

*John Docherty, February 14, 2016*

### **Living ink: Letting go of the pen**

The overarching theme for this year's Lenten season is “Living ink”. The idea is that we are all part of a grand story, authored by God. The metaphor is intended, I think, to encourage us to stretch our imaginations around the ways in which God is using us to fashion this story; and to be aware of how God is using the story to fashion *us*.

In some ways, we are the “ink” used by God to bring the story to life; the raw material needed to express in physical form what has already been conceived in the mind of God.

In other ways, we are individually simply one of the characters in the story; pushed this way and that by other characters and elements of the plot that are needed to move the story forward.

And in yet other ways, we are co-authors with God, and we have a direct role to play in fashioning how the story evolves.

On that last point, we often hear writers claim that once they've started work on a story; once they've set the plot in motion; once they've developed the characters to a certain point; that the characters then sometimes take on a life of their own.

The story is then no longer under the complete control of the author, in the sense that the author must now at least be consistent with regard to the story and characters to date, and must allow the plot to play out in ways that are true to the world he or she has created, even if that world is a fantastical creation, like Middle Earth of Lord of the Rings, or the Empire of Star Wars.

A truly good and believable story is always faithful to the ways in which things can happen in “real life”, and the characters and plot twists need to reflect that. The more contrived a story feels; the more it seems that the author is tossing in elements, or wild coincidences, that one would never expect to happen in “real life”, the less satisfying the story becomes.

At least that's been my experience of appreciation of a good story. It has to seem plausible at the very least, and a reasonably true reflection of “real life”.

“Real life”, though, is exactly what God is writing with, and the proposal for this Lenten season is that we pay attention to how this story is playing out.

The story, as we understand it, had it's beginning six thousand years ago in a garden in

Mesopotamia;

or, if you prefer, it had its start 14 billion years ago in a 'singularity', out there somewhere, that produced a "Big Bang";

or, in the case of my personal story, it started 61 years, 1 month and 14 days ago in Glasgow;

or, in the case of your personal story, it started at *your* unique time and place.

I like this metaphor of story. I like the idea that there is something "structured" about our lives; that the pieces fit together somehow; that the thread of our lives is not just a collection of random events that lead nowhere in particular.

A good story, in fact any story, I suppose, has a beginning, a middle and an end.

It's certainly how Christians have always approached an understanding of the meaning of life :

a) that there is, in fact, meaning in life;

b) that God is the author behind that meaning;

and c) that God is at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the story : God created, God sustains, and God will at some point pull all the threads together.

We don't echo Shakespeare's Macbeth when he hears the news that his wife is dead :

SEYTON : The queen, my lord, is dead.

MACBETH : *She should have died hereafter;*  
There would have been a time for such a word.  
To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
To the last syllable of recorded time,  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more: it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.

And you thought *I* was a melancholy Scot ...

If we're to look at life as "story", I think we can't avoid the fact that, at best, it's a complex weave of plots, subplots and parts that feel like filler. (If you've ever read Herman Melville's "Moby Dick" you probably have some idea of what I mean by filler ... and I suppose the uncharitable among you might suspect that the preceding reference to Macbeth might warrant that label).

In the story of life there are major characters, minor characters, protagonists, antagonists.

There are multiple landscapes, varied textures, language that can be beautiful in its poetry and use of imagery, and there is language that can be coarse and brutal in its effect.

There can be a feel to the story that is by turns charming, comical, tragic, romantic, dramatic, sad, frightening, hopeful ...

The story sometimes moves along at a rapid pace, and sometimes drags interminably ... just like some of my meditations.

Get to the point John! Where are you going with all of this?

Well, where I'm going with all of this is to suggest that during the period of Lent we pay attention to our lives as story; that we take note of the narrative and try to observe how much, or how little, we are in control of the story line.

But to do that, I think we need to start out by being aware that we are a part of multiple story lines.

There is, of course, the meta-narrative of history : how do you see God at work in the broad strokes of what is happening around the world? Few of us would be considered major players in that story, but all of us are, in some way, a part of it.

So what part do you see yourself playing in this epic tale with a cast of billions, and where do you have something to contribute to how the story plays out? Do you have any control over the story, and, if so, what part?

