



## Forging a Common Story

**H**ow do people forge a common story out of many stories? How long does it take? And is something lost if that process succeeds?

A wandering tramp in Willa Cather's novel *My Ántonia* (1918) learns that he can't get beer from the farmers in the area because they are Norwegians. "My God!" he says, "so it's Norwegians now, is it? I thought this was America."<sup>\*</sup> But things change—in both directions: those Norwegians get Americanized, so now (for better or for worse) it will be easier to get beer from most of them; and America adopts the Norwegian story so that now Lake Wobegon is everybody's hometown.

Similarly, come November, many of us will sit down to Thanksgiving dinner and listen to stories about "our" ancestors coming over on the *Mayflower*, though, of course, the latter will actually be true for only very few of us. But not all Americans will yet share those stories. For some, including perhaps Hmongs and Somalis in this area, Thanksgiving will still be somebody else's story; others, especially some of our Native American neighbors, will look at Thanksgiving and repeat the "there goes the neighborhood" punch line.

But for these groups, too, some things change. In Minnesota, for example, pow-wows are increasingly open to and visited by non-Indians; and suddenly (it seems) the Fourth of July weekend includes not only fireworks and red, white, and blue parades, but also the Hmong Sports Tournament and Freedom Festival that attracts some 40,000 visitors to Como Park, virtually in Luther Seminary's backyard.

It was ever thus. According to the biblical story, every tribe and all the people arrived in the promised land with the exodus; yet, critical historical investigations suggest that this version was a later development, much like the growth of our American Thanksgiving tradition, in which "everybody" is adopted into a story that was originally shared by only a few. And the exodus story spreads. Now all Jews everywhere repeat that "they" were on the exodus; and some Jewish synagogues invite their Christian neighbors to teaching Seders, so Christians, too, can share more fully in that ancient story.

Much is gained in all this. Common stories and common festivals create solidarity and community in ways that cajoling and admonition cannot. Many now characterize the postmodern culture as one sadly without a metanarrative, and, to

<sup>\*</sup>Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (1918; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995) 114.

the degree that this is true, sharing in the neighbor's freedom festival will do a lot more good than allowing *Desperate Housewives*, *NCIS*, and the other stories told by the flat screen on the wall to provide our only common interest.

Might our common story grow? Might we (in this case, the European American "we") expand our narrative to include not just the tales of pilgrims and friendly Indians but also the accounts of "our" terrifying journeys on slave ships, "our" lengthy sojourns in Laotian refugee camps, or "our" treacherous treks across the deserts of the Southwest? Or would that even be a good thing? We are not so much into the "melting pot" metaphor any more, because we don't want to see the particularities of our several flavors lost in the common stew—no doubt, a laudable concern—yet neither will the opposite extreme be helpful, that is, a kind of cultural insularity that refuses community and cooperation. If all we can say is that "you" could never understand "my" story, we are doomed to factionalism and isolation. Fact is, story sharing is perhaps the best way we have to find our way into another's experience and develop genuine empathy for it.

The proper tension—between commonality and particularity—is tricky to maintain. I have said—truthfully—that, when I was invited to teach at Luther Seminary in 1973, I (with my Ohio German background) represented diversity among my Upper Midwestern colleagues of Scandinavian heritage (males all, of course). On the other hand, I also recognize that it will not be helpful to use that experience ("Hey, I was diverse, too!") to minimize or co-opt the unique experiences of my newer colleagues with their even more striking diversities. Particularity matters, though we do hope that becoming at home happens (which will make it a new home for all of us). For healthy community, we need both: particularity within community, a community that recognizes and celebrates difference.

What takes place over time in a macroscale in the United States and on a microscale on the campus of Luther Seminary happens also, more or less successfully, in Christian denominations and local congregations. We struggle to figure it out, in everything from the question of whether to provide services with "alternative" music styles or to try to bring people together in blended worship, to the matter of what language(s) we are talking about when we try to encourage biblical literacy. The struggle won't go away, but somehow we want to say that we *were* all on that exodus, because we are all God's people. And though we were not all on the *Mayflower*, nor did we all arrive from Sierra Leone, Mexico, Somalia, or Laos—we want (or at least, I do) to come together culturally in a way that gives all those stories a place at the family table, even while some tables will happily continue to feature chiles rellenos while others feature (oh, no!) lutefisk.

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