

On the Importance of Having and Sharing “Story”

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My wife, Inger, and I both celebrated our 70th birthdays this Fall. Looking back from 70 and realizing that what years may be before me are likely to be relatively few, I occasionally allow myself the fantasy of being able to be 26 years old again, with that young, pliable body with all its vim and vigor and vitality. I even recall thinking at that age that if I lived to be 45, that would be a full life. And a couple of hundred years ago, to reach 45 in fact would have been better than average. Now I realize that in my maturation through adulthood, 45 is truly mid-life, however relatively few people once lived to older ages. The real problem with my occasional longing for the physicality of youth is that it comes paired with the mind of youth. And from where I sit now, I can do without my 26-year-old mind, as educated as it was supposed to have been at that time.

In fact, I am not especially interested in yesterday's mind. I find each day's encounters just too provocative as I consider the spectacular results of science as set against the utter foolishness of so much of humankind in its various narrow-minded, self-serving iterations. With regard to the latter narrow-mindedness in the current context, have a look at the expose by Greg Palast, Vulture's Picnic, 2011, which reveals the calculated, behind the scene sleaze and greed at the highest levels of our government and financial institutions that led to the near world-wide financial collapse and the Great Recession, in which we are presently mired. Bordering on depression in the face of what the day reveals of human degradation, I descend into my “settling tank” during each night's journey, and I tend to emerge to meet the next morning with some new composition of ideas to address the glaring disparity between human potential and our willingness to waste it. So, I am a changed person today and everyday, and to date I believe each cycle in my mental life results in either increased scope of understanding or needed refinement in details. As a consequence of dwelling in this continuous process, I would not trade my mind of the present to obtain the body of my youth – even with its prospects for greatly increased longevity. I have sacrificed at the alter of a lot of experience to get to my present mind, and I would rather have the short time remaining with it than a long term body and a mind of relative ignorance.

At 70, I know that the class I am in is directly in line for graduation into the unknown. In this regard, it seems that 70 is some kind of threshold and beyond it the slope of life takes a steeper gradient into the ultimate afterlife pit. As this

slope steepens, losing close friends is the hardest part of being 70. In the climb from 60 to 70, I noticed that maintenance tends to become a greater portion of each day's activities, but to encounter the terminal illnesses and deaths of intimate relatives and friends – not premature or accidental death, is just plain HARD to deal with and to get over, especially when many seem so ill prepared to cope with it. Losing first pets, then grandparents, and then parents to the grim reaper is tough, but it is just a warm up to the effects of losing "Your Own." Some, who come to this ultimate juncture have no "Story." By this I mean that these unfortunates have no way to address the challenge of death as an absolute end. They have no Story to assist themselves and their loved ones to cope with the loss in death, and especially the seemingly bottomless loss of life-long spouses who were also soul mates. To share a hug with these "storyless" surviving spouses is to sense their near paralysis as if they could fall right through the floor. While I dread having to endure the possible loss of Inger, we both do have our "stories," and we have shared them with one another and with our family and friends.

As engagements with death become ever more present in my surroundings, I have noticed that in spite of my stimulating mental life every day, a kind of sadness seeps into the fabric of my days beyond 70. And the real problem is that I know what starts out at the edges as a mere morning mist will become a full day of rain over time – if I am around to witness it. Now, I realize that other than seeking out young friends I cannot do anything either about the loss accumulating around me among my existing family and age mates or about its magnification due to the general lack of preparation for it among the storyless. What I can do is explore what makes for a "Good" Story – at least for me – and recommend that others make the effort to find Story for themselves and thereby not get themselves or those around them Stuck in Grief.

In the current context, some in their search for Story have gravitated very vocally to religious fundamentalism while most individuals in developed cultures continue the gradual withdrawal from the traditional religious stories which were codified in the period after the first millennium A.D. and which reflect the earth and human centered assumptions about the world and universe at that time. Today's fundamentalists, whether Christian or Muslim or Hindu etc., have their old stories that they believe in literally, and they are still willing to go to war in the form of crusades or jihads to impose or defend these stories as singularly capturing THE Truth. As a social and cultural scientist, I am well aware of the huge variety of religious stories [technically mythologies] in different cultures, all functioning pretty much equally to assuage uncertainty and to support the social order. While I can personally relate to the animistic versions of these belief systems – which occur mostly in aboriginal societies, I find none of the rest

satisfying in the context of what we now know about the nature and extent of the universe and the absolutely infinitesimal and insignificant role humans play in it. In a known universe of 100 billion galaxies, each with at least 100 billion star systems, with a likely total of at least 50 quadrillion planets, and all of this less than 5% of the stuff of this universe, in what may well be multiple universes, it is simply not tenable for me to imagine that God is focused on one very recent species – humans, on one planet – Earth, much less that this God is consumed with evaluating every little action of every one of us humans throughout our lives in behalf of rendering a final judgment – up or down – at our individual deaths. “Does not compute” applies all the more for me if we add in the requirement that this God at one point in the 200,000-year history of modern humankind was so concerned about the ill behavior of one small group of people that He/She sent them a messiah, which they rejected, as the best way to provide guidance to ALL of humanity. Far beyond “does not compute” is the requirement that if I do not believe in this messiah as providing the Only way, God will send me directly into the Eternal Fire or put me on indefinite hold for entry to any form of survival after death.

