

The Importance of Telling the Story

It is important to tell our stories.

Storytelling is how we preserve our history. Storytelling is how we share our faith. Storytelling is how we leave legacies. Storytelling can reveal the character of the teller, it informs the listener, and storytelling can inspire the listener to action. Who are the storytellers in our lives? Ministers, schoolteachers, parents, authors, leaders of every kind influence and change us by telling stories. I am personally motivated by listening to a good speaker or reading a well told story, and I would wager the same is true for everyone in this room tonight. These lessons learned don't always have to be in the form of a serious, heavy story. Some of the best storytellers can leave us with a great learning that comes in the form of a humorous tale. I recognize that I'm building up a lot of pressure on the telling of stories, but I believe it is important. Each of us has stories to tell, and we need to develop a way to do so – whether in writing, audio recording, or simply conversing with loved ones.

I believe it is equally important that we think carefully about how we pass along our stories. What emphasis do we put on facts, accuracy? I might contend that there may be too much emphasis on facts. A study of recorded history shows that there are often mistakes or omissions. I think it is safe to suggest that there are usually mistakes and omissions. For every story told there is, as Paul Harvey taught us, the “rest of the story”. Many years after studying American History in high school, I read a book titled “The Peoples History of the United States” by Howard Zinn. I would wager that if I asked this group to tell the story of Christopher Columbus, 95% or more here would have the same version – the Nina, Pinta, and the Santa Maria - the one we learned in school. If you dig a little deeper and read Columbus's actual journals, you learn of the exploitation and greed that drove him. In the same vein, I suspect that most of us here would answer “true” to the statement that the Civil war was fought to end slavery. You'd be wrong – the Civil War was fought over economics, money. The US economy was in great peril of collapse, and the use of free labor by half the states was the root cause. If the situation wasn't corrected - and soon- there would have been an economic depression far greater than the one experienced in 1929. Freeing slaves was a byproduct of the war.

Winston Churchill hit the nail on the head when he said “History is written by the victors”. The telling of stories is always from the perspective of the writer or storyteller and often fails to reflect the views of the characters in the story.

There have been attempts to tell the “rest of the story” over the years, such as Howard Zinn's work, but many times we don't want to hear the truth. We are much more comfortable with the polished and pretty version than we are of some of the nasty truth with its scars, warts and other unpleasanties.

Sometimes the efforts to correct the story are met with other misfortune. I was thrilled to meet and work with a professor from Pacific University named Tracy Faulconer. Some of you here tonight met her when she was here conducting research and following up on stories from “The Eden Peace Witness”. At the time of Tracy's birth in 1944, her father, Harry A. Faulconer, was living in a Civilian Public Service camp. Following the War the Faulconers remained in close contact with Harry's fellow conscientious objectors. This association had a strong influence on Tracy. As a committed pacifist, Tracy helped teach

people about pacifism and about how to gain conscientious objector status. Throughout her career as an educator, Tracy studied and assembled a massive collection of copied documents and research notes relating to both her father and the larger Civilian Public Service system. Tracy was also instrumental in coordinating an oral history project that interviewed numerous conscientious objectors. Tracy was chair of a national organization of history teachers and was spearheading an effort to rewrite high school history books to include a section on conscientious objection. You see, all of our current texts teach that the only response to war is military service – there is no mention of the CO position. She was awarded a Fulbright Scholar Award, and used it to further her research. Unfortunately Tracy never had the opportunity to complete her work. Tracy was diagnosed with lung cancer in 2006 and she died in her home on December 25, 2008. Her research files and oral history files are in a library archives collecting dust. Who will tell the rest of the story? Who will change the way history is taught in public schools?

The challenge in telling the story is presenting the listener or reader with the truth. You can present facts as you see them, but facts don't always illuminate the truth.

I can get onto shaky ground here if I begin to name local examples of recorded history, as some of the folks who helped to record this history are in the room tonight. But I will be brave (or foolish) enough to make a few suggestions.

I've seen many wonderful, well researched genealogies or family trees. I've personally done the work to try to complete my family's story. There are countless hours involved in this work, and after reviewing Krehbiel, Stucky, Goering and other family trees, I've come to the conclusion that the only really, truly interesting one is my own. You see, all those other facts that you have gathered and recorded really don't tell me the story of your family. When I think about an individual member of the Schrag or Goering clan, it is rare that I would wonder how many siblings Grandpa Jake had, or if there are double cousins. What impacts me is the legacy of the family or individual. What I see, what the observer sees, is the truth of the story. The truth is what rises up out of the endless details of facts and figures. At Eden Church, we have a wonderful, dedicated group that spends countless hours recording a detailed history of our congregation. This is all great stuff, and when we are seeking an accurate detail of our history, the data they are gathering is priceless. but – the story, the truth, of the Eden congregation is what it stands for. The story of Eden is its mission work, the service to others, the pastors who came out of the group, and its influence in the community at large. I say this to stress the importance of the story we tell. The facts are a necessary foundation for the story, but the product of history is the story or truth that emerges.

