

Title: Mighty Stories of Liberty and Faith

Scripture: Proverbs 11:14

Bernard Securos, the curator for the new cultural center for the Tohono O’odham Native Americans, near Tucson, Arizona, told us some wonderful tribal stories during the time we spent at the center. The tribe only recently developed a writing system in 1986, so only the new generation can read and write the language, the majority of the tribe are ‘speakers’ only. His job as curator of the center is to help preserve the oral traditions as well as promote the new written language. For instance, “T-Ha’icu aiga” means “our story.” There are rules for telling the stories, Bernard told us. Some stories, like the creation story, may only be told in the winter months. Anyone listening must pay very close attention. If you, as a listener, are called upon, you must be able to give the last word spoken in the story, or else the story would not live on. The cost of not paying attention was that the storyteller would stop the story cold and not finish it. No amount of begging or cajoling could get the storyteller to finish it. The listener would have to wait another whole year before having another chance at hearing how the story ended, but by then, the story will have changed. Through these stories, the youth learned to be deeply respectful of others and of creation, and industrious and generous. They became story-livers as well as story-tellers. They could continue the story of how to survive in the desert, especially during drought, how to prepare their special foods from the plants (like the Saguaro) found in the desert, and how to find the medicines that healed the sick, or the fibers to make baskets and rope, how to perform the ancient ceremonies through which their culture thrived.

< Storytelling and storyliving are also our best ways of passing down our American heritage. In their book, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals, Weaving Together the Human and the Divine*, Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley write: ‘these common stories provide us an identity and break down barriers that would otherwise separate us.’ There are narratives that allow us to dream and to believe in a better future, that comfort us and assure us that everything is going to be all right (mythic). There are also narratives that confront us and challenge our ‘dream worlds’ with the harsh reality of the present (parabolic). We stitch our individual stories into the collective story, and we are as much shaped by our stories, as we engage in shaping them. Our rituals also shape our stories as they urge us to rehearse the story through our bodies.

Our many public rituals have a precise order and cadence so that we can remember

the many stories that lay behind them and give meaning to them. Events like the changing of the guard at the tomb of the unknown, or the raising of the United States Flag at Base Headquarters every morning, or the inauguration of a new President, or the swearing in of a new Congress are public rituals. Or even those rituals like public parades and graduations or fireworks displays, or even hearing the symphony perform on the Fourth of July. These carry our American story forward to the next generation, and we live the story through them and behind them, and sometimes they even help us to add to the story that we are living out at the moment.

< “Three-year-old Timothy had just heard his mother read his favorite bedtime story for the third time. After the third and final reading his mother witnessed a strange thing. The toddler took the book and set it on the ground; then he opened the book, gently put one foot and then the other on the open pages, and looked down in wonderment; then he began to cry. The mother was puzzled at this little display until her eight-year-old daughter offered her interpretation: ‘Timmy really likes the book.’ It was then that mother understood: Timothy wanted to become part of the book.”

Consider the mighty stories of the Bible: Moses parting the sea, Samson slaying the lions and demolishing the Philistine temple with his bare hands, David, the shepherd boy, slaying the giant Goliath with a sling shot and calming King Saul with his harp, Queen Esther saving her people from destruction, or Deborah, prophetess and commander, who led her people’s army to victory over the great General Sisera, and his 900 iron chariots, in the Plain of Esdraelon (Judges 4,5). These are the mighty stories of liberty and faith that remind us that humility is the key to wisdom (Prov. 11:2; Micah 6:8) and trust in God rather than riches is the key to deliverance, in battle as well as life.

The scripture from Proverbs (11:14) has several layers of meaning, depending on how you interpret the Hebrew word: ‘*Amam*.’ Depending on the context, the word can be translated as: folk, people, tribe, troops, army, flock, or nation. We as biblical readers of proverbs have multiple options for using these gems of wisdom, all pointing to people collectively rather than individually. Here are some possibilities:

“Without wise leadership, a nation falls; there is safety in having many advisers”

¹⁴For lack of guidance a people falls; security lies in many counselors. (Catholic Study Bible)

“Without good direction, people lose their way; the more wise-counsel you follow, the better your chances.” The Message

“Where no wise direction is, a people fall, but in the multitude of counselors there is safety.” Masoretic

¹⁴For lack of guidance a nation falls, but victory is won through many advisers.
NIV

¹⁴For want of skillful strategy an army is lost [or fails]; victory is the fruit of long planning (Oxford Study Bible)

Cf. 20:18 “Plans are established by taking advice, wage war by following wise guidance.”

Military success is not generally achieved by ‘demonizing the enemy,’ or by hating the enemy more than they hate us, but by studying the strengths and weaknesses of their opposing forces, applying the right strategies to the right situations. The same is true for a nation of people; wise leadership starts with connecting a wide range of diverse information into an actionable knowledge that solves problems. Another one of our proverbs goes like this: “The foolish of heart will inherit the wind, but the wise of heart will be its master.” We are not able to hold the wind in our fists or possess its strength in our hands, but we are able to steer our ships of state by its power. Even more important, true leadership has a wisdom of the heart as well as the mind. It harnesses the power of passion and intelligence into one motion. We can better steer the ship when everyone is pulling the rope in the same direction (*tachbulah*) and managing the rope with the same purpose (*yaats*).

