

Tuesday, May 14, 2024

## **CHARTER NARRATIVES**

An essay presented to the Chit Chat Club of San Francisco

©Stephen S. Pearce, PhD

In a 1957 commencement address Cecil B. DeMille said: “Like mighty rivers flowing from a single source, all the great religions of the Western world stem from Moses. On their broad streams they carry the precious cargo of their different traditions—but they all share in a common reverence for the Law of God revealed through Moses.”

In contrast, you all are familiar with George Gershwin’s famous line: “It ain’t necessarily so. The things that you’re liable to read in the Bible, it ain’t necessarily so.”

I would like to spend my time this evening focusing on this deeply held cherished account that I introduce by focusing on the concept of charter narrative.

Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1872/1942), working in the 1920s, primarily with the natives of the southwestern Pacific Ocean, particularly on the Trobriand Islands, developed the notion that the intrinsic meaning of a people’s narrative comes not from the narrative itself, but from the meaning given to it—to its cultural context. He termed this cultural context “charter myth” defined as a lived reality, an active component of culture, a warrant for the future generations that binds a society together by reinforcing common values and mores connected to long-held rites, rituals, social practices, and traditions. Charter myths legitimize societal arrangements, providing a sense of security, particularly in times of bewildering change. Simply stated, a charter myth is a text that is pretext for a context.

Thus, as much as individuals are defined by their myths, the myths are defined by the society. Because Malinowski believed that the meaning of myth lay not in its literal messages, but rather in what myths did for individuals and societies, he turned to the behavioral consequences of certain stories. If we really want to understand myths, look at what myths do, not what they say.

From cultural, ethnic, and religious perspectives, they bind a society together by reinforcing common values and culture. Even in families, such narratives from the past define the behavior of current and later generations. A charter myth is a reminder of an ever-present tension between what is hoped for and what actually is, and as such, often exerts an influence that takes on a life of its own.

Although Malinowski coined the term Charter Myth, I prefer re-titling it as Charter Narrative because not all Charter Narratives are myths. All religions have charter narratives that transmit cultural heritage, values, language, philosophy, and spiritual traditions. Charter narratives frequently, but not always, are counter to fact and require a “leap of faith.” For

example, Moses, slave child, is plucked from the waters of the Nile River, ultimately to receive the Law at Mt. Sinai. As C.S. Lewis contemplated his own conversion, he focused on his love of myth, which he called “at its best a real unfocused gleam of truth falling on human imagination.” In *The Allegory of Love*, Lewis said, “There is nothing in literature which does not in some degree, percolate into life.”

By extension, therapist Alan Cheuse captures the power of what has come before us and influences us, whether or not we know that to be the case, when he wrote: “We’re traveling light but we’re encumbered, like all wanderers, with the ineffable but ever-present baggage of everything that’s come before.”

By way of a contemporary illustration of a charter narrative, James Piereson, author of “Camelot and the Cultural Revolution,” wrote in *The Daily Beast* that Jacqueline Kennedy single-handedly invented the **Camelot myth** in an interview she conducted with Theodore White for *Life Magazine* a week after her husband’s assassination. She told White that she and her husband enjoyed listening to the cast recording at bedtime, particularly the title song in which Richard Burton as Arthur sings: “Don't let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief, shining moment, that was known as Camelot.” Jacqueline quoted the line and concluded, “There will be great presidents again, but there will never be another Camelot.” Her observations found their way into newspapers around the country. Nothing did more to cement the nostalgic Kennedy mythos than that one word. Liz Nickles in her book *Brandstorm*, wrote that her comment is “one of the most significant examples of the power of storytelling to build a brand in modern history.” Despite all the less-than-flattering revelations that have emerged about the Kennedy presidency, 60 years later the Camelot metaphor is still unassailable.