If you visit the Swiss Mennonite memorial near the Hopefield church you will see the monuments there with plaques. On these plaques there are a lot of facts detailing the arrival of the people in Kansas. But guess what – as diligent as the storytellers were in recording the facts, they missed some information. Space may have been the restriction from telling more, but the net result is an incomplete telling of the story. If a visitor were to take in all that is presented there, they would leave with a perspective based on facts that may or may not be entirely complete. The question is - did they leave with the truth??.... I will suggest that the answer is yes, but, the follow-up question is – did they learn the whole truth? Telling the story is important.

Let me give you another example – This happened to me a few weeks ago when I was in California. I was representing Mennonite Disaster Service at the annual national convention of the Mennonite Brethren Church. While working in our MDS booth, a gentleman named Harold walked up and read my name tag. He milled around for a while, and came up close and read my name tag again. He then asked – “are you the Jeff Koller that wrote that Eden Peace book?” I told him yes, I am the guy. He suddenly hugged me then grabbed my hand and shook it for what seemed like 10 minutes. He exclaimed “you did more for telling the story of how Mennonites revolutionized the mental health industry in America than has ever been told before!” I was taken aback, and puzzled at his interpretation of what he read. Now, you must understand that I’m kind of slow on the uptake sometimes – not necessarily the sharpest tack in the box. Some days later, I was thinking about the exchange and realized that he read the truth in our Eden story – that is, - the truth as it appeared to him. You see, the focus of the book I did was to tell the story of a strong people of faith who said no to the military machine. I was telling the story of pacifism, of conscientious objection. but- through the stories shared in the book, Harold heard the story of our people’s service in mental hospitals and the way they worked to improve the care of the patients there. He read the truth that emerged from the facts recorded in the book. You see, as I stated earlier, the facts are secondary to our story. What emerges is the truth. The facts are important, and need to be recorded, but they are more often the vehicle or the means to get the story told so that the truth can emerge.

I’ll tell another story related to the book. Actually, this relates, perhaps, the very genesis of the book. When Becky and I were youth sponsors at Eden almost 40 years ago, we took our youth group on a field trip to Camp Funston, near Junction City KS. Walt Neufeld was our pastor at the time, and was a mentor to me as I processed issues of non-resistance. We decided that it would be a powerful and significant learning opportunity for our young people to see where their forefathers were during World War I. There were a handful of men from Eden who experienced WWI who still living at the time. We invited them to go along on the trip to serve as a resource and share their stories. Several went along, and told stories of their time there. There were a lot of tears shed, and very meaningful exchanges between the young and old on our visit. One of the memories I have of the occasion was one of terrific loss. I’m referring to the loss of history, loss of a story. You see, we invited Jacob Goering (Vic’s father) to go along. I made several trips to Memorial home to encourage Jake to join us. On the last visit, Jake finally explained, through tears, that he just couldn’t ever return to that place. The horrors and injustices he experienced there scarred him for life, and the very prospect of a return brought tears to his eyes, and a fear that was physically visible in his countenance. I apologized for provoking the memory, and he quickly assured me that it was not my fault, as I had no way of knowing how he felt. Some years later, I visited with Vic about this, and Vic shared that dad (Jake) never told any of the family about his time at Funston. It was too painful for him to relate. The point of sharing this experience is to shine a light on the significant loss of a story. Jake’s story had the potential to change lives. I’m sure that if we would know what he experienced, listeners would be moved to a position of peace, a position that would resist the military institution in our country. I do know that Jake’s untold story had a profound influence on my life. Jake’s pain combined with the stories of the men that did go along have never left me, and drove me to record as many stories as I can.

Allow me to shift gears for a moment. I want to share a story from India. I would imagine that many of you have heard the story of the blind men and the elephant. For those who may not know the story, it goes something like this. The story says that six blind men were asked to determine what an elephant looked like by feeling different parts of the elephant's body. The blind man who feels a leg says the elephant is like a pillar; the one who feels the tail says the elephant is like a rope; the one who feels the trunk says the elephant is like a tree branch; the one who feels the ear says the elephant is like a hand fan; the one who feels the belly says the elephant is like a wall; and the one who feels the tusk says the elephant is like a solid pipe.