I think I have a lot of company among most moderns who are not willing to bypass the significant facts of contemporary awareness and continue to accept “on faith” any of our traditional religious stories. However, the problem for many such moderns, and a problem that secondarily and ironically encourages the retreat into fundamentalism, is that we have identified no other collective Story to substitute for these religious stories. Some individuals exercise the option for a partial retreat and cull traditional stories to extract a social philosophy together with a generalized Deist perspective. But while this approach to Story may suffice to guide living, it does little to address the challenge presented by death. And thus we find the many, who now live lives mostly devoid of significant suffering or experience with death – even in the animal foods they consume, unprepared to deal with death and left inadvertently with the full-on encounter in the bottomless pit of despair. A few moderns are seekers, and after sifting mostly on their own through many alternative stories and scientific facts, they discover their own story, but the norm has become for a great many moderns to remain adrift and essentially storyless – at least as regards the challenge of death.

For me at 70, the Almighty as the final thumbs up or thumbs down Decision Maker at the time of my death, together with whatever other embellishments accompany this notion, makes it necessary for me to fit a very large square peg into a tiny round hole. And the idea that this “decision” will be based somehow on a measure of the “goodness” of my overall behavior during my life makes my life entirely too defensively motivated. I do not need a vision of life as one

where I strive to avoid being “bad” so I can accumulate “credits” to tip the scale in a heavenly direction. Life is just too valuable to have fear and avoidance as its primary motivations. I want a story that motivates me to give life all I’ve got at the same time that I am respectful of the existence of all that surrounds me. I am not interested in a Story that makes my destiny to be a meddling ancestor, or a benevolent ghost, or a feathered angel, or a slithering serpent, or a soul afloat on streets of gold, or the chief of a harem of 69 virgins, or a reincarnated toad or Napoleon the 6 billionth. I like who I am, and I haven’t any interest in “becoming” some One thing Else in any Singular setting.

The “Story” that I like and the one that does not require me to shelve all Science is for me at my death to transition into the infinite All of energy and matter and become part of the Everything from which I originally emerged. I am fulfilled by the notion that ultimately I am constructed from components of supernovae explosions, that my “parts” collectively come from Everywhere in the Universe, and that at my death I “survive” to once again participate in becoming part of Anything and Everything. And if I am of Everything and become potentially Everything once again, I had better take care of “Myself” and respect all that is around me while I am this particular manifestation of the Everything that is Me. I am especially pleased that my story accords with, rather than contradicts, what is currently known through Science. I also really like the fact that mine is a simple story free of the need to appeal to priests or divine kings or to placate a pantheon of judgmental gods or ancestors. And not incidentally, my story does not require me to either sacrifice my first-born or kill my “infidel” neighbor. Moreover, my story can exist in any modern society without either undermining it or supporting it. And since clearly no one has cornered the market on the truth of “life after death,” I figure my brief story is as good as anyone else’s.

At age 70, in my application for the Afterlife, I contend that we all have the right to choose our own story – so long as it does not justify denying someone else’s story. I am not interested in others adopting my story, and I do not contend that my story embodies the Truth about death, survival, and life after death. But the fact is that my story satisfies ME as I contemplate my own death, and with others knowing this, whether they agree with my story or not, they can more easily release me and avoid undue grief. My view is that we all have a better chance to live a productive life, first if we allow each person to discover his or her own story, and second, if we all back off on sponsoring evangelical crusades to convert one another and if we release the requirement that we all must tramp down the road, lock step into Armageddon Stadium.

As a human, I know that I am designed to survive a variety of positive and negative experiences with a range of appropriate emotions. I cannot really expect to appreciate Joy if I have never encountered Sorrow. Suffering from all varieties of causes is a central theme and a necessary precondition in most religions exactly because it is the goal of overcoming it that these religions propose to achieve. Experiencing loss, and especially loss at death, is to suffer the emotion of sorrow, and we all need our stories to assist in coping as gracefully as possible with it. At the personal level, Christianity, Islam, Hindi, Buddhism, etc. are all about achieving awareness to the point where we can overcome loss and the sorrow that accompanies it. There are many stories, and I have my own story. Hopefully you have yours. And in the final analysis, Having a Story to address loss, suffering and sorrow, a story that we can share with others without the hubris of evangelicalism, is what we all need and should be worthy of.

May You Have a Story that You Share with Those Around You and that Does No Harm to Others.