living in the spaces between big events. We live our small stories... Life's best moments happen in the cracks, in the little moments we hardly notice, that pass us by day-by-day.

[David Majister](#)

Remember, you don't fear people whose stories you know.

Margaret Wheatley

Videos & Podcasts

How to Narrate a Life Story of Hope Rather than Despair

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Brpk26Oq4aE>

On the Courageous Edits that Free Us From Our Narrow Stories

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_MQr4IHm0c

Telling Stories that Make Room for Us All

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JfBYz6tab8>

Rewriting the Stories of Our Lives

<https://open.spotify.com/episode/3VD2XYWO4fZCUkPRcl5wrN>

The [Story](#) of Time

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rB3CgEnxnYY>

Creating New Narratives Through "Portrait Quilts"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yNIB_2luMY8

For Use in Your Meditation Practice

- [Writing Your Story](#)
- [Change Your Story](#)
- [Opening to the Opposite of Your Story](#)

Articles

What Your 'Life Story' Really Says About You

<https://www.huffpost.com/entry/how-your-life-story-is-a-n-4284006>

Six principles from narrative psychology to help you better understand your “life story.”

How Invisible Stories Hold Us Back

<https://ozanvarol.com/how-invisible-stories-hold-you-back/>

How the “Strict Father” Story Won the Election

<https://www.theframelab.org/some-lessons-of-the-2024-election/>

Why Telling Our Own Story Is So Powerful for Black Americans

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_telling_our_own_story_is_so_powerful_for_black_americans

This Simple Story Can Save the Planet

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/11/08/magazine/yuval-noah-harari-interview.html>

More [here](#) and [here](#)

Books

[Between the Listening and the Telling: How Stories Can Save Us](#)
[Wellness](#)
[Ninety-Nine Stories of God](#)

Movies

[Big Fish](#)
[Boyhood](#)
[Wag the Dog](#)
[When They See Us](#)
[Aloha 'Aina](#)
[Stories: How humanity makes its meaning](#)

Music

Each of our [theme-based playlists](#) - on Spotify and [YouTube](#) - is organized as a journey of sorts, so consider listening from beginning to end and using it as a personal musical meditation.

Click [HERE](#) for the **Spotify playlist** on Story.
Click [HERE](#) for the **YouTube playlist** on Story.

More Monthly Inspiration from Soul Matters!

Our Facebook Inspiration Page:

<https://www.facebook.com/soulmatterssharingcircle/>

Our Instagram Page:

Find us at "soul_matters_circle"

Packet Introduction Credit Note:

Unless explicitly noted otherwise, the introductions of these packets are written by our Team Lead, Rev. Scott Tayler. Rev. Scott gives permission for his pieces to be used in any way that is helpful, including in newsletters, worship and in online service/recordings.



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