

THE STORIES WE TELL—AND WHAT THEY TELL US

Heather Sundahl

“I will tell you something about stories. . . . They aren’t just for entertainment. Don’t be fooled. They are all we have, you see, all we have to fight off illness or death. You don’t have anything if you don’t have stories.”

—Leslie Marmon Silko¹

Stories Matter

Stories are a binding force in families,² a fact Mormons have known for a long time. A study at Emory University tried to identify what could strengthen families and help kids be more resilient. Their conclusion: “The single most important thing you can do for your family may be the simplest of all: develop a strong family narrative.”³ They created a questionnaire that tested kids on their knowledge of their families. Examples included: Do you know where your grandparents grew up? Do you know where your parents met? Do you know an illness or something really terrible that happened in your family? Do you

1. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Viking, 1977), 2.

2. Bruce Feiler, “The Stories That Bind Us,” *New York Times*, Mar. 15, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/fashion/the-family-stories-that-bind-us-this-life.html>. The article is adapted from Bruce Feiler, *The Secrets of Happy Families: How to Improve Your Morning, Rethink Family Dinner, Fight Smart, Go Out and Play, and Much More* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013).

3. *Ibid.*

know the story of your birth?⁴ The researchers also gave their subjects extensive psychological tests to gauge their emotional stability and resilience. What they found was that the more children knew about their family's history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem, and the more they believed their families functioned successfully. The "Do You Know?" scale turned out to be the best single predictor of children's emotional health and happiness.⁵

We all need to see ourselves as part of something bigger. We all need to be part of larger stories where we see that trials and problems are part of life, but that, ultimately, we will endure and triumph. The researchers at Emory University concluded that happy families were not the ones who had the fewest problems but the ones who talked about their challenges and found "positive stories" to tell. In his summary of this research, Bruce Feiler writes: "When faced with a challenge, happy families, like happy people, just add a new chapter to their life story that shows them overcoming the hardship. . . . The bottom line: if you want a happier family, create, refine and retell the story of your family's positive moments and your ability to bounce back from the difficult ones. That act alone may increase the odds that your family will thrive for many generations to come."⁶ A beautiful example of this is Mother Eve's response to leaving the garden. Instead of cursing Satan or pining for paradise, Eve, like the happy families that Feiler studied, knows that they will bounce back: "Were it not for our transgression we never should have had seed, and never should have known good and evil, and the joy of our redemption, and the eternal life which God giveth unto all the obedient. And Adam and Eve blessed the name of God, and they

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

made all things known unto their sons and their daughters.”⁷ These family narratives of faith teach us that we are all part of something bigger.

When you and your family of origin get together, what stories are told? Is there a theme? What is your role in these stories? Which, if any, of these stories do you tell your friends or your kids? Do these stories serve you well? Do you like the character you are supposed to be when you are with your family? Or do they keep you from growth and change? What part have these stories played in defining you and your family? What have you embraced? What have you rejected?

Choosing the Story

I was a sassy little girl. One of my early memories is of our across-the-street neighbor Helen Williams saying, “That Heather—you never know what will come out of her mouth.” But it’s not actually my memory. It’s just something my mother has repeated to me so often that I have appropriated it and can even visualize Mrs. Williams saying this as she prunes her pink roses. And over the years I have often had things fly out of my mouth that should have stayed in, like the time I said to a pregnant woman in the ward, “Oh! You’re having a boy.” She was surprised and asked how I knew. I replied: “It’s the sideburns you’re growing.” That story about Helen Williams has often given me permission to say things I shouldn’t have.

The stories we use to encase memories shape and make connections and give meaning to our memories. In a popular TED talk given in 2010, psychologist Daniel Kahneman explained that our “remembering self captures three seconds of reality” before we either discard

7. Moses 5:11–12.

or claim those memories by endowing them with explanation.⁸ This is why two people can witness the same event and experience it very differently. In short, our memories are what we make them. We can't control the events of our lives, but we shape and mold them and draw conclusions that make up our story. We may not create the plot or the characters, but we certainly decide the theme.

This concept is exemplified by my grandfather, Oscar McFarland. Like Rumpelstiltskin, he could take events made of straw and turn them into gold. In fact, sometimes his optimism drove me nuts—I remember rolling my eyes at the way he looked at his life through rose-colored glasses. So let me relay to you his life in two ways and you can decide which story is more true.