Another example of a terse narrative that says it all and provides the listener and speaker with an immediate understanding of history without the necessity of an interminable explanation. A radio-talk-show-host friend recalled a program on the African American struggle for equality in which a listener succinctly summarized the hours of radio conversation about the ascent of African Americans in this terse statement: “Rosa sat, so Martin could walk, so Obama could run, so our children could fly.”

Sometimes charter narratives take on a life of their own. A cousin of mine married a Texas hillbilly who made his living buying used cars, detailing and touching up dents and scratches and then reselling them for a few hundred dollars more than he paid. He decided he wanted to open a used car lot. Sitting around the dining room table bantering about a fitting name for the business, his father-in-law, my uncle, who hated this son-in-law, suggested the name “Shady Deals.” Bingo! He opened his so-named lot with unintended consequences—people loved the name and flocked to his business, many saying that anyone who would name his lot “Shady Deals” had to be honest. The news media picked up the item (must have been a slow news day!), and gave him national coverage. Nevertheless, the business failed!

By way of another example of unintended consequences, “Union Provisions” was the name of a restaurant that an inexperienced northerner named his southern restaurant, in spite of his partner’s objections. He stuck with the name because he grew up on Union Street in San Francisco and because he thought that it would express the “unity” of the restaurant’s fusion menu. But there was no way to control the narrative that it evoked in southerners about the Civil

War— initial reviews were poor and patrons did not flock to the eatery, and in the end, the establishment was closed, and renamed with repositioned offerings—and yes, it then was a great success with a second location about to open.

Ralph Waldo Emerson emphasized that it is difficult to identify insights gained from narratives: “Everything in creation has its appointed painter or poet, and remains in bondage like the princess in the fairy tale, till its appropriate liberator comes to set it free. The story of the Sleeping Beauty is more than a fairy tale, it is an allegory of the life of every human being who fights his way through life.”

Martin Buber suggests: “All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware.” Thus, for Carl Jung, “The most important question anyone can ask is: ‘What myth am I living?’” because each of us carries a life-shaping narrative. A humorous fictional illustration is of a man who dreamed that he was being chased by a pursuer. As the dreamer fled, the chase became more intense—his heart pounding, he was sweating and fearful as the pursuer closed in on him. Finally, cornered by the pursuer, the dreamer asked: “What are you going to do?” The pursuer replied: “How should I know? It is your dream!”

Family narratives frequently define the behavior of later generations, especially when influenced by concealed events. In such situations, an ever-present tension between what is hoped for and what is, exerts influence that takes on a life of its own. Thus, the more family narratives are suppressed, the more they influence current relationships and behavior, surfacing and resurfacing, seeking expression until the truth is consciously known. In a fictional example from Hollywood, the 1988 award-winning movie “Rain Man,” starring Dustin Hoffman, uncovers a family secret that shaped the destiny of the relationship between a son and his father. The son, Charlie Babbitt, an abrasive, selfish, young wheeler-dealer in collectibles, learns that his estranged father, Sanford Babbitt, has died. Charlie travels to Cincinnati to settle the estate and learns that all he inherited were some rosebushes and a classic 1949 Buick Roadmaster Convertible, over which he and his father had clashed years before. The remainder of the three-million-dollar estate was to go to a trustee for the benefit of an unnamed man who resides in a local mental institution. Babbitt discovers he has an older brother, Raymond, whose existence he had been unaware of for his entire life, except for childhood memories of an imaginary playmate named “Rain Man.” Raymond has superb recall but shows little emotional expression, except when in distress. Babbitt kidnaps Rain Man and the adventure continues as he drives his obsessive-compulsive brother to Los Angeles on side roads because Rain Man strenuously objects to driving on interstate highways.

