

Talk Radio

Stories. Our life is all stories. Stories of snowstorms, of baseball games, of life's events big and small. Nothing really happens until we tell a story about it. Our stories are very particular to each one of us. Sometimes we are surprised by the stories that different people tell about what we thought was the same event. Do you have a different story about that snowstorm? Or about the Red Sox? Having a different story doesn't change your story, though, or mine. Our individual stories come together to form the narrative of our lives as a community and as a nation. But, big and grand as that narrative can be, it starts with our individual stories. So, I'd like to tell you a story.

You know how there are some childhood memories that stand out above all others? For me, one of the most vivid involves sugar. Not just any sugar, the dark brown, lumpy, sparkly, amber like sugar that my parents kept only in the sugar bowl in the dining room for their dinner guests to stir into their after dinner coffee. I don't know if I loved that sugar for its rich caramelized taste or because I had to engage in such subterfuge to get some. It was that subterfuge that brought my seven year old self to the dining room in the darkness of a late autumn, northern English afternoon. My mother and grandmother were busy in the kitchen preparing for a dinner party that night so conditions were ideal for sugar thievery. I had overcome the problems of the creaky cabinet door and the dog (who had given the game away on previous occasions) slept peacefully through rattling of the sugar bowl's china lid. I had just popped a delicious lump of the exquisite sugar in my mouth and was settling down to wait for it to melt on my tongue when the dining room door opened and my mother burst into the room

crying. Even to my seven year old mind this seemed like an over-reaction to sugar stealing and when she swept past the evidence of the sugar bowl and pressed me into a powerful bear hug I knew life had changed in some fundamental way. The date was November 22, 1963 and the news of President John F. Kennedy's assassination had just reached my American mother in our English home.

That is my "Where were you when JFK was shot?" story. I believe if you ask any American of my generation or older they could tell you their story too. Having such a story almost defines you as a member of a particular generation because no one who lived through this event was indifferent. According to a University of Chicago study*, after learning of the assassination, more than half of Americans did not continue their normal activities. It is interesting, though, that the major emotion reported was not anger (although that was certainly present) but shame, shame that such a thing could happen in America. That can be hard for us to understand today.

The collective story of America in 1963 was of a country that was the hope of the world. WWII and the defeat of Nazism was a fresh and living memory for most adults alive at that time. They were there when it happened. America was prosperous and had just demonstrated to itself its own reasonable broad-mindedness by electing a Roman Catholic president. Most people, it seemed, had confidence in him to meet the challenges posed by Sputnik and Castro through a combination of hard work, ingenuity, fair play and an increase in funding for science education in the public schools. Kennedy's assassination was not just the murder of an individual, it was an assault on the state, on the meaning of America. Ordinary people experienced the

assassination as an attack on their hopes and aspirations for America. Some must have felt somehow that they had failed, hence the feelings of shame. The attack was incomprehensible to them, which is why, I think, so many theories about it abound to this day, people couldn't make sense of what had happened. Slowly, though, we came to terms with it. The collective story of a just and generous America, an innovative and fair America, by and large, stood the test of this terrible event. America recovered and went on to write the stories of the Great Society and the civil rights movement. America's sense of itself took a body blow and survived.

Let me tell you another story. Before I came to First Church I served a Unitarian congregation in an affluent, stockbroker suburb in northern New Jersey. After the major drop in income I experienced after my divorce, I had to choose - find a better paying job or a cheaper place to live. I liked my job (and gas was about \$1.25 a gallon) so I moved further out and commuted 50 minutes each way to my job. I filled up my commuting time exploring the radio dial. I listened to all kinds of people, with all kinds of opinions shouting at each other about all kinds of topics. So, I had been at a long church committee meeting the night before this particular morning, late in the baseball season, so I did not know how Roger Clemens (remember him?) had fared in his first start back from the disabled list the night before. I was wending my way through the foothills of the Ramapo Mountains on my way to work and my usual sports radio station was behaving strangely. Instead of the morning hosts arguing the fine points of last night's pitching performance it seemed to be broadcasting some kind of traffic report for lower Manhattan. I switched over to one of the all news stations and, the same thing, then I

came up over the crest of route 17 where the New York skyline opened up in the distance, in sharp relief against the brilliant sunshine and I saw great clouds of smoke billowing from one of the towers of the world trade center. September 11 was a day at work like no other I have ever experienced, frantically contacting our stockbroker congregants - how do you say, "I'm so glad you're all right but I can't talk now, I have 15 more people on my list?" - and fielding calls from others asking us to collect their children or reassure their parents. At the end of the day it was clear all of our congregation had survived, but my town had not been so lucky. Seven NYC firefighters who lived in my town lost their lives that day. All of you who are old enough have a Sept. 11 story, I'm sure, you remember when and what and who. Years from now, having such a story will define a generation once again.

