

## TELL ME A STORY

By Bob Lane

In monasteries, seminaries,  
retreats and synagogues,  
they fear hell  
and seek paradise.  
Those who know  
the mysteries of Life  
never let that seed  
be planted in their souls.

Over the years I have talked with your congregation on several occasions. I have talked about the Bible, about contemporary literature, and about absurdist philosophy, and had fun doing that. Today I want to tell you a story. Today's story will be about **story**. I have come to believe that **story** is of basic importance.

Long ago and in a romantic faraway place my life was changed forever. Outside a Lutheran Church I met the woman who, some 57 years later, is still helping me to tell our story as a family. A second story was found in the works of Albert Camus – specifically the first two books he wrote: *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger*. The ideas that had such an effect on me? The Absurd. And the absurd hero.

The ideas behind the development of the absurd hero are present in the first three essays of *The Myth of Sisyphus*. In these essays Camus faces the problem of suicide. In his typically shocking, unnerving manner he opens with the bold assertion that:

***There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. (p. 3).***

He goes on to consider if suicide is a legitimate answer to the human predicament. Or to put it another way: Is life worth living now that god is dead? The discussion begins and continues not as a metaphysical cobweb but as a well-reasoned statement based on a way of knowing which Camus holds is the only epistemology we have at our command. We know only two things:

*This heart within me I can feel, and I judge that it exists. This world I can touch, and I likewise judge that it exists. There ends all my knowledge, **and the rest is construction.** (p. 14)*

“*And the rest is construction*” - Camus argues that there is no meaning to life. He disapproves of the many philosophers who "have played on words and pretended to believe that refusing to grant a meaning to life necessarily leads to declaring that it is not worth living." (p.7) Life has no absolute meaning. In spite of the human's irrational "nostalgia" for unity, for absolutes, for a definite order and meaning to the "not me" of the universe, no such meaning exists in the silent, indifferent universe. Between this yearning for meaning and eternal verities and the actual

condition of the universe there is a gap that can never be filled. The confrontation of the irrational, longing human heart and the indifferent universe brings about the notion of the absurd.

*The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world. (p.21)*

and further:

*The absurd is not in man nor in the world, but in their presence together...it is the only bond uniting them. (p. 21)*

People must realize that the feeling of the absurd exists and can happen to them at any time. The absurd person must demand to live solely with what is known and to bring in nothing that is not certain. This means that all I know is that I exist, that the world exists, and that I am mortal. Doesn't this make a futile pessimistic chaos of life? Wouldn't suicide be a legitimate way out of a meaningless life? "No."

"No." answers Camus. Although the absurd cancels all chances of eternal freedom it magnifies freedom of action. Suicide is "acceptance at its extreme", it is a way of confessing that life is too much for one. This is the only life we have; and even though we are aware, in fact, because we are aware of the absurd, we can find value in this life. The value is in our freedom, our passion, and our revolt. The first change we must make to live in the absurd situation is to realize that thinking, or reason, is not tied to any eternal mind which can unify and "make appearances familiar under the guise of a great principle," but it is:

*...learning all over again to see, to be attentive, to focus consciousness; it is turning every idea and every image, in the manner of Proust, into a privileged moment. (p. 20)*

My experiences, my passions, my ideas, my images and memories are all that I know of this world - and they are enough. The absurd person can finally say "all is well".

*I understand then why the doctrines that explain everything to me also debilitate me at the same time. They relieve me of the weight of my own life, and yet I must carry it alone. (p. 41)*

In the following essays, Camus presents examples of the absurd person. We are given Don Juan, the actor, and the conqueror as examples of people who multiply their lives in an attempt to live fully within the span of their mortality. But more important is the creator who is discussed in the essay "Absurd Creation". "The absurd joy par excellence is creation." For in creating a work of art the creator is living doubly in as much as his creation is a separate life. "The artist commits himself and becomes himself in his work." Works of art become, then, the one means for a person to support and sustain a lucid consciousness in the face of the absurdity of the universe.

Art is for Camus an essential human activity and one of the most fundamental. It expresses human aspirations toward freedom and beauty, aspirations which make life valuable for each

transient human being. Art defies that part of existence in which each individual is no more than a social unit or an insignificant cog in the evolution of history.

While I was involved in studying Camus for a graduate course at the University of California I found this profound bit in his notebooks, where he wrote:

*"For a generous psychology.*

*We help a person more by giving him a favorable image of himself than by constantly reminding him of his shortcomings. Each individual normally strives to resemble his best image. Can be applied to teaching, to history, to philosophy, to politics. We are for instance the result of twenty centuries of Christian imagery. For two thousand years man has been offered a humiliating image of himself. The result is obvious. Anyway, who can say what we should be if those twenty centuries had clung to the ancient ideal with its beautiful human face."* Albert Camus -- Notebooks

What a wonderful idea! Try to employ it always in family relations, in work relations, and in dealing with students.

