

What Will the World Miss, If You Don't Tell Your Story?
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September 8, 2019

Acts 9:3-9

Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Henry David Thoreau is often credited with writing "Most men (people) lead lives of quiet desperation and die with their song still inside them"

As I sat down earlier this year and wrestled with this year's theme: FALLING IN LOVE WITH JESUS --- I tried to imagine what some of the barriers were to achieving it.

I pondered this long and hard, and I came to the conclusion that the biggest barrier is myself --- and that may be true for you as well.

My inability to be honest with myself --- let alone with you --- is always a huge barrier to me building a deeper relationship with Jesus and of course with each other

In 2014, I had the opportunity to attend Don Miller's storyline conference --- the fact that it was in San Diego -- in February --- just made it all that more attractive.

The premise of the conference was to help us live out our story (or using Thoreau's words) our song that is inside us.

In order to live a great story, we have to change the way that we approach life.

To live a great story, we need to know who we are, what we want and understand the conflict that we will need to engage so that we can take action.

Miller argued that living a great story is like learning to ride a bike.
It takes patience and practice

To be able to live a great story we have to change the way we think about life

- We need to identify our dreams
- understand the potential conflicts to achieving those dreams
- and create a plan of action

Once we begin this journey we can begin to embrace what is at stake --- the song that is trapped inside you.

Too many people struggle to find the meaning and purpose of life.

Don Miller said: "What if life is not meaningless --- but **your** life is meaningless?"
Don't you want to unlock the meaning and live it out?

It was Maya Angelou who said: "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you."

The question is how do we free that story and live the life we were meant to live.

I am NOT a Calvinist --- I do not believe that God has foreordained our lives.
I believe that God walks with us --- not grabs us by the hand and pulls us along.

In other words --- quit looking for the perfect story.
I am not sure there is such a thing as a perfect story, anyway
But I am convinced that there are millions of good ones

Jon Acuff says that to have a meaningful story it requires two things
Heart and structure

And he offers five ways to start living your best life

1. Don't wait for a perfect vision of what your story is to be
You just have to start
2. Yes, you will be afraid

When asked in a Forbes interview what keeps people from achieving their potential he said the most common trap was fear.

He said:
I've never met a 20 year old or a 50 year old who says, "I've never had a single passion, dream, hope or desire." We all have them, but a lot of us give in to fear as soon as we get close to them. The reason is that fear only gets loud when you do things that matter. Fear never bothers you if you're average but the second you dare to be more than ordinary, fear awakens.

Fear is not the same as regret
Better to face your fear today instead of living your regret forever

3. People will criticize you
4. Be patient

5. You have to say YES

So how do we write our story?

Our story --- not the story that the world tries to give us!

It starts with you getting out a piece of paper

I did this the other day, and after I finished, the next day I found the list I made while at the conference --- what amazed me was two things

- Almost everything was the same
- What changed --- on this new list I was more honest with myself

I was more willing to admit my failure (and how those failures turned into something positive!)

And I think that is the key --- HONESTY

So the first thing to do is to write down all the important positive events in your life

The ones that have left a legacy --- been a turning point or marker

After making that list --- go back and add to it, the negative turns.

This is where it gets hard to be honest with ourselves

But the goal is to begin to see the redemption that is found even in those hard places

Much like Paul's story this morning.

I am going to trust you enough, and share some of my journey (some things I have NEVER shared before) --- I do this fully understanding the risks involved --- but I am convinced --- that if Meridian Street wants to reach it's potential in leading people into discipleship with Jesus ---THE ONLY WAY that is going to happen is if we can be dangerously honest with each other.

I know that this could explode

But I embrace Jon Acuff's third principle

PEOPLE WILL CRITICIZE YOU

This is a sampling of my combined list --- just some of the highlights

When I look back on my life --- the first seminal moment took place when I was about 9 years old.

I was in the elementary school production of The Wizard of Oz, I was so good, I was (along with the rest of my class who didn't get selected for a part) invited to be in the chorus.

During the dress rehearsal --- Mrs. Boone (who was not only a member of the church, but our families were very close) --- Mrs. Boone walked over to me and suggested I turn and face the back of the stage and not sing so loudly.

I was devastated

Obviously, I still hang on to it 50 years later, that is my first real significant memory

And it took a long time for that story to redeem itself --- but it actually did (that's another story for another day)

A year or so later I found myself in the hospital in Jackson, TN sharing the room with a boy who was sick like me. It was my first encounter with someone of a different race and I learned a powerful lesson.