Oscar from the outside: Oscar married Jessie in 1930. She had rheumatoid arthritis, so he left a promising cattle business in West Weber, Utah, for no job in Southern California during the Depression with two kids (and three more to follow). He got a job as milkman and they always scraped by. Jessie died in 1970 just as Oscar was called as stake patriarch. A visiting General Authority told him to remarry quickly. Unfortunately, he married a cruel woman who caused ten years of misery for the family. Eventually, they divorced, Oscar was released as patriarch, and his temple recommend was taken away as a result. It was a terrible time for him. A few years later he met Johanna Schneider. She joined the Church and they were married. She loved all of Oscar's large LDS family. Oscar was reinstated as a patriarch, and Oscar and Johanna lived out their years together happily.

Oscar on Oscar: "It was hard to leave the farm, but I had faith and got a great job when others had none (I was still working with cattle,

8. Daniel Kahneman, "The Riddle of Experience vs. Memory," filmed Feb. 2010 in Long Beach, Calif., TED video, 19:51, https://www.ted.com/talks/daniel_kahneman_the_riddle_of_experience_vs_memory?language=en.

just the wrong end!). We always had enough; our trials strengthened our faith and family bonds. I was heartbroken when Jessie died, but I was obedient to the counsel I was given. That marriage was hard, but I had faith to endure and came to believe that the bad marriage was a placeholder until Johanna was ready. One day with her was worth enduring all the bad years that came before.”

Which version is truer? When he recorded his life history, many family members urged him to leave out the ten dark years. But in the end, he recorded the pain because he said, “How else could I truly show the joy of my life now?”

Take a moment to reflect on your current level of happiness. If you are filled with bliss and joy, congratulations! A shuttle to Kolob awaits! If, however, you feel your life is letting you down, take a look at your stories. Do they begin with “This would only happen to me” or “If only” or “Everybody else” or “I’ll be happy when . . .”? Each of these negative explanations makes it harder to envision a happy ending. Listen to how you explain the events in your life. Look for patterns. Is happiness perceived as unattainable? If so, your stories need a makeover. Remember: how you interpret and explain the everyday stuff of life will shape your story into a tragedy or an adventure. In short, what is keeping you from happiness?

We should not let idealized images make our story feel wrong. The hard or sad times are not just part of your story but the very elements that give you the potential to change and grow. Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl wrote, “When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves,”⁹ and “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s

9. Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984).

own way.”¹⁰ We always have a choice. We cannot control the plot of our lives, but the theme is ours to shape.

Fear and insecurity frequently keep us from rewriting the script and keep us paralyzed. As life coach Kate Bartolotta wrote in an advice column for *HuffPost*: “We are all insecure fourteen-year-olds at heart. We’re all scared. We all have dreams inside of us that we’ve tucked away because somewhere along the line we tacked on those ideas about who we are that buried that essential brilliant, childlike sense of wonder. The more we stick to these scripts about who we are, the longer we live a fraction of the life we could be living.”¹¹

There was a period of my life that was ruled by fear. It started with a miscarriage. And then another. And then a pregnancy that mysteriously ended at seventeen weeks. My body recovered quickly, but my soul suffered. I did not think I could go down that path again. But the next spring I had dreams. I’d be asleep and then I’d hear “Mom, MOM, MOM” and feel a little finger poking me in the arm. I’d wake up grumbling “WHAT?,” expecting to see one of my girls, only to find myself alone. Yes, even my non-corporeal children are irritating.

After the third dream like this, my husband and I decided to try again and I became pregnant. Because of my history, my obstetrician sent me to the high-risk practice at Brigham and Women’s Hospital and I underwent so many tests that I often felt like I’d been abducted by aliens. At nine weeks, a somber nurse told me there was a problem and ushered me into the genetic counselor’s office. I heard the words *cystic hygroma*, *severe defects*, *chromosomal abnormality*, and *termination*. I stopped listening and just concentrated on breathing.

10. Ibid.

11. Kate Bartolotta, “How to Get Flat Abs, Have Amazing Sex and Rule the World in 8 Easy Steps,” *HuffPost*, Dec. 3, 2015, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/happiness-tips_b_3956114.

That first appointment wasn't the end of it. Every time I went to the doctor it got worse. The cyst was growing, and my doctor would list for me all the things that might be wrong with my baby—if I even made it full term. Every time I went into her office, I felt despair. As these visits increased, I decided miracles were for other people, not me.

At the urging of a friend, I finally asked God for a miracle. And it was terrifying to lay my desires at the Lord's feet. Could my faith survive another heartbreak? God heard my prayers and gave me a gift: hope. I remember it felt tangible, this gift of hope that I could choose to take or not take. It wasn't a warranty against pain and suffering or a guarantee of a glittery and shiny outcome. But it shone brightly, like a star you might follow through the desert or a wilderness. And I followed. It gave me courage to reclaim the pregnancy. The first thing I did was fire my doctor because this one had been hijacking my story. Next, a dear friend organized a fast for me. I felt their faith bolster mine and I was wrapped in a warm, gentle peace. By month eight I had the courage to go ahead and prepare the nursery. I followed the star of hope and had faith that whatever awaited me in the manger would be a blessing—even if it were empty.

