

# ***Remembering Your Story***

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Life is a story—a myriad of stories, when you think about it. Everyone has a narrative at some level that chronicles their existence—known or unknown. Some are recorded for posterity, most are not; many people experience life from womb to tomb destined to be who they are with little or no record to show for it, except for what’s remembered by others.

A story, though, is what creates meaning in one’s existence. Though every life is a story, it’s not likely to be recalled in the same way twice, at least while one is still creating the narrative. Much like the currents of a river, the perspective one has on life flows and evolves as time passes and more distance occurs; we are never in the same place we once were when parts of life were lived nor when our story was last told. We might remember certain things at one time; forget, ignore, or revise them later depending on what’s transpired or on who is listening to the tale. For that reason, the stories of our lives are rarely told in the same way twice.

I thought about storytelling last weekend when we were in Florida visiting family. My brothers, along with our maternal-side cousins (the Larsen sisters and their spouses) gathered to celebrate my mother’s 90<sup>th</sup> birthday (she’s now the family matriarch). My cousin, Anne (or Ricki, as we call her), came fully focused on recording my mother’s take on family lore, as Ricki is composing a history of the Larsen family for as many generations as accounts can be found. She had already sent for review the first draft of the chapter she had written on my mother’s childhood, particularly with her older brother, Howard, who is Ricki’s father.

It was interesting to me how different Ricki’s perception was of those years compared to the yarns we Hayes boys inherited from our mother.

The setting was the same (the Scandinavian neighborhoods of Brooklyn, NY), but the recollections, perspective, and meanings attached were not, because the one telling the story was not the same. That, clearly, made all the difference.

My mother, being who she is, was eager to set the record straight as to what actually happened during those years, at least from her point of view. So, she spent the next two hours regaling us with anecdotes from her childhood, captured in remarkable detail, including, for instance, the color and type of clothes she was wearing on a particular day in 1939 when she fell down into a manhole that had popped its cover after a heavy rain, or when she accidentally tripped while running through the house with an open bottle of ink and the contents splattered across the living room furniture (all of which was mercifully redemptive for me).

Then, my mother explained that Howard (who was nine years her senior) was much more of a father-figure than a brother, so they weren't all that close growing up, even though they came to be as adults. She grew up like an only child in a quietly reserved adult home. That thought sparked an epiphany of sorts, as it then dawned on her why she spent so much time over at her Aunt Nancy's and Uncle George's house, i.e., the sheer exhaustion little Doris brought upon her own household! She had too much energy for them to contain.

While absorbing the impact of that revelation, she then landed another one on us. To my utter astonishment, she walked back a lifelong tale that had been told about her—that she was engaged to two men at the same time (which is what she had always said, even though apparently not accurate—an old boyfriend merely came back into her life while she was engaged to my father, prompting her to give back his ring). Suddenly, a

favorite old tale was debunked. It was all so much to take in. The old, old stories weren't quite what we thought they were. As the last of her generation left standing, my mother was well positioned to establish the New Revised Standard Version of the Larsen family story, which will now be the Authorized Version (at least until I do her eulogy!).

So, with this historical revision, a fair question to ask is: what makes a story true, especially when another perspective changes the narrative? If a life can be conveyed and remembered in different ways (even by the same person), what then makes the story authentic, authoritative, and believable? Who's to say which version is more accurate than another, especially when they differ in detail? Understandably, with storytelling, it's hard to incorporate all the varying perspectives, interpretations, and emotional content. That's why life is a myriad of stories and why many voices must be included in the collective memory.

That said, memory is also based more on meaning than accurate reporting. What we remember are the parts of life that matter to us in the present—the stories that bring meaning to us especially at a later stage. Consider the thousands of synapses buried in our brains which are not fired off when we ponder the past, even though they contain the raw material of all that we have witnessed and experienced over time. Why? Because the memories we routinely pull up and easily share are those that are meaningful to us—we remember what matters to us in the present.

Meaning also plays a central role in telling a story. In each story, we express who we are (or what we'd like to believe we are), what we value, what we despise, where we've come from, who we associate with or those we don't like. Again, there are facts and people who are included in our

account, and many others overlooked, or purposely left out and ignored. This occurs not only with the tales we tell, but with collective history too.

What I mean is, “history” isn’t what we believe it to be. It’s not as normative or universal as is assumed. This is another thing to keep in mind when telling stories. I recall taking American history in high school and assumed the textbook would cover all the important stuff that mattered. It never entered our minds to ask who the storyteller might be and how that might make a difference. It was only later in life I realized there are many histories that are not included in a standard textbook. Most of what we learned as “American history” was based on the accounts of educated, rich, white landowners of the time, including those who gathered in Philadelphia to write the constitution and form a government. That, we were told, was “American history.”

But whose lives, perspectives, or voices were left out of the story? Would Thomas Jefferson’s view of American colonial life have reflected that of an African slave working on his property or elsewhere? What about any female at the time whose opinions were routinely ignored by the public record? Or think about the indigenous tribes that were driven off their ancestral lands by European interlopers? How might they tell the story? Or what about the descendants of those who settled in the southwest in Spanish Catholic missions two centuries earlier? Would it have mattered to them at the time that a shot was fired on Lexington Green? Where do they fit into the annals of American history?

This is the problem with “history” and other conventional forms of storytelling, as they are at most partial accounts told from a specific (and often narrow) vantage point which invariably leave out many who were present at the time yet were unaccounted for in the story. So, then, we

must ask: how can any historical record be truly “authoritative” or normative? We must always wonder who or what is left out of the story that is being told?

I say this because it also factors into our notions of biblical history. As people of faith, it’s not our practice, but our task to wonder and ask, who’s the storyteller? When was this story written and who is left out of the narrative? It’s only fair and wise to ask.