In a true-from-life first person account, Russ, a middle-aged architect recalled a childhood loss of innocence in such a painful moment of growth that shaped his worldview. Each year at Halloween, all the students put on a costume and the teachers tried to figure out who was who. The student who was not identified would get a prize. Russ said, “I was in the third grade. My heart just wanted to win. I remember going with my mother to get a lion costume. I said: ‘I have the best costume in the world! No one’s ever going to figure out.’ I was in the locker room at school putting my costume on for the contest. The kid next to me said: ‘Everybody’s going to know who you are, Rusty. You take one step, and it’s going to be totally obvious who you are.’ Something clicked way inside of me. It was like my whole universe caved in. For the first time,

I realized everybody was pretending. Everybody was lying. My mother was lying, the teachers were lying, the kids at school were lying. They all pretended that nobody was going to figure out who I was. I had had polio. I limped. To me, having polio was like wearing glasses. I couldn't see myself limping, so I never even dreamed of that as an issue. All of that happened five minutes before I was to walk out there. When it was my turn, I stepped out on the field and walked in front of the teachers. I had this mask on and I cried...And I could just cry and cry because I had this lion's mask on. I could just cry and cry and cry. I remember it like it was yesterday. I didn't feel badly because I limped. It was because people were lying to me. Ah, it hurt. My whole world lied."

With what's going on in the Middle East (October 7, 2023 Palestinian attack on Israel), I want to use an historical event to provide an example of a charter narrative, an event so powerful that it shaped the destiny of the Jewish people and the creation of the State of Israel as well as the current struggle.

Captain Alfred Dreyfus' political and social life poisoned French society one hundred years ago and remained an undercurrent throughout the succeeding decades. By way of background, Dreyfus was wrongly accused of spying for Germany. A thirty-five-year-old French officer hailing from the Alsace region who spoke both French and German, was from a wealthy family and married into another wealthy family. He was reserved and aloof, preferring the company of horses, women, and books to that of his fellow officers whom he found to be boring, spiteful, and envious. They in turn, thought Dreyfus to be pretentious and distant. His wealth isolated him from both their problems and their camaraderie. His fine horses, considerable library, specially tailored uniforms, and large wine cellar were sources of jealousy. Thus, when it was discovered that someone in the military was passing French military secrets to the Germans, the General Staff of France's army went looking for a spy; it was easy to wrongfully suspect and frame this awkward, unalluring man with strong ties to family to Germany.

Before this affair would be over, at least thirty-one duels would be fought, a forger of evidence would commit suicide, a president would die in office, an attempted coup would fail, a cascade of resignations and scandals would plague the government, news reporter Émile Zola and his wife would be murdered, Dreyfus would spend five years on Devil's Island, be tried, retried, convicted a second time, and then pardoned. The chain of events is so implausible that it reads like some kind of cheap murder mystery.

Journalist Theodor Herzl, a witness to the trial, was stunned by the cries of "Death to the Jews" at Dreyfus' ceremony of degradation. Even after his name was cleared and he was restored to his rightful military rank, the French bureaucracy would not give Dreyfus pension credit for the years he had wrongly been imprisoned on Devil's Island.

Émile Zola's first article on the Dreyfus affair ended with a phrase that would soon become famous. He wrote: "Truth is on the march and will not be silenced." But after the first three articles about Dreyfus appeared, the editor of *Le Figaro* could not withstand the overwhelming negative response of the readers who pressured the paper with huge numbers of

cancelled subscriptions. The editor told Zola that he would no longer accept his articles for publication. Zola promptly hired a printer and, at his own expense, published his remaining articles in the series *J'Accuse*, forcefully stated his case: "It is a crime to poison the minds of children and uneducated people, to exasperate reactionary and intolerant passions, while hiding behind this odious antisemitism which will kill the great and liberal France of the rights of man if France is not cured of it."

A series of anti-Jewish sermons were preached throughout France, and a rash of riots and demonstrations against Jews broke out. Throughout France crowds chanted, "Death to Dreyfus! Down with the Jews! Down with Zola! Death to the traitors! Long live the Army! Long live France! Long live the Republic!"