Closer to home, and at a perhaps less intimidating level, there is the story of our local social environment. Local meaning either national, provincial, or municipal environment. Is God at work there? Other than paying your taxes and perhaps casting a

vote from time to time, are you an important character in that story? Do you want to be? Is God nudging you towards, or away from, any of these involvements? Are the possible involvements only of a political nature? Do you have any control over *that* story?

Thirdly, and at a much more intimate level, how is God at work in your personal story? Can you use this time of Lent to take note of your own life as story, and look for hints that God is at work crafting a story line even there?

Now let me just say that I don't think this last personal level is any less challenging than the earlier levels in terms of complexity. For one thing, our personal stories are not stand-alone products over which we have sole and final editing privileges.

Some things will happen to us, over which we have no control whatsoever. I'm not asking you to try to understand "why" these things are happening. I'm only asking you to take note over the next few weeks of those parts of the narrative that are driving your story, but that have nothing directly to do with you personally :

things like any accidents or mishaps that may happen – how are they affecting your story line?

things that are happening on the world stage that may not affect you directly, but that nonetheless generate in you some kind of reaction that pushes you in some way – how are they affecting your story line?

What are some of the things that do have something directly to do with you, but over which you have no control :

Things like illness – how is this affecting your story line?

Things like changes at work or at school – how is this affecting your story line?

I said a few moments ago that we are a part of multiple story lines, and that our personal stories are not stand-alone products. Part of what I meant by that is that there is one meta-narrative of history; there are multiple national / provincial / municipal type narratives around the world; and there are six billion individual stories being played out.

Yours is one of those stories.

Mine is another.

You may only be something less than a footnote in the grand scheme of human history, but you are the central character in your own story.

And while I may be the central character in *my* own story, I am only a minor character, or a secondary character, in *yours*.

But, that said, we are all characters in each other's story. During this time of Lent, can you take note of how *your* story is being influenced by the other characters in your life? Can you take note of how your life is influencing the *other* characters' stories?

Let's focus that a little – since it *is* Lent, let's add a little bit of guilt and penance to the exercise : in terms of how others are influencing your own story, why not limit that to taking note of the positive influences : how is your life's story being enriched by those around you? Ignore the stuff that is just dragging you down.

But don't let yourself off the hook – in terms of how you are influencing the lives of others (sounds like a good title for a movie ...), can you take note of how you are enriching or diminishing the lives of those around you? Can you take stock of the ways that your story is overlapping with other stories? Can you step back momentarily and assess your level of satisfaction with the ways in which you are co-authoring the lives of those around you?

Because, quite frankly, in some ways we *are* co-authors with God in how this human story will develop. In the same way that a writer's characters take on a life of their own, we have our own level of autonomy. We are not puppets, or two dimensional characters being forced in this direction, or that. We are fully formed, multi-dimensional creations that are capable of making our own choices with regard to plot development.

I'm not sure how popular these are anymore, but those of you of a certain age will probably remember reading “choose your own adventure” books when you were children. For those of you not familiar with the concept, the books start telling a story. At a certain point in the narrative, the story pauses, and the reader is invited to make a choice :

given the plot that's just been described, would you choose option a)? then go to page 12;

or would you choose option b)? then go to page 18.

The reader then effectively decides, on some level, how the story will evolve, and the process is repeated a few times to allow for various plot twists.

Our lives are a little bit like that. We are regularly confronted with choices that will have an impact on how our story develops.

And this is where we finally connect with the passage from Luke that was read earlier. In that passage, Jesus is confronted with choices that will determine how *his* story will develop.

Will he opt for security and comfort (will he accept the bread offered by the devil and let his story move off in that direction)?

Will he opt for political power (will he accept the glory and authority offered by the devil and let his story move off in that direction)?

Will he opt for a self-aggrandizing display of his own inherent power (will he prove to the devil who he is and let his story move off in that direction)?

So, during this period of Lent, can you metaphorically let go of the pen for a while and simply observe what is happening with your narrative? Obviously, you can't quite just be an observer – you can't just step away from the page and take stock of where things are going.

But you can be conscious of the interplay;

you can be aware of the overlapping narratives;

you can take note of those things over which you have control, and, so far as it lies with you, you can choose life-affirming plot decisions;

and you can take note of those things over which you have no control, and you can try to let go of the pen, knowing and trusting that God is also at work crafting that part of the story line.