Frankly, the Bible consists of stories composed by storytellers who were not contemporaneous with what they’re writing about. This isn’t journalism, it’s theological reflection. Consequently, it’s important to recognize what is being conveyed is rarely an eyewitness account of an event (as we’re often led to believe), but instead an inherited legend or, in many cases, a creative invention, such as an allegory, a myth, a symbolic representation, or a metaphorical portrayal intended to be reflected upon by the listener or reader—something that isn’t always clear on the surface.

Nevertheless, rethinking tradition’s take on biblical stories is particularly relevant to us in the present generation because archaeological discoveries, carbon dating, and advances in scholarship provide us a different take on these ancient texts. In fact, some of the traditional assumptions made about biblical history aren’t entirely accurate or at least what they appear to be.

For instance, factual evidence points to the likelihood that much of the Hebrew canon was created and compiled centuries later than previously known. Likewise, archaeologists find no evidence of highly developed settlements, or large-scale structures (e.g., fortresses, palaces, or temple), or destroyed villages or cities where and when the biblical record claims they existed or occurred. Even something as central as the Exodus story

suffers a dearth of credible evidence (e.g., pottery shards, other signs of mass migration, etc.). Instead, the evidence suggests that most of those who became the twelve tribes of Israel did not arise from Egypt, following Moses through the wilderness, but instead emerged from the poorer hill people of Canaan where they had settled for generations. There's plenty of evidence for that. So it's possible (if not likely) that only a limited number of Israelites (perhaps the landless Levites, who became the religious priests) who came up from Egypt, not dramatically through the Red Sea parting waters with Charlton Heston theatrics, mind you, but in a generation-long migration to Canaan. That would match the migratory patterns of that period.

Along those same lines, it's also unlikely the "real life" stories of David or Solomon played out as they have been described in the books of II Samuel or Chronicles. There simply isn't indisputable evidence of a large centralized government nor extensive development or massive structures in or around Jerusalem 3,000 years ago. Most likely, the stories reflect the reality of a later era, i.e., the perspective of a sixth century BCE storyteller being assumed upon a far less developed period four to five hundred years earlier. A logical conclusion would be that much of the recorded "history" of Israel in the Bible is, in fact, the composition of various reformers (most likely of the priestly class) during and after the Babylonian exile writing with the intent to inspire their own contemporaries to return to the core meaning and righteous virtues and values of Israel's "historic" identity and faith—a tradition that evolved over time. The stories were developed from inherited lore or even composed at the time to carry the meaning of their religious customs and faith into succeeding generations.

So then, what do we make of today's text from Deuteronomy 26? Is it celebrating the history of Israel? Or is it the voice and meaningful "memory" of a later storyteller—a Levitical story that came to be embraced by the entirety of Israel's hill tribes, largely because of those who were the sole keepers of their religious life and written record, i.e., Levitical priests. This conclusion isn't so much to cast doubt on the veracity of the message or the meaning of the text, as it is to correct and reconcile the record with archaeological evidence in order to understand what likely happened thousands of years ago. Sometimes, the old lore must be revised when introducing new perspectives.

I recognize that how the story came to be must remain secondary to the central meaning and message, which is: *remember your ancestors, incorporate their identity, and follow their covenantal faith in YHWH and the laws (Torah) of the descendants of Levi (Moses, Miriam, and Aaron) that were brought in their great migration from Egypt.* I would imagine for those who were among the poor in the hills of Canaan, the immigrating and landless Levites quite likely provided for them a compelling story and collective religious identity they were unable to find for themselves among the dominant culture of Canaan. Instead of just being the poor hill people on the margins of Canaanite culture, perhaps with the help of these wandering immigrants, they banded together to become the storied and chosen tribes of Israel. Though the stories are similar, the real history is likely quite different in its details than the mythical one, yet the message and meaning remain the same: follow the faith of your ancestors in YHWH, who delivers the poor of the world to their redemption and relief—a message and mission later advanced by Jesus.

Now, some of you may push back a bit by thinking this is just an excuse to revise and diminish the spiritual authority of the Bible. In defense of long-held beliefs, you may sense it undercuts the biblical message when we reckon with a view that makes it as much a product of human culture as divine inspiration. I honestly don't view it that way. I think the validity of the story (and the sense of God's inspiration) is greatly enhanced and strengthened when we realize what likely occurred, instead of only what we want it to be. We do that by integrating into it the reality check of human experience and knowledge—the way we crosscheck many aspects of our life.

Let me put it this way. You and I discover a similar check on personal memories when we revisit places from long past and realize that everything we remember looks and feels different than as they were recalled. We're forced to reconcile memories with reality. What we typically find is, when old stories don't match reality, the meaning doesn't diminish, we simply have a new appreciation, perspective, and understanding of them. Stories will often become more meaningful when they integrate more effectively into reality as we humans know it, instead of being depicted as fantasy. Besides, meaning is usually altered over time, as are memories and as are people, even though we continue to cherish and tell the same old, old stories. In my view, that's the beauty of the wisdom within the stories of the Bible.

Before I close, let's put this in another context: what is your story or that of your family? How has it changed over time? How has it changed *you* over time? Have some of the details been lost, revised, or altered? Have some things that once were important to tell become less so now? Who is included in your story and who is not? What are you still learning

or discovering about yourself, or in life itself, that will be added to the essential meaning of who you are?

All of this storytelling is good—very good. For I believe that God intended life to be centered around storytelling and for each of us to remember and take account of our own narrative—a meaningful and memorable reflection that captures who we are, as well as *whose* we are from one generation to the next. If it's true God loves a good story, then it's for us to live and share them, especially when the story we remember is deeper, richer, and more meaningful every time we tell it to those who will listen.

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