With 9/11 as with the Kennedy assassination, a collective story, an American narrative of what really happened here and what it meant began to take shape. People tried to make sense of what had happened. It was obvious that whoever did this had a powerful grievance and, unlike JFK, it was not the idiosyncratic grievance of one person. But, America understands itself to be a fair and just nation so in the days immediately after the attack there were impulses towards reconciliation and peace making. On Sept. 23, 2001 less than two weeks after the attack, Oprah Winfrey hosted "Prayer for America," Yankee Stadium. The prayer service was simulcast on large television screens at stadiums in Staten Island and Brooklyn, NY. It was televised on four national networks. Clergy from many faith traditions prayed together. But signs that the story of 9/11 would not be one of inclusive peace-making were present even

then. Lutheran pastor, Rev. Dr. David Benke, was suspended by his Missouri Synod for offering a prayer at this service because “to give the impression that there might be more than one God, is an extremely serious offense against the God of the Bible.” This was the first chapter in a new story of clashing world views that would be picked up by the media talking heads (on radio and TV) and would eventually drown out other stories about what happened that day and why. So, public efforts at reconciliation dwindled and attention then turned to identifying and remembering the dead. The NYT published an extensive list of obituaries as each of the victim’s identity became known. There was also a great deal of focus on compensating the families and how to calculate that compensation.

As these very human, individual stories were absorbing much of the attention of a shocked and traumatized public another story was emerging, seemingly out of nowhere, although it was bolstered in the public discourse by the clashing world view stories on talk radio. The government announced a color coded terror alert system and advised us all to buy plastic sheeting and duct tape to seal our homes in the event of a terrorist chemical attack. Soldiers with machine guns patrolled the bridges and subways. The story we were seeing on TV and, yes, hearing on the radio had changed. The struggle between righteous Americans and some ill-defined Islamic Jihad was coming to a shopping mall or football stadium near you. The terror story took on a life of its own, it filled the airwaves and all of a sudden lots of people wanted a piece of it because there was money involved. As funding increased more and more potential targets of terrorism were identified, by 2003, there were 1,849 of them, including the

Sears Tower in Chicago but also the Indiana Apple and Pork Festival. We were all unwitting draftees in the war on terror. Right about here, I think, is where ordinary people totally lost control of the narrative of the meaning of 9/11.

The story that we were being told had no relationship at all to the lived experiences nor to the personal stories of anyone who remembers that day. It is a story born, at best, out of fear and reactivity and at worst, out of cynical manipulation of public opinion. But somehow it became **the** story and crowded out all the others. We all know what happened next, two wars, thousands of lives lost and the situation that we find ourselves in today. But, I'd like us to focus this morning on what it means that we lost control of the story. Here is what I think it means: we have lost the ability, as a people, to construct a narrative that will help us make sense of what happened on that sunny Tuesday morning in September and because we can't make sense of it, we cannot heal. And, I think, because we cannot heal we are in danger of losing our sense of ourselves as a nation of fairness and freedom.

We were starting to make sense of it at that prayer service in Yankee Stadium, we understood someone had a terrible grievance against us, but we were never given the space to consider in the public discourse what that grievance might be nor how we might appropriately respond to it. Our collective attention was focused on the weapon used in the attack - terrorism - rather than on the reason for the attack itself. The analogy to the war on terror in the instance of JFK's assassination would be a war on rifles. Both, in my view, are absurd. Over time it has become impossible to speculate publicly about what the grievance held by the 9/11 hijackers might have been or

whether or not there might be some justice to it. Public figures cannot even pose the question without having their patriotism called into question, at best. So, we are stuck. Everything in our commonsense lived experience tell us that people do not inflict such a horrific attack on other people, at the cost of their own lives, no less, for no reason or simply for the reason that they possess the weaponry - terroristic use of commercial airliners - to do so. There has to be a reason, be it madness, ideology, a misguided effort to right a terrible wrong or something else entirely. There has to be a reason. For us as a nation to construct a public narrative to make sense out of what has happened we must grapple with the reason or reasons behind the attack. We have got to talk about it. But we aren't.