The power of Dreyfus' degradation ceremony made Theodore Herzl, an assimilated Jew, realize that the dream of Jewish assimilation into mainstream European life was a lost cause and he began to work in earnest on the creation of a Jewish state. He urged Jews to give up the dream of emancipation because antisemitism would not allow Jews to live, so deeply engrained was it in the European psyche. Shortly thereafter, he called upon world Jewry to meet at a series of World Zionist Congresses that would ultimately lead to the creation of the State of Israel. Herzl predicted the Holocaust 50 years before it happened, although he said that it would begin in France.

Herzl wasn't the only one to foretell the Holocaust. Franz Kafka's metaphorical short story, *The Trial*, predicts the same end. Little understood legal proceedings that Josef K., the protagonist, is subjected to foreshadowed the Holocaust in Kafka's work, a maddening series of events, devoid of logic or reason, echoing the main character's pointless persecution.

On the morning of his thirtieth birthday, Josef K., the chief clerk of a bank, is unexpectedly arrested by two unidentified agents in unrecognizable uniforms, from an unspecified agency, for an unnamed crime. Josef is not imprisoned, however, but left "free" and told to await instructions from the Committee of Affairs. Subsequently, Josef is ordered to appear at the court's address the coming Sunday without being told the exact time or room. After a period of exploration, Josef finds the court in the attic and is severely reproached for his tardiness. Furthermore, he arouses the assembly's hostility after a passionate plea about the absurdity of the trial and the emptiness of the accusation. Josef later tries to confront the presiding judge over his case, but only finds an attendant's wife. Josef struggles throughout the account to prove his innocence, but ultimately is transformed from a confident, well-spoken man to one who is paranoid and on edge. On the eve of Josef's thirty-first birthday, two men arrive at his apartment to execute him. They lead him to a small quarry outside the city and kill him with a butcher's knife, as Josef concludes with his last words: "Like a dog!"

It is over one hundred years after the conclusion of the Dreyfus Affair and, sadly, little has changed. The harsh reality is that Jews have to look to themselves and the few friends they have to sustain the promise of the Promised Land. When Jews were being fed into the maw of the Nazi killing machine, the French and other Europeans stood by silently and aided and abetted that effort. Now the world leaders will condemn Jews defending themselves when under rocket

attack and when their citizens were kidnapped and murdered. Nevertheless, many are calling the Israeli reaction “disproportionate” and condemning its defense of its sovereign territory.

As is well known, Herzl took the inspiration for the title of his 1902 utopian novel *Altneuland* (Old-New Land) from the name of the great Prague synagogue, which Herzl had visited as early as 1885. On August 30, 1899, he wrote in his diary that the epiphany of his “Zion novel” and its name came to him during a bumpy bus ride. *Altneuland* alluded to the Altneuschul: “It will become a famous word.” Most commentators take this choice of title as symbolic of how Jewish continuity in Europe will be politically transposed onto the new terrain of Palestine. Georges Yitshak Weisz, in his book *Theodor Herzl: A New Reading*, is one of the few commentators to have connected the novel with the more obscure legend of Prague, magic, and the Altneuschul that Herzl himself found strangely intriguing. The novel has never been plausibly read as a literary achievement, but it did work out several fundamental aspects of Herzl’s liberal political vision that had received scant attention, or none at all, in his watershed 1896 pamphlet *Der Judenstaat* (*The Jewish State*).

Hebrew literature is filled with examples of the longing of Jews to return to Zion, the theme Shmuel Yosef Agnon’s story “On Account of a Goat,” which expresses the collective and individual longing to return to the Land of Israel as well as the improbability of ever returning to the Jewish Homeland after 2000 years of exile.

A sick old man was ordered by his doctor to drink goat’s milk. He bought a goat, but the goat disappeared a few days later and was nowhere to be found. When she finally returned, her udders were full of milk that had the taste of paradise. She continued to disappear periodically, and each time she reappeared, her udders were full of milk that was sweeter than honey.

