

“Mapping Our World in Stories: A Home for the Soul”  
Deuteronomy 6:1-9

In his book *Between the Listening and the Telling*, Mark Yaconelli tells the haunting story of his mentor Morton Kelsey. Morton was born a premature baby in 1917 with transparent skin, a large head, and fingernails and toenails that were not fully formed. “In old letters Morton discovered that when his mother first saw him she rejected him, called him ‘hideous.’ She had even written a letter to her sister to tell her she had ‘given birth to a monster.’...she refused to care for him...In sharing his story Morton would relate, ‘According to letters from my father, I was rarely held. I was so tiny, my parents kept me in a shoe box placed next to a woodstove for warmth.’...When Morton was six months old, his family moved to Palmerton, Pennsylvania...As a baby, Morton was diagnosed with mild cerebral palsy and drooled constantly...As soon as he was weaned, Morton was placed in a detached cottage apart from the main house. A fourteen-year-old girl from town was hired to live in the cottage and provide full-time care for Morton. For his first four years he lived a life separate from his brother, mother, and father. When he was four, a local doctor recommended that Morton be placed in a home for disabled children. As part of the intake he was given the Stanford-Binet intelligence test. His scores were so high that the local school officials had Morton take the test a second time...Following this test, Morton was brought home and for the first time received love and acceptance from his parents as a full son. Years of rejection, however, had already inflicted deep damage on his soul and psyche...Morton suffered from extreme bouts of depression and anxiety as an adolescent and young adult...In his early twenties, filled with feelings of worthlessness and self-hatred, he decided to end his life. One afternoon he took his father’s rifle and walked up in the Allegheny Mountains, fully prepared to die by suicide. He waited until night descended, headed out to a large rock formation, lay on his back looking up at the stars, and waited for midnight. And then. Just as he prepared to leave his life, a song came to him. It was not a song heard through the ears. It was deeper than that. It was a song that came from the rocks and trees and stars and earth. It entered my body from all directions. It was a sort of lullaby. A song of love and comfort and warmth.”

This became a turning point for Morton after which he discovered faith, was mentored by an episcopal priest, went through therapy and found intimacy with God through spiritual practices of deep prayer. He went to seminary, became a husband, a father, a writer, a professor, and a spiritual teacher. But the story didn’t end there! In 1994, Morton received a letter from a woman named Clara. “The woman said she had come across one of his books and wondered if Morton had ever lived in a Palmerton, Pennsylvania. Morton had published many books and was used to receiving letters from readers. He responded to the woman’s letter and told her that yes, he had been raised in Palmerton. He then sent her a copy of one of his books, a book of legends from the Seneca tribe that he had been told as a child. Within days Morton received a reply...”When I was fourteen years old, your parents hired me to take care of you. You were just an infant, but they placed you in my care, and together we lived in a detached cottage. I felt like I was the luckiest girl in town. Your parents provided a crib for you to sleep in, but unbeknownst to them, you never slept in that crib. You always slept next to me. Your parents rarely held you, but I loved to hold you constantly. As you got older I sang to you and told you stories. For four

years you were the center of my life. You were my best friend...I have been looking for you my whole life, Morton. Please come and see me.” When he visited her, “Clara not only had photographs, but even at ninety-one, she remembered the vivid details of Morton’s earliest years -what he ate, the toys he enjoyed, the books he liked to look at, his favorite hat.” After a long visit, Morton and his wife were ready to leave, “Clara leaned forward and hugged Morton. She placed her head on his chest and began to sing. It was a lullaby. It was a song she had sung to Morton when he was a baby.’ Suddenly Morton began to weep.” Later as he got into the car with his wife she asked about the song. This was his response, “That was the same song that came to me in the mountains all those years ago when I was planning to end my life.”

This was an incredible story of love and deep connection. Morton’s life was such a blessing to so many people and it all depended on someone taking the time to love him, tell him stories, and sing him songs.

This is the wisdom we find in our scripture for this week. This was part of the commandments and teaching that were given to Moses so that he could give it to his people as they were wandering in the wilderness. Let’s listen to the words of the scripture from Deuteronomy 6:1-9.

Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the LORD your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy,<sup>2</sup> so that you and your children and your children’s children may fear the LORD your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long.<sup>3</sup> Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

<sup>4</sup>Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.<sup>[a]</sup> <sup>5</sup>You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. <sup>6</sup>Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. <sup>7</sup>Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. <sup>8</sup>Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem<sup>[b]</sup> on your forehead, <sup>9</sup>and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Telling the story of God’s salvation of the people was an essential part of their life together. They were supposed to tell the stories and teachings of their faith all the time, at home and outside the home and when they were sitting, standing, or lying down. The context of the commandments was always the story of the Israelites’ exodus from slavery in Egypt. God saved and made them into a new people and they in turn were supposed to remember this story and share it so that there is never a doubt about the identity of the people of God as those who are redeemed and loved by God. Their story was that of love. What is interesting of course is that when Jesus was asked about the most important commandment from the teachings of Moses, he recited Deuteronomy 6:4-5. So generation after generation, the stories were shared and the teachings were given so that

people always knew the purpose of their lives and the grace of God which accompanied them. Jesus, like his people, knew the importance of telling the stories of life and of faith. And his preferred method of teaching was that of parables. Story after story gave the people the important foundations for life, justice, community, faith, and purpose.

Sharing our stories can be lifesaving, especially at a time when many of the dominant stories are those of doom and gloom or those that are of the spectacular. Stories of life and faith lived in the ordinary moments of our lives can make a huge difference.

In a recent article, Maureen Dowd talked about our age as an age of anxiety for many of our young people. Her article, “Anxiety in the Age of Barbie,” reflected on the struggle of many young women who “seem to have everything, yet they are unable to fully enjoy a stretch in their life that should be sizzling with adventure and promise.” She quotes the Billie Eilish song in the “Barbie” movie “What Was I Made for?” not just as about Barbie but also about the struggle of many young women like Eilish herself who “between the ages of 12 and 16” struggled with “suicidal thoughts, self-harming, and body dysmorphia.” Here are the lyrics:

I used to float, now I just fall down  
 I used to know but I'm not sure now  
 What I was made for...  
 I don't know how to feel  
 But someday, I might...  
 When did it end? All the enjoyment  
 I'm sad again, don't tell my boyfriend  
 It's not what he's made for.

Unfortunately, an overarching story of grace, love, and redemption is not part of the experience of many people today. In addition, the social isolation of our age has lessened our storytelling and sharing times.

Stories are essential for our human soul. They connect us to the home our souls once knew in the fullness of God's presence.

Mark Yaconelli writes, “What does it mean to be human? How are we to spend our days? How do we face the troubles of this world? How do we address the heartache for the life we're meant to live but can't remember now? How do we find the place that the soul once knew? In another time, in another setting, sitting together around a table and sharing stories was as necessary to human life as bread and water. Storytelling was our source of identify, connecting us to our passions, our daily work, the people we encountered, the land we inhabited...Telling stories kept our core values vibrant and accessible, drew to the surface our most generous and courageous qualities.”

What is a story that you believe God wants you to share with others?

Whose story has influenced your life?

I want to challenge you this week to find someone in your life and to ask them to tell you their story.

We are going to end with a video exploring the sacred Welsh word of hiraeth, “A longing for a place or time that the soul once knew.”

[\(1\) Video | Facebook.](#) Amen.