We aren't talking about any of it. It is increasingly difficult to get news about Iraq in the papers and on T.V. We just don't want to know. But ignoring it won't make it go away and, more importantly, ignoring it won't restore our understanding of ourselves as a free and fair nation. We have got to talk about it. We have got to get our stories back, our real stories about what happened that day. They have been taken away from us and subsumed in a narrative which we did not shape and which does not reflect, in any way, our experiences of the event. In 2001 we were all focused on the ruins of the World Trade Center and the lives that had been lost there and possible reasons why 19 young men would go, apparently willingly, to their deaths to make it all happen. If our experiences and thoughts had been allowed to develop naturally into a collective story to make sense of what had happened we should have seen, I don't know, educational programs about the Middle with deep reflections on our roles as consumers of their oil

and as agents in the many conflicts in that region. We might have reflected, as a country, on our relations with Saudi Arabia (where most of the hijackers came from) and considered whether we wanted to continue to be their best customer. Instead, we were wrapped, quite literally, in the American flag. Every car, every house, every newscaster and politician suddenly sprouted the Stars and Stripes.

Suddenly everyone who died on 9/11 was first and foremost a patriot, even though 236 foreigners (not including the hijackers), ranging from hedge fund managers to undocumented kitchen workers died that day. I don't think I am speaking ill of the dead when I say that when the people who died in the World Trade Center left their homes on the morning of September 11, 2001, they were not going to war, they were going to work. I know this because my congregants, friends and neighbors rode the same trains with them. But, somehow, in the public discourse they were transformed into frontline warriors in the war on terror.

How could we let this happen? How could we relinquish all our pain, shock and hurt? How could we give up on making sense of our world? You are looking at me like you think I have an answer to that question. Well, I don't think I do. Maybe there are many answers. We got scared. We got lazy. We got drowned out. All those voices, shouting at each other on all those radio stations I used to listen to on my commute. They gave us a headache, so we stopped talking to them and hoped they would go away. But we elected that congress that funded the war, that war that we don't want to read about so much anymore. And, while we're getting down to it here, we should admit that for many of us in the economically privileged classes, whose children would

not be asked to fight this war, we may have felt in a deep and secret place that this whole thing didn't really concern us that much, after all. I have two young adults sons, if they had been in danger I know I would have tried harder. Whatever the reason, though, we have failed, all of us. We have failed to insist that our authentic stories about what happened and why, on that sunny September day six and half years ago, be the stories that we use to make sense of and make decisions about what came after.

It is never too late to tell our stories. And that is what I believe we must do, over and over again, wherever, whenever we can. Go back in your mind to that day. Clear away all the noise and chatter and remember what was it really like for you? What did it feel like? What did you think about? What were your impulses to action? Dig back and find your story and when you have, go out and tell it. Don't be intimidated. You lived it. It is your story and you have a right to it. Yours stories become mine and mine become yours in the telling. It is how we become who we are. Our stories move us to action, to decide what the next step should be. Ask yourself and your listeners, how did we get here? How could we let this happen? For many of us, myself included, what happened on 9/11 tore into the soft underbelly of what it meant to be an American. It exposed viscera, anger, blood and ugliness that we don't like to think about. Like JFK's assassination 38 years before, it left the blood splatter of a nation on the pavement. But the difference is that through the national story we all share, participate it and will hand down to our children, we are healing from the wound inflicted in Dallas. Now, looking back we can find hope and inspiration as well as tragedy and betrayal. The wound of 9/11 will never heal until we can make meaning out of it with a collective, national

story that holds all of our individual stories and makes sense to all of us. If we carry on as we are, we will continue to self-medicate with the adrenaline rush of violence and conquest. But, we will remain a nation with a gaping wound, addicted to violence. There is power in stories, to know one another, to make sense of our lives and to heal our wounds.

45 years ago I was a little girl, with a lump of sugar in her mouth, struggling to breath as her mother held her tightly and cried. My mother's tears are held forever in our shared story of that day. Six and a half years ago I was a mother myself, returning home after an exhausting, terrifying day to find my young son had been sent home early from school. We sat on the couch together and watched endless replays of planes crashing into towers and we cried. Amen.