One day, the old man asked his son to discover where the goat went. The son tied a cord to the goat’s tail and when he noticed that the goat was about to leave, he took hold of the cord and followed her. Soon, they reached a cave, and after proceeding for a while, they emerged into a beautiful land that turned out to be Israel. The son decided to remain behind, but he wanted his father to come there, too. He sent a note stating where he was and advised his father to follow the goat. He rolled up the note and inserted it in the goat’s ear, thinking that when the goat returned, his father would stroke her head, and as her ears wiggled, the note would fall out. Unfortunately, that is not what happened. The father did not stroke the goat, her ears did not wiggle, the note did not fall out, and the father went into mourning for his lost son. Because the goat would constantly remind him of his loss, he decided to have her slaughtered. When she was being skinned, the note was discovered. When the old man read it, he realized that he had lost his son, the goat, and its milk—and...the opportunity to go to the Land of Israel.

Indeed, Hebrew literature is filled with comparable stories that demonstrate the longing and the frustrating blocks to ever returning to Zion. I share more of those narratives, like this one written by the great Hasidic Master Menachem Mendel of Kotzk. An old Jew searched and searched for his lost snuffbox but could not find it. Saddened by the loss, he thought, “If the bitterness of the exile were not enough for me to bear, now I must endure this loss as well.”

While searching and lamenting, he found himself lost in the forest, where he came upon the strangest of all creatures—a holy goat! This goat roamed the forests and roads of the earth, waiting for midnight, when he would raise his immense horns toward the blackened sky, touching the heavens and thereby awakening the stars to sing the glory of the Most Holy One all night long.

“Why are you so sad?” asked the goat.

The old Jew told him about the loss of his snuffbox. The goat laughed a hearty goat laugh and said, “Is that all?”

The bewildered Jew looked quizzically at the goat, who then said, “It is wasteful to cry over a lost snuffbox that can easily be replaced. Take your knife and cut a piece of one of my horns and make yourself a new snuff box.”

He carved a snuffbox from the piece of horn, filled his newly made snuffbox with tobacco, and made his way to the house of study. Rejoicing in his good fortune, he offered a pinch of snuff to anyone who wanted one. And every taker marveled at the wonderful tobacco that had the smell of paradise. All who sampled the tobacco soon realized that the tobacco’s aroma was due to the box. They besieged the old Jew with questions about how he came to acquire the box, and although reluctant to reveal its secret, he soon told the story of the holy goat. As word spread of the miraculous snuffbox and its origin, the villagers grabbed their pocketknives and headed to the forest to find the holy goat. There they found him pacing the earth, back and forth, awaiting midnight. One by one, they approached him and begged permission to cut off small pieces of his horns for snuff boxes. The holy goat gladly gave up snippets of his horns. Box after box was made and filled with tobacco. The fame of the boxes spread far and wide and soon, at every step, there was another petitioner who asked for a piece of his horns. The holy goat’s horns became smaller and smaller, until finally they disappeared altogether.

Now the holy goat still roams the earth, but he has no horns. He looks forlornly at the blackened sky, no longer able to touch it with his horns to awaken the stars and make them sing the glory of the Most Holy One all night long.

Another clue for the return to the Holy Land is hinted by the memory of the ancient Canaanite city of Luz, later renamed Beth-El by Jacob (Gen. 28:19 and 35:6). Beth-El was believed to be the only place on earth over which the Angel of Death had no power—thus ushering in the messianic age. In contemporary literature, James Hilton’s 1933 novel, *Lost Horizon*, depicts the utopian land of Shangri-la. Many other volumes have been written about Utopia by Malthus, Plato, Spencer, Marks, and others. More than four hundred Utopian works in the English language were published before the year 1900, with more than a thousand others appearing during the twentieth century.

Two years before his diary entry about the Altneuschul and *Altneuland*, Theodor Herzl recorded a colorful legend of the Prague synagogue told to him by Eduard Bacher, his editor at the Viennese paper the *Neue Freie Presse*. Bacher and Herzl had a