While his skin might have been darker than mine --- and the end of the day --- we were both equally scared. God gave me a gift, a glimpse of what brothers and sisters are really like

When I went to High School, I joined the debate team (I certainly wasn't joining the choir) and I found great success.

Not only were we good --- I was respected (I am not sure I felt that before)

It gave me a confidence that I had never had

When I went off to college, I chose the school I chose not because of the school, but I wanted to go someplace that all my friends were not.

It may have been one of the wisest decisions in my life.

When I came home at Christmas my Freshman year I shared to family and friends that I felt God calling me into the ministry

Nobody was surprised --- which was a huge disappointment

And a comment was given to me that has stuck

"You will be good because you get along with people"

It has taken me a long time to unpack the influence (good and bad) that that little statement has had on my life

My last year in college I became a Resident Assistant and while in that role met another Resident Assistant we dated our senior year and I headed off to Duke Divinity School

We were separated during that year, but we decided to get married so we could be together.

A few months before the wedding, my best friend and I had one of those talks --- he knew --- and I knew --- that getting married was a mistake --- but I kept feeling that I would disappoint people if I broke it off.

Because my story was that I got along with people and should be able to work it out (Right?)

I didn't break it off and we were married that summer.

It lasted a semester --- the reasons why it didn't work are irrelevant

Both of us were to blame

The next big transformational event in my life was meeting a young woman named Nancy Hollowell

She has been amazing

She was with me when Stewart died --- and I am not sure that I could have made it thought that period without her

And that event --- probably more than any other on this list has been profound on my life's story. I would not --- I could not --- be a pastor without having gone through that terrible tragedy

I do not believe Stewart died so that I could be a pastor, but through the pain and agony --- Stewart taught and shaped me

Shortly after that Nancy and I got married
Best thing I have ever done!

Each of the girls births have been transformational

When I was 29 years old, having only served a small county seat church, I was invited to become the founding pastor of a church in Warsaw Indiana.

That was the most stress filled and exhilarating time of my life
two of the girls were born during this period

But after 6 years, I was out of balance and I knew I had to leave

Jump ahead almost 20 years (not that there are not important things in-between)

But about 12 years in as pastor in Munster, for reasons I have not fully comprehended even to this day a family that we were very close too fell away --- not from the church mind you --- just from our lives.

While they had been some of our biggest supporters, and as family we did many things with ----
Now they were distant, and behind the scenes not always honest
I still sting from that experience

One of the challenges of staying a long time as the pastor of a church is you have to re-invent yourself. I managed to go through three such transitions while I was at Munster, but as I faced the reality of a fourth transition, I (to be honest) could not figure out which way to turn.

I was still hurt by the broken relationship and was tired of always trying to keep everyone playing nice together.

So I decided to jump ship.
My mistake was I jumped at the first thing that came along.

I went to work for a non-profit and quickly found myself dealing with some questionable practices.

I remember coming home when I was looking to hire an assistant and I told Nancy that I had two excellent candidates, but I could not hire one because she was too pretty and I perceived

that some in management had a tendency to prey on pretty women. But there was nothing I could do to change that.

After six months, I was fired --- mainly because I asked too many questions, and I learned a surprising lesson. When someone wants you gone bad enough they will pay you to leave (if you get my drift).

The day before I was fired, was the day I got a phone call from Bert Kite asking me if I would be interested in coming to Meridian Street. A month earlier, I had made the decision that I needed to be back in the church.

Why is all this important?

Because knowing where I have been --- helps me examine my future dreams and help make sure that they are aligned and that I have the strength to deal with the inevitable conflicts that will come.

A few years ago, a hospice nurse put together a list of the regrets that she had heard shared by those who are dying. (Bronnie Ware)

1. I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.
2. I wish I hadn't worked so hard.
3. I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings.
4. I wish I had stayed in touch with my friends.
5. I wish that I had let myself be happier.

In response to those, Don Miller created what he called the 5 Commandments of the Living

1. Don't ignore your dreams
2. Keep work and relationships in balance
3. Project your God-given self into the world
4. Cultivate deep friendships
5. Be grateful

Pretty good list, and as I enter begin to dream about the next stage of my life, they are certainly things I need to be more cognizant of

Your story matters

Take action --- to make YOUR story count

Not everyone will want you to change

The stakes are high

By living fully the story God intends you impact other people --- and model for them what living their own story can be like

And I am convinced ---

You cannot fully fall in love with Jesus unless you are honest about your story and let it be known
--- to YOU and GOD.

My favorite thing that Don Miller said --- If you don't like your story --- write a new one!