The art form we all participate in is - **story telling and story building**. Storytelling is the conveying of events in words. Story building is sometimes called living. Stories or narratives have been shared in every culture as a means of entertainment, education, cultural preservation and in order to instill moral values. We use stories as exemplars, for example, in the second book of Samuel we read the exciting love story of David and Bathsheba, and learn how David, driven by desire for the beautiful Bathsheba, brings her to his bed and makes her pregnant while her husband Uriah is in David's army fighting the enemies of Israel. David eliminates Uriah by sending a letter (carried by Uriah) to the commander telling him to place Uriah in the fiercest fighting and then to fall back leaving him alone to be killed. After Uriah is killed Bathsheba mourns for him for the appropriate time and then David brings her into his house and takes her as his wife. (2 Sam. 11,12) Shortly after this we are told "what David had done was wrong in the eyes of the Lord." And then, as we read in the King James Version,:

*And the Lord sent Nathan unto David. And he came unto him, and said unto him, There were two men in one city; the one rich and the other poor.*

*The rich man had exceeding many flocks and herds: But the poor man had nothing, save one little ewe lamb, which he had bought and nourished up; and it grew up together with him, and with his children; it did eat of his own meat, and drank of his own cup, and lay in his bosom, and was unto him as a daughter.*

*And there came a traveller unto the rich man, and he spared to take of his own flock and his own herd, to dress for the wayfaring man that was come unto him; but took the poor man's lamb, and dressed it for the man that was come to him.*

*And David's anger was greatly kindled against the man; and he said to Nathan, As the Lord liveth, the man that hath done this thing shall surely die: And he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.*

*And Nathan said to David, Thou art the man.*

Crucial elements of stories and storytelling include plot, characters and narrative point of view. Stories are the fabric of a culture.

In general we use art to extend the reach of sense into the making of a world. Specifically, we use the art of storytelling to construct a story of ourselves in our world. We loop back from the objective world to the subjective world to construct a story of ourselves in our world. As the representation of the self loops back onto itself exemplarizing the experience of a life, the self becomes unified in a story of a life. And by extension in a story of a culture.

Think of Homer, that great story-teller of the distant past. He populated his stories with the gods of the time. Think of the Hebrew Bible which begins at the beginning with a story of the creation. The creation myth can be read as a description of any act of creation: first the intention, then the translation from mind to matter, and then the evaluation: "and it was good." Professor Douwe Stuurman, who taught *The Bible as Literature* at the University of California in the nineteen sixties, pointed out in lectures that the creation myth, when read aloud, will be heard to be an accurate description of the completion of any creative act. He told us the story of his first wife, a blind poet, who had asked him to read Genesis 1 and 2 aloud to her and who when he finished said "that is precisely the feeling of creating a poem." In writing a poem one starts with an idea and a blank and formless page. The creative act of beginning to "blow" life into that page and after some time (and with some luck) giving form to the stuff of the mind, transforming it into a new medium has formed a completed work. The poet does not know the poem until it is finished. And when finished the feeling is there to be expressed: "And it is good."

Write your story, live your life, so when finished it will be said, "And it was good."

The story tellers who compose the account of the creation presuppose God, as an objective being. God, as a character in a narrative, is yet to be discovered. To be discovered in the story. To be discovered through actions.

In the Hebrew Bible Ecclesiastes stands alone in theology and in style. It probably never would have been included in the canon except that it was believed to have been written by King Solomon, and that authority was sufficient to assure it a place in the collection of "revealed" books. It is the most footnoted of books in the collection. On occasions the "footnotes" have become a part of the text as the redactor added a line here and there to try to force the story into the official line. For example, as the headnote to the book in the New English Bible puts it:

"Glosses which relieve the gloom (and, indeed, the impiety) of the book seem to have been added in later times...." It has often been read as a gloomy and impious book because it departs from the official line in such a basic way. Right after the Speaker says "I saw under the sun that, where justice ought to be, there was wickedness, and where righteousness ought to be, there was wickedness," a gloss (at 3.17) is added which states that God's purpose is to test men "to see what they truly are." Or again at 7.18 after the Speaker suggests a balanced approach as the best psychology to pursue ("Do not be over-righteous and do not be over-wise") the "Explainer" adds, "for a man who fears God will succeed both ways." And at 8.12-13, after the Speaker has stated that wickedness is not punished, and goodness not rewarded the Explainer adds, "A sinner may do wrong and live to an old age, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God..." and the "yet I know" rings false in the overall story of skepticism that it presented in the text. The dramatic question in both Job and Ecclesiastes arises precisely because the human characters do not and cannot know what, if any, plan surrounds and defines their lives. In the Speaker's response to this question we see it makes no difference whether there is a plan or not; it is not knowable in any case. "True, the living know that they will die; but the dead know nothing."

Once in an evening class I had the students listen to a recording of Ecclesiastes as read by James Mason and asked them to jot down responses as they were listening. I too kept notes of what came into my mind while listening to the Mason interpretation of the text. My "reader's response" notes follow:

The opening passage with its circular images of cyclical activity without purpose: eyes not satisfied with seeing, appetite not filled, rivers that flow to the sea but the sea is never filled - all accurately describe a mental state of despair and weariness.

