

---

My name is Karyl Howard and I am a member of this congregation.

I'm here to talk about the value of my story, your story, and our stories, and how sharing them helps to build and strengthen ourselves, our families and friends, and our communities, especially the one here at Emerson.

The characters in the story "Something from Nothing" are like part of my family. I'm sorry that most of you "grown-ups" couldn't see the pictures in the book because they show the kind of community my grandmother, grandfather, some of their siblings, and my dad came from almost 100 years ago. It was named "Starobin" and it was near Minsk, Belarus. They came to this country with what they could carry on their backs, in their arms and in their hearts. They slipped across borders to avoid the Russian and Polish military and police and had to pass through inspection at the German border before boarding a ship that would take them into New York. My grandfather came ahead of my grandmother because she was pregnant with my father at the time and unable to travel. When my father was about 8 months old, he and my grandmother came with her brothers and their families. The story often told about my dad was that he cried frequently (as infants do) and, one night in the middle of December of 1913, the group was trying to hide themselves from the Russian soldiers. They were afraid that his crying would give away their hiding place and they contemplated just leaving him behind to save the group. None of them thought that it was an acceptable option, so one of his uncles shoved a handkerchief into his mouth to keep him from making noise. (My father never stopped making noise after that...).

They came here with virtually nothing, unable to speak the language and dependent on each other for their survival. They moved from New York to Wisconsin where other relatives had settled. They became junk dealers and furriers. My grandfather was one of the junk dealers and my grandmother bought pelts from the trappers and hunters and sent them to her brothers and nephews who made them into coats and hats. All of them sent their children to school to learn as much as they could. I am sorry that I didn't gather more of their stories when I was a kid. The one thing that I remember was that, when things got really interesting, they abandoned English and lapsed back into their native Yiddish so the children wouldn't or couldn't understand.

Both of my grandparents died in their 50's, so they really didn't get a chance to see their grandchildren grow up, but, by the time those grandchildren reached young adulthood, almost all of them had been sent to and graduated from college. They were a generation of immigrants who were truly the makers of "something from nothing" in many ways. My father, like the grandfather in the story, could build and fix anything. He was notorious for those skills and he was always doing something, even in his late 80's when he built bird and squirrel feeders and yard windmills!

I think that we all may be the makers of "something from nothing" and that process is what gives us our own stories to tell. Well, I am a "dot connector" and a list maker. I'm always trying

to put things together. That includes fabric to make quilts, bits and pieces of stones, glass and metal to make jewelry, ideas and words in my journals, fibers to knit into sweaters, shawls, hats and gloves, sheets and sheets of paper to make books, ingredients to make food to serve my family and friends, and, as a crisis interventionist, sometimes I helped to put together people. Some people in my family would call me the “creative one”, others would say that I’m a problem solver (that was the engineer) or that I’m resourceful (that was the businessman) and both of them while quite creative, think, incorrectly, of course, that, if you are “creative” you are “artsy” and that idea seems to terrify both of them! Regardless of how it’s described, I am always...piecing, linking, learning, questioning, arguing and building, building, building.

I first came to Emerson about 22 years ago when the services were held in what is now known as the “hearth room”. We had just moved here from suburban Detroit where we’d belonged to a 350-member Unitarian Universalist church that had a large and vibrant youth program for our soon-to-be teen-age daughter. Emerson seemed so small and I’m not sure if there were any other kids her age at the time. It just didn’t seem to meet our needs. Because I don’t live very far from here, I was aware that this sanctuary had been built, but I never made it back, choosing to straggle into Eliot Chapel on occasion. Two years ago, on a cold Sunday morning in January, I slipped in and was stunned by what I found.

This... and You.

I didn’t know any of you, but I saw, heard and learned enough that day, to come back the next week and pretty much every Sunday since! I now realize that many of you who really built this “something from nothing” are still here, still building and still working so hard with your minds, hearts and hands to make this place something that was only a dream and a vision at one time. I thank you for your dedication and love and for sharing your tales of early life at Emerson with me.

