

# What's your story?

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Powered by God for life.

Stories. Our world is filled with stories. Stories delight us, scare us, inspire us, horrify us, comfort us and numb us. They tell us what is happening in other parts of the world and can mobilize us for causes that might not touch our lives otherwise. They try to convince us to buy products that we previously did not realize we

needed. Stories tell us of the quality of a school or company or entertainment. They give us glimpses into the lives of people we admire, of the struggles they have overcome and mistakes made along the way. They teach us history so hopefully we can learn from those who have gone before us. The reasons and purposes for telling stories are endless. But stories are double-edged swords that can bind us as well as free us, that can narrow our world as easily as they can open the world up to us. So the question becomes, what stories do we allow in our lives?

I love stories. I love listening to people tell stories and I love reading stories, although I tend to stick to stories with happy endings. I remember family gatherings as a kid when my grandfather and grandmother, aunts and uncles, parents and cousins would sit around reminiscing and laughing. My most powerful memories of family stories come from my grandfather's family. My grandfather was the oldest of four boys who lost their father at an early age. Living in a rural part of Canada, they and their mother had a rough time finding food for the family, but, by hook and by crook, they made it and stayed together. Sitting around with my family and listening to these stories was always my favorite aspect of us all getting together.

It was not until I was in college that I really looked at the messages in those stories and the purpose they serve for everyone in my family. In college, I took a course called "Folklore and Folklife" and the professor asked a question that has stuck in my mind since then - what do your family stories tell you to be? As we explored this question, I was bowled over by the realization that so much of my behavior, so many of my opinions and so much of what I valued were an extension of my family's stories. The rugged, self sufficiency, the connection to nature and hunting, the pride in blue collar work and the friendly teasing of those around you are themes that come up again and again in stories my family tells.

Even as I smile as I think about my family telling stories, I must acknowledge that these stories can be both positive and negative. I am fortunate because the stories my family tells encourage the kids as individuals to find their way in the world. My family taught me how to be in touch with nature and to enjoy being in the silence of the woods. I was taught how to live simply and to be smart with my money. But, then, there were the stories of certain family members that always seemed to point out how those people mess up at everything. Now, don't get me wrong, some of the funniest stories are stories of mistakes people make. But when that is the only type of stories ever told about those few family members, there is a sense in which those family members are being told that they just do not measure up to the family values. When stories continually repeat the same core, negative message – you are weak, you are stupid, you will not succeed in anything, etc. -, they can bind the one in the story as something less than they have been born to be.

Even when the stories are positive, they can be traps. When a person is told repeatedly that he is the one who is going to succeed, does he then take fewer risks in fear of failure? When a person is told repeatedly what a good athlete she is, what if she continues to compete even when injured because that is her only identity? Stories, both positive and negative, can bind a person more tightly than any physical restraints.

As I was growing up, I unknowingly fashioned myself to be all that my family stories told me I should be. Much of this was a positive thing because the values of my family have helped me to be successful in life so far. But, as I have spent more time on my own, trying to discover and be true to who I really am, I have had to fight my way out of the binding ties of these stories when *who* I am has been in conflict with these values. Just recently, I was reminded of the power of these stories in my life. A few months ago, a few professors from my department and I were carrying some boxes from one of Suffolk University's buildings to another when a gentleman on the street offered to help us with our

**For the Bible text for this talk Click  
(or control-click)  
[Jeremiah 9:23-24 & Genesis 32:22-32](#)  
(You must be connected to the Internet)**

burdens. He took the boxes from my hands and walked with us to the other building. After he put down the boxes and left with our thanks, one of the professors said, in a sarcastic manner, Johanna always relies on the kindness of strangers. My first reaction was to cringe inside because I had failed to be self-sufficient and to assert my strength. But, in the next second, I realized how true his statement was in my life and what a positive thing it is for me. I have lived all over the country and overseas and I have traveled further. If not for the kindness of strangers, my life and travels would be much flatter, much duller. By being open to the kindness of others, I have lived a richer life, a life full of friends met in some rather random places. In that moment, I felt myself to be a little more freed from the need to be so self-sufficient. I think I will run up against the stories in my head and heart from the rest of my life – for good and bad. And I think this is part of becoming an adult.

As I have grown old, I have less opportunity to hear my family tell stories but my life is still filled with stories. As my friends and family know, I am someone who meets people everywhere I go and I love to hear their stories.

In Genesis 32, a story is told about someone Jacob meets in the dark of night, the night before he meets his brother for the first time in years. Years ago, Jacob stole his brother's birthright and then ran for his life. In the years since they last saw each other, Jacob has married and has prospered and now he is going to be seeing this brother again who he knowingly betrayed. If I were in his shoes, I would be pretty fearful that my brother would try to get revenge at the first opportunity. The night before Jacob meets him, he has this strange encounter with a "man". After a night full of struggle, Jacob is still holding his own and the man asks Jacob to free him. In the subsequent conversation, the man (who is commonly believed to be an angel) tells Jacob his life story in a few words, "You have fought with God and with men and have won.". I do not know about you but I think I would walk away from that encounter with a lot of courage to face whatever the day brings. The story the angel tells is of one who endures and overcomes so, whatever happens with his brother, Jacob can be hopeful that he will be okay. What a powerful tool the angel uses to encourage this man.