Obviously the speaker is a middle aged man who has attempted to live his life with some ideas and beliefs that have proved to be false. The path he has followed has been a long one with many attempts to make life meaningful by aiming at particular external goals. He has tried wisdom, madness, folly, pleasure, great works, money, sex, mirth, and found them all to be empty, because always was the reality of his own mortality.

The text is like a huge symphony with separate and identifiable movements. It opens with an emptiness of spirit that is palpable to the senses, but then it starts to move to a different level of acceptance and resignation and finally to an amazing finale of optimism, acceptance and joy. (Herb is asleep now; his head leaning further and further toward Cathy. He may be faking it just to lay his sleeping head on her shoulder. He wakes and looks at me, ah, did the instructor see me sleeping? Emptiness, all is

emptiness.) Is it boring? Well, yes I suppose the beginning parts are boring to a twenty year old who still believes he is immortal. (How many people will drop off to sleep? The room is hot, the reading accurate but monotonous - oh, how right Mason is to read it just that way - David's book falls off his lap as he too drops off. What difference does it make? "One event happeneth to all." No one will remember or care tomorrow what happened today.)

The poem which The Byrds stole to make "Turn, turn, turn" is the first move towards life and acceptance. There is a time for everything has a comforting sound to it. There is a time to sleep and a time to study. "So I hated life." Why? Because it didn't yield to my hopes and plans; it went on not paying attention to me, not caring about me. What is missing? Why this despair and hatred of life? An entire inventory of goals is given and none have produced the feeling of life, of value. Are there more goals that haven't been considered? Will it become clearer when I am older? Will Herb wake up? What is missing? Why is everything stale and flat?

And finally - and finally an answer:

"The light of day is sweet, and pleasant to the eye is the sight of the sun; if a man lives for many years, he should rejoice in all of them."  
(11.7)

Everyone should write her own response to this book. Read it; listen to it; write about it. It suggests to me these themes: Get rid of goals and life begins to flow, have goals and you get tied up in knots. This does not mean that you should not save for a rainy day. These are life-goals that the Speaker talks about. If you set out to find wisdom, labor, and pleasure as ends in themselves, and expect these ends to deliver results as an investment might, then you are doomed to emptiness, for happiness is always a by-product of doing something and not a thing to be sought out like a coin lost on the floor. Life, says the Speaker, is an attitude not a program, a scene and not a plot. With divine justice in human affairs an illusion, and truth unattainable, the Speaker is left with little upon which to build. All that is certain for man\woman is that there is a desire for happiness. Thus, the basic theme of the book is an insistence upon the enjoyment of life, of all the things in this world since it is the only world we can know. Live capriciously, do not calculate like Job did; joy is our categorical imperative and we must taste of life's joys without self-deception. The Speaker reminds us that the realities of life do not correspond to the yearnings of the heart. Often our deepest desires are thwarted by the hard facts of experience, and our timeless yearnings are frustrated by our time-restricted days.

**Let me end with an example of a story that resonates in me. Another story that changed my life. For years I have been prejudiced against a certain group of humans. Even long ago as**

**a college student I used to shy away from members of this group. Confronted with them I withdrew with fear and repugnance. I knew I was wrong to do so but I could not seem to get what I knew incorporated into what I do.**

A few years ago, at the Seattle Special Olympics, nine contestants, all physically or mentally disabled, assembled at the starting line for the 100-yard dash.

At the gun, they all started out, not exactly in a dash, but with a relish to run the race to the finish and win. All, that is, except one little boy who stumbled on the track, tumbled over a couple of times, and began to cry. The other eight heard the boy cry. They slowed down and looked back. Then they all turned around and went back. Every one of them. One girl with Down's syndrome bent down and kissed him and said: "This will make it better."

Then all nine linked arms and walked together to the finish line. Everyone in the stadium stood, and the cheering went on for several minutes. People who were there are still telling the story.

Why? Because deep down we know this one thing: What matters in this life is more than winning for ourselves. *What matters in this life is helping others win, even if it means slowing down and changing our course.*

Each of us creates a narrative in our life, creates a STORY of our life by the actions we take as we walk toward the finish line. Choose your stories with care, for "the truth about stories is – that's all we are."

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*The brain, it seems, does not make much of a distinction between reading about an experience and encountering it in real life; in each case, the same neurological regions are stimulated. Keith Oatley, an emeritus professor of cognitive psychology at the University of Toronto (and a published novelist), has proposed that reading produces a vivid simulation of reality, one that "runs on minds of readers just as computer simulations run on computers." Fiction — with its redolent details, imaginative metaphors and attentive descriptions of people and their actions — offers an especially rich replica. Indeed, in one respect novels go beyond simulating reality to give readers an experience unavailable off the page: the opportunity to enter fully into other people's thoughts and feelings. – NYT*

*How Literature Changes the Way We Think* attempts to illuminate literature's ethics of resilience by re-conceptualising our understanding of representation. **Literature not only represents to us our world but it also shows us ways in which we can change the world or adapt to changes which have already taken place without our realization. Literature's cognitive dimension helps us cope with the current as well as future challenges by changing the way we think about ourselves, our society and those who are excluded from or marginalized within our society. . . .**