A few years ago, William Shuttleworth, a USAF Veteran, spoke with a small group of people who had gathered at our local VFW in Smith Center, KS. William was walking across America from his home in Newburyport, Massachusetts to Vandenberg Air Force Base in California to focus and gather support for the needs of veterans. Bill was 71 years of age at the time he was walking this route. The most days he had covered in one day was 52 miles, the least about 23 miles. Bill was raising money for the Disabled American Veterans Association (DAV) at his website entitled: *Veterans Don't Forget Veterans*. He had raised more than \$100,000 at the halfway point in the journey. ‘There is a growing problem with opioid addiction among veterans who have been prescribed these drugs from the VA,’ he said, ‘we can make a difference, I know we can.’ Bill is also an educator (after his retirement from the Air Force) who has organized ‘adventure events’ (in nature) for those who suffer from childhood trauma. On his way to Smith Center,

KS, he described having stopped to celebrate with a group of builders who had just completed a home for a homeless veteran. ‘There is much in America to be grateful for, when all the people I have met along my journey are respectful and hard-working and generous.’ And, I would add to his words, we need to stop pulling in different directions and manage the ropes with the same purpose.

< Medal of Honor Recipient Bennie Gene Adkins (1934-2020) is one of our own; born in Waurika, Oklahoma. He received his medal for his service during the Vietnam War in March 1966, in a 38-hour close-combat battle against North Vietnamese Army forces in the “a shau valley” of Vietnam. Bennie tells the story of how an Indonesian Tiger helped save himself and 16 other Green Berets in the jungles near the Ho Chi Minh Trail. They actually spent four days and nights facing down the hungry tiger and escaped because the enemy, in Bennie’s words, feared the tiger more and would not chase them down. The title of Bennie’s book is: *A Tiger Among Us: A Story of Valor in Vietnam’s A Shau Valley*. Sadly, Bennie passed away from COVID-19 in April 2020; but not before he had the opportunity to share his memories of Vietnam in his own words, some fifty years after the war, publishing his book and touring the country advertising it and speaking about his experiences. But, one particular interview during the book tour, left him speechless. Not that he was not used to being speechless, since it had taken almost 50 years to find his voice on the subject. But, this interview was of a different nature. In this interview, Bennie told the audience that the tiger was nothing compared to his visit to a Pre-Kindergarten classroom during his tour. A young boy had stood up and asked him a question, and not just any question, but a very genuine question coming from deep in his being. “Why must there be war?” The boy sat down and waited for his response. Bennie swallowed, and told the boy that he did not have an answer. We might say that the young boy, in that moment, was wearing the shoes of peace mentioned in Ephesians as part of the armor of God (Eph. 6:15). Bennie may have seen his own reflection in the boy’s face.

< In the 2018 movie entitled *Almost Sunrise*, directed by Michael Collins and Marty Syjuco for PBS, the Iraqi veteran Tom Voss learns from Father Thomas Keating (1923-2018) a different approach to forgiveness, the forgiving of God. Father Keating, a Trappist monk, had been one of the developers of a contemplative prayer form known as “centering prayer,” originating out of St Joseph’s Abbey in Spencer, MA. Our veteran, Tom, sought him out in his

retirement years to find help with his moral injury. This is Tom's description of the meeting as he stepped into Keating's world.

"I didn't quite recall his words, but I remembered the concept of forgiveness. I felt it like a question mark. Could I forgive myself for things I had and hadn't done in Iraq? Could I forgive God for the moral wounds that had nearly destroyed what was left of my life? I didn't ask the question in my mind. I asked the question from somewhere deeper inside myself. I didn't need words or thoughts. This Q&A was between my soul and nature, or God. A tingling sensation suddenly stirred at the base of my spine. It felt like something was opening up and unwinding itself from deep inside me. It was a physical sensation, but it wasn't just my physical body that was unraveling. I felt the sensation move upward along my spine. It gained momentum as it moved from my tailbone to the middle of my back, then up between my shoulder blades and into my throat. The sensation, the *ckakra*, the whatever-it-was burst through my throat in a silent sob and came out as tears. There, lying on the mat surrounded by other veterans, I wept freely, and soundlessly, without sorrow or grief. As I wept, a voice from within rose up and consumed me with the force of a rocket-propelled grenade: 'You are forgiven,' it said. I felt the forgiveness permeate every cell. And then, a response welled up from deep inside me. 'I forgive you, too.'¹"

These are the stories of liberty and faith in our own time. As we walk with these veterans in spirit, we also embody part of the American story in our own bodies. Their stories, and the rituals we create around them as they journey, are part of our stepping onto the book of freedom, like three-year-old Timothy, a book whose authors gathered in 1776 in Philadelphia to re-write the history of our country from a colony of England to an independent and inter-dependent nation among other nations. Those authors challenged us to 'keep the embodied liberty alive,' in our hearts and minds, and to continually add new stories of liberty to our American portfolio. But, more importantly, we need to 'keep faith alive' in our hearts and minds, and continually add new stories of faith to our religious portfolio, that

¹ Tom Voss, "PTSD/Meditation Breakthrough: Forgiving Myself and Forgiving God," InnerSelf (2019) Accessed April 21, 2020. <https://innerself.com/content/personal/spirituality-mindfulness/meditation/22034-ptsd-meditation-breaktrough-forgiving-myself-and-forgiving-god.html>. Excerpted from Tom Voss and Rebecca Anne Nguyen, *Where War Ends: A Combat Veteran's 2,700-Mile Journey to Heal-Recovering from PTSD and Moral Injury Through Meditation* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2019), 216.

humility will always shape our wisdom, and love will always shape our actions and hope will always shape our purpose. When we step into the Book of God's Love, like three-year-old Timothy, we also step into the divine story of welcoming the stranger, sharing with the poor, loving our enemies, comforting the broken-hearted, healing the sick, protecting the children, nursing back to health both those who have borne the battle and those who have forged the peace, treating the least of these as we would like to be treated, and walking humbly with our God. May it ever be so in liberty and faith. Alleluia! Amen.