As I meet people, the stories they tell are an important part of whether our friendship deepens or not. Just as stories told around and about us as kid can form the foundations of who we grow into, the stories told around and about us as adults can cheapen or enrich our lives now. For example, some people only know how to tell sarcastic and biting stories and others only know how to tell stories that put other people down so they feel better. But other people can tell their stories with humor and honesty and they invite the listener to step into their lives. I believe that people's stories reflect their outlook and behavior in life. The people in the first example can bring me down and suck the joy out of my life. The people in the second example fill my life with joy and make living every day worthwhile.

But beyond the stories our families tell and beyond the stories our friends tell, I believe the most important stories in our lives are the stories we tell ourselves. Picture this, you are getting ready for a really big exam or a really important meeting or interview. What is going through your head? What are you telling yourself? Are you encouraging yourself or are you tearing yourself down? The stories that run through our minds on a daily basis are the most important stories we tell because they are the foundations for how we live our life and how we view ourselves.

Recently, I was preparing to attend a two day conference with the Rotary Club where I was going to meet a whole group of people I did not know who have an interest in global issues. I was nervous and anxious about these two days because I was feeling insecure about my international experience and knowledge. In the midst of the defensive stories I was telling myself to try to assuage this insecurity, I happened to open my Bible and came across this passage in Jeremiah about boast. It stopped me in my tracks. This passage reminded me that my story is not about my own strength or trying to be better than other people's stories so I am admired. My story is truly meaningful when I am answering two questions: "how fully have I lived my life?" and "how close or far from God have I been?"

This reminded me of the most important story I could tell of something that happened when I was 17 years old. At that time in my life, I was a senior in high school, playing in lots of music groups, involved in church youth group and, in my free time, avidly consuming science fiction/fantasy books. You would almost always find me with my head in a book and my daily life was immersed in stories of warriors, kings and queens, sorcerers and sorceresses, people with special powers and people with special, world saving quests. Through those stories, I learned a lot about honor, protecting others who cannot protect themselves, and the used of power for the good of all.

During winter break of that year, I was attending a weeklong church organized ski trip. Halfway through that week, I was sitting in an evening meeting, listening to one of the leaders sing about Christ dying on a cross for me and I

just started crying non-stop. This was painfully embarrassing, especially since none of the people around me understood why I was cry and neither did I. Being the person I am and was, this pissed me off and I decided it was time for me and God to have a little conversation. So I bundled up in my snow gear and headed outside where I could be alone. After finding a suitably secluded spot, I sat down and basically said, God, I am not leaving this spot until you show me why I am cry. Amazingly, He answered my demand and communicated with me in the best way for me to understand.

I suddenly had an image of a king sitting on a throne with a knight kneeling at His feet and I knew immediately that the king represented Jesus and the knight was me. In those moments, I realized two things. The first was that this king had died for me, a lowly knight, and that went against everything I believed in. The king does not die for a knight! The knights protect the king against all danger and certainly against death or they are not worthy of being knights. This was totally unacceptable. But then, in the midst of my incredulity, I realized that I was not being received with scorn as I would expect but with unconditional love. Love like I had never felt before was pouring from this king as I knelt at His feet. At that moment, I could not give any other response other than to lay my life at His feet and to dedicate my life to His service.

Thank God for a powerful beginning because we have definitely had our ups and downs since then. But those ups and downs and how close or far away I walk in relationship with God form the underpinning of all my stories. My relationship with God is the common thread that weaves itself through all my stories and is as essential as breathing. The value of my story lays in how I am seen by God, not by man. When I keep that perspective, I am free to be who I was born to be.

In Galatians 5:1, Paul writes, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free”. Our family’s stories, our friends’ stories, the stories we tell ourselves and the stories told about us by our schooling, workplace, neighborhood and position in society all influence us for good or for bad. They can tell us that we are worthwhile or worthless. They can tell us that we are capable of everything or capable of nothing. But I do not want to live by the ever-changing standards of the world around me. If I were to try to meet the expectations of all that has an influence on my life, I would fall apart. But Christ offers me a shield from all these competing voices. He has set me free to live an abundant, challenge-filled, wacky and fun life, for the glory of God and the service of peace. His story is the one I want in my head as I move forward in life.

#### Questions to think about:

- What values do your family stories encourage?
- What are the most important stories in your life?
- What stories do you allow your friends or family to tell about you (or that you tell yourself) that limit and dishearten you? What can you do to change these stories?