The king explains to them:

All of you are right. The reason every one of you is telling it differently is because each one of you touched the different part of the elephant. So, actually the elephant has all the features you mentioned.

The ancient Indian texts often explain the concept *syādvāda* with the [parable](#) of the blind men and an elephant, which addresses the manifold nature of truth. This parable resolves the conflict, and is used to illustrate the principle of living in harmony with people who have different belief systems, and that truth can be stated in different ways.

What do you suppose are our “elephants”??

When you tell a story, and you relate it truthfully from your perspective, are you describing the trunk or the tail? The story of the Swiss Mennonite experience in the US is 140 years old. The story is not done. In fact, the story is still unfolding, and those of you here are players in the story. Significant milestones are still happening in the life of our churches and our communities. Often times these milestones reflect an occurrence that is painful or uncomfortable for us to relate. We still have events that hurt so much we don't even want to talk about it for fear of deepening the wound. Still, these are the events that shape our collective story. How do we faithfully record events that are fresh and raw? We do need to tell the story, and record the story. The challenge then, is to have the vision and the wisdom to record the facts in such a way that when the story is told in the future, the listener or reader will harvest the truth of the story. One of my beloved mentors in my church family who was a great man of peace and a deeply thoughtful and caring soul refused to tell stories or relate incidents that would perpetuate a story or rumor that might someday hurt someone. I respected him so much for this practice. Recently his son told me of a time when the son made a comment about a friend of his. His dad, my mentor, replied with the comment “you shouldn't be surprised by that considering his family”. Even though Dad didn't pass on a story that would degrade the family, he still left the message that the behavior in question was typical of “those folks”. And thus the stereotyping continues, even in the most passive way.

Historians are very careful to record the facts as accurately as possible. They check references, and recheck. They are ultimately telling a story, and exposing the truth in the story as the facts allow. And yet, regardless of how carefully a historian puts words to paper, he or she cannot control what the reader or listener will actually hear. The book “Prairie People” by David Haury was a carefully and thoughtfully written volume that related facts from archives and personal stories. When it was released, there were folks who didn't like how the story they read was presented – mind you – others read the

same story and didn't read the same truth. The same is true for the "Eden Peace Witness". I have been chewed out for the way stories are presented in the book. And the interesting part is that everyone else who read the same story arrived at a different truth, and offered praise for its telling.

I'll make one more observation on the subject of storytelling. My opening statement was "it is important to tell the story".

It is!!

This group has a story to tell that has the potential to influence folks to pursue peace, to share the love of God, and make our world a better place. WOW!!

So I encourage you to record the data, compile the records, and shape them into the story of a people of faith. But here is my word of caution. Share your stories in a responsible, thoughtful and considered way. Here's a thought that was shared with me very recently. A friend of mine said this – "I have a dog. My dog is gentle and docile and would never harm anyone. I know this to be true. I take my dog on walks, and I use a leash. It is one of those neat retractable leashes. When there is no one coming towards me, I release the catch on the leash to let my dog range out 20 feet or so. But when a stranger approaches, I quickly reel the leash in to just a few feet in front of me. You see, the stranger doesn't know my dog, and what a friendly dog it is. Once the person gets used to my dog, they recognize what a nice, friendly dog it is. Then I am OK with releasing the leash to let the dog range out a little more."

I ask you to think about this story and replace the word dog with the word story. I suggest we share our story the way my friend walks his dog. When you are in an environment that you know the listener, tell your story more freely. When you don't know the listener, keep it closer to your vest. In the same way that I cautiously suggested that your genealogy isn't very meaningful to me, the Swiss Mennonite story isn't very significant to new people who may be attracted to our churches. If our mission as the church is to share the love of God and grow the family of God, we must be judicious in putting our history out as it may come across as being part of the admission criteria to the church. Always remember that sharing our faith and growing the kingdom of God is our first and primary calling. The presence of a historical display in the church means nothing to the new member. Believe it or not, the existence of the Swiss Mennonite Cultural and Historical Society means nothing to the new or seeking member.

I can tell story after story of people who have been attracted to the peace position of the Anabaptist faith, and none of that attraction is to the Swiss Mennonite migration story. Isn't that amazing!! The attraction to our faith is the fact that, to the seeker, Anabaptist theology most closely lays out a plan to follow the teachings of Christ. It is after a person is drawn to the church and adheres to the faith that adding the history of the Swiss Mennonite story becomes a reinforcement or enhancement to the new follower.

So tell the story and use your retractable leash with wisdom.

Continue to nurture this organization so that the story will continue. This is a valuable organization, and the story we have to tell has the power to make a positive change in our world. Do whatever you can to record our history and tell your story so that the listener or reader will see the truth that emerges!