As it came time to deliver the baby, the room was filled with doctors and nurses waiting to see what they would need to do for this child. None of it stressed me at this point. I knew that whatever happened, God had heard me, and I would not be left alone. A healthy daughter arrived and medical professionals dubbed her "the miracle baby." I felt like the Holy Family as hospital personnel and friends streamed in and out of our room to behold our child. "Come let us adore her," I thought. We named her Beatrice, bringer of joy and blessings. And while I do think of her as my miracle baby, I know that choosing hope in the face of despair was in itself a miracle. Even if the ending of that chapter had been different, I knew I could live with my story.

Let me address here the relationship between the smaller stories of everyday life and the overarching story of our life. The way you explain

the daily events, no matter how trivial, affects the way you see your whole life. Sentences build paragraphs, paragraphs create chapters, and chapters form a book. It broke Eve's heart to leave the garden, but she recognized that it was necessary for growth and taught her that wisdom and joy, not just pain, were the fruits of the tree. Because I was willing to lay my heart at the Savior's feet and ask for a miracle in one situation, I now see miracles and hope sprinkled throughout my life. As it says in Alma 37:6, "by small and simple things are great things brought to pass."¹²

Change your story, change your life. It sounds ridiculously simple, but with the Lord's help we can own our stories and make them serve us. The Savior's atonement is to free humans—from death, from sin, but also from suffering and emotional bondage.¹³ The Atonement can release us from whatever prevents growth and forward movement. But it is up to us to act. To believe you are trapped in a story is to lose sight of the healing power of Christ. As with so many things in life, the key is repentance, which in most instances requires us to rethink, reexamine, and reframe our thoughts and actions so that they are in alignment with the divine.

For example, let's look at a small thing that makes me grumpy: bad drivers. When someone cuts me off, I fight the urge to honk and instead imagine the best reason why they did it. Perhaps the driver is taking someone to the emergency room or racing to the airport to stop their lover from leaving town. The choice is yours. When we encounter irritating people, we can choose to gift them a kind story. My sister's mantra is "assume goodwill." It reminds me of the Savior on the cross asking the Father to forgive his crucifiers because they "know not what

12. Alma 37:6.

13. See Helaman 14.

they do.”¹⁴ The next time you are offended, rethink your reaction, retell their motives, reclaim your happiness.

Tell Your Story

Alice Walker writes: “It is, in the end, the saving of lives that we writers are about. . . . We do it because we care. . . . We care because we know this: *the life we save is our own.*”¹⁵

Most of us don’t lead glamorous lives. Most of us feel like our stories are too mundane and simple to be of real value. The prophet Wilford Woodruff disagreed: “[Women and] men should write down the things which God has made known to them. Whether things are important or not often depends upon God’s purposes; but the testimony of the goodness of God and the things he has wrought in the lives of [women and] men will always be important as a testimony.”¹⁶ Our stories do matter. It is how we relate and shape the events of our lives that determine our happiness. It is in the telling that we find the meaning.

How do we tell our stories? We talk to our friends and family and share our lives. We learn to rethink and reclaim our daily tales with generosity, leaving room for growth and forgiveness. We take our pain and put it into words so that our loved ones can share it and infuse our sorrow with the sweetness of their compassion. We mourn with those that mourn. We revel in the silly and laugh until our embarrassment runs for cover. We bear testimony at the pulpit and the dinner table so that we know what we believe and bear witness to others in the process.

14. Luke 23:34.

15. Alice Walker, “Saving the Life that is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist’s Life,” in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Prose* (New York: Open Road Media, 2011).

16. Wilford Woodruff, “The Book of Remembrance,” *Improvement Era*, Apr. 1966, 294–95.

We speak our ancestors' names out loud so that no one is forgotten. We look at our hard times, our losses, and rethink and reclaim and retell our stories until we find versions that ring true. And one day, like Eve, we will bear testimony that our pain and sorrows have made way for the joy of our salvation, one story at a time.

HEATHER SUNDAHL {hsundahl@gmail.com} is a writer and media specialist at the Utah Women and Leadership Project at Utah Valley University. She received a BA in humanities and an MA in English from Brigham Young University. Her passion is women's stories. In pursuit of this she has worked with *Exponent II* for twenty-three years as a contributor, blogger, editor, retreat presenter, and president. Heather has traveled to Botswana and South Africa to interview and collect the stories of the sister saints with the Mormon Women's Oral History Project. She lives in Provo with of her four kids, two cats, and one husband.