In these two years, I have had the opportunity to make some wonderful connections with so many interesting, caring, knowledgeable, funny, and active people of all ages. These connections came by sharing who we are, where we’ve been, where we’d like to go, and what’s important to us. Some of that sharing came through the Covenant Group that I moderated last year, some of it during Adult Religious Education, coffee hours, lunches, dinners, classes for sermon writing, the book club, Basic Lunch Therapy, the Covenant Group I’m in this year and through the Strategic Planning Committee, of which I am a member.

One of the earliest connections came from a little blurb about myself that I wrote for the new member column in the *Emerson Emissary*. In it I mentioned that I’d majored in geology as an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee. The next week, long-time member, Bill Elmore gave me a copy of one of the books he’d written – it’s called “Eden’s Secrets”. For those of you who don’t know Bill, he’s the gentleman with the bicycle horn on his cane... . This book is about religion and science. In particular, it is about stories from the Old Testament and geology! A long time ago, in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, when the field of “plate tectonics” was in its early stages, I asked one of my professors if “horst and “grabben” land movement could explain the story of Moses parting the waters of the Red Sea. (Remember...always trying to put pieces together...) I remember him looking at me and saying “I don’t believe in religious phenomena”. Well, Bill’s book has a take on exactly that and I loved re-visiting one of my old questions! Sometimes, I don’t remember yesterday’s dinner, but I do remember the day I asked that question and getting that response! If you think that this is the

end of the story, you're wrong. Along the way, I discovered that Mr. Elmore had written a couple of other books!

Some of them were genealogical studies of the Thomas and Elmore families in the Carolinas. "So?", you ask. "So" here's the thing...my graduate school advisor was a man named "Thomas Elmore" who had established the counselor education program at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, NC! Yup. Probably one of Bill's distant cousins, but, if he hadn't shared his book, I would never have made those connections.

If we hadn't taken the time to share little snapshots of our lives, I wouldn't know about some of your battles with illnesses, social injustices and/or discrimination. I wouldn't know about your commitments to making the world a better place, I wouldn't know how much you love your children and, perhaps, your grandchildren, I wouldn't know how funny (or even delightfully snarky", zany, and maybe irreverent) some of you are, I wouldn't know what books you like, I wouldn't know how many of you have lived where I've lived, I wouldn't know who loves BBQ, I wouldn't know how many of us are in the adoption circle, how many have been involved with exchange student programs, I wouldn't know how many of us have met with adversity or major life changes and have had to start anew to make different lives. I probably wouldn't feel the bonds that I feel with so many of you! The trust required to share these things, reflects very strong convictions and that trust is found here!

This "story sharing" stuff isn't just for adults (notice that I didn't say "grown-ups"...)! We have the most wonderful children who come to this place. From the tiniest little babies to the big kids, they are something very special. One of the very most important things that I learned growing up as a Jewish kid was the value and worth of children! How they are our shared responsibility and legacy. Here, we include them in our services, send them off to "Children's Chapel" with watchful and protective words, we respect them for who they are and share their dreams for what they may become. We try to link them to each other and to the world. We let them entertain and educate us. We try to show them how to handle difficult situations with our dedication, courage and hope. It is, indeed, one of our jobs to help them to create and re-create their lives, if they need to, so that they, too, will have stories to share. In the end, our stories help to create social networks that allow us to see each other as more alike than different. They have the power to open our hearts. They allow us to link with each other and to create relationships.

When we tell our stories and are heard, we can turn strangers into friends. We discover what is important to us as individuals and as communities. It then promotes the growth of both. At the present time, Emerson is growing (and out-growing our "home"). Our connections have made us stronger as a community. Our stronger community has attracted more people and I believe that we are all lucky to be here. As the grandfather in the story always found the way to assess and re-assess what he had to work with, may we continue to build our community so we too may continue to create that "something from nothing." We are lucky to be here at this time.

Keep listening, keep sharing and keep caring.