

Are We on the Same Planet?: *Can Story Bridge Personal Paradigm?*

By Judith Black

My father-in-law used to joke that there are two kinds of people in this world: us and them. In my heart, I know that until all humanity becomes 'us,' 'they' will pose an endless threat. We, aided by television news, family legends, and historic interpretations, tell ourselves stories about who 'we' are and who 'they' are. These stories are as variable as the human race:

"We are the freedom loving Christian citizens of a Democracy.
They are Muslim extremists living in totalitarian states."

*"We are family and faith loving followers of Allah's teachings.
They are aggressive, violent, Christian invaders."*

"We are people who believe in family, church, and community.
They are homosexuals who want to spread their degenerate lifestyle."

"We are law abiding, productive, gay couples denied the most rudimentary protections of our human rights by narrow, fearful, bigots."

"We are liberal, inclusive Unitarian Universalists.
They are narrow, fanatic, fundamentalists."

"We are people who have had our lives and missions revealed in the words and acts of Jesus Christ. They are sinners who will spend their eternity in hell."

'Us' and 'them' is the oldest delineation of human beings since Adam and Eve. (Though they might well have divided it as 'him' or 'her'.) Can stories begin to bridge 'us' and 'them'?

Change can't begin with 'them.' It must always start with 'us.' The only story you have authentic license to tell, manipulate, and recreate is your own. Thus I am called upon to examine the stories I tell about who I am, and what in that story contributes to creating a 'them' rather than an 'us.' I tell myself lots of those stories. Just a few of them go like this:

"I am a liberal Jew who works towards the humane treatment of all living beings. The Christian right cares more about a stem cell than a child living in poverty."

"I live in Massachusetts where people actually make decisions based on our understanding of contemporary science and economics. The citizens of Red States seem to have been duped into honoring message over reality."

“I believe that our media never offers a full picture of world events and that their fear mongering is turning this nation toward fascism.”

I have lots of stories, and I am convinced that every one of them is true.

In October 2004, I was working at a festival out in Mesa, Arizona. The festival was created and run by a wonderfully creative and hardworking woman, along with her extended family, friends, and business associates. They created an atmosphere that was warm, welcoming, and honoring of story. I also knew them to be a religious, Republican crowd. In my mind, that coincides with ‘them.’ In initial conversations with any one of this group, when the topic turned towards politics, I would note that the administration had dealt with the environment as if they were hosting a yard sale for large industries (this was during the George W. Bush administration). They would agree that this White House has not been the best steward of the earth. I would bring up the poor support for education, and these folks with many children, lovingly held, would agree that educational standards and supports have slipped terribly. They would even agree that we are less safe in the world than we were four years ago. At that point, my new friend would usually take my hand, or touch a shoulder, look me in the eyes and say, “Yes, yes, all these things are true, but you have to understand: this upcoming election is about something much bigger. It’s about good versus evil.”

It was this moment, oft repeated during the course of the festival, in which I understood we were functioning in different paradigms. I don’t believe in absolute good and absolute evil. An occasional psychopath sometimes comes to office or initiates an act of destruction, but generally we have free will to try and make the best choices, play out the best possible behaviors in any given situation. How can one call an entire culture, faith, or race ‘evil?’ So, our conversation hits that ‘good and evil’ line and in a flash I am ‘us’ and they are ‘them,’ and I say “nice meeting you.” Then I go to my room and cry, trying hard to understand how these decent, generous, hard working, welcoming humans could vote against the health of the environment, our children’s education, and international steps towards peace.

You may have heard the saying ‘physician heal thyself.’ I am a storyteller by vocation and avocation, and so the story I must examine is my own. It is immediately clear that I am not about to believe that any single faith claims the exclusive path to G-d, but is there a story that can bridge our worlds?

That same year, I was asked to be part of a presentation at our local Unitarian Church. They were acknowledging the feast of St. Stephen, and bringing people’s attention

to the plight of homelessness. (For 17 years, I have headed up a crew that cooks the 4th Thursday dinner at our local Shelter, worked with homeless populations in the Boston area, and coached homeless women; peppering up their storytelling skills so that they could testify before the State Senate.) Three of us were to address various aspects of homelessness. I met the other two speakers just prior to the service: one was an old friend, but the other was the kind of man whose mere appearance usually starts my ‘us/them’ paradigm chugging into gear. He was tall, with a British accent, an exquisitely tailored suit, and well-coiffed hair. My friend Linda told me in hushed tones that he was an investment banker and a Bush supporting Republican. This was not his ‘home’ church, and I wondered what level of discomfort he might be suffering looking out into pews filled with gay, straight, rich, poor, believers and cynics as parishioners. What was his role in the morning service?

We began with songs and readings. Then, I painted profiles of five different women so that the congregation could understand the highly varied issues that can culminate in a homeless existence. The next speaker was the investment banker, introduced as a member of the board of governors for the mission. He spoke with the congregation as you might speak to a friend over tea. He explained that with an overflowing live-in population, a kitchen that serves three meals a day to the larger community, and a heavily used food pantry, the mission needed to be expanded. He spoke of a new church and its ancillary buildings that had just been purchased through a 3 million dollar capital campaign that he (and others) had generated. He described the long, involved negotiations with a community that feared having the homeless as neighbors. He talked about the broadening goals of the mission. He said, “We must stop institutionalizing and funding homelessness, and start putting our money, energy, and hope into the homeless.” He spoke of one-room apartments at the site that would enable those capable to transition into their own places. He spoke of moving from warehousing people into an environment where they were lovingly received off the streets into a place that would not only give them respite, but also help them find their strengths and develop skills, eventually enabling them to live independently. He acknowledged that with the closing of state hospitals, some people would never be able to care for themselves and these people, too, would need permanent group homes. By the time he was done, I was in love with the man.

So many of our personal stories are radically different, but if one, just one, puts us in the exact same place, time, or vision with someone on the opposite side of the us/them divide, let us see it as a building block, rather than an anomaly. Let us consider it a window into one another’s humanity. From that view, we can build a bridge. No wall will ever be tall enough to keep out all of one’s enemies. But we do hold the potential to build bridges, by finding these bits of shared humanity, and basing our stories on them:

“Please tell me a story about a time you felt attacked.”

“Let me tell you about how my very traditional synagogue decided to welcome same sex couples.”

“Did you know that a major tenet of faith for Jews, Christians, and Muslims has to do with caring for the poor and needy? Let me tell you a story from each faith belief about this deeply held value.”

We have a choice: we can tell the stories hawked by the Fox network, or we can turn away from fear, and tell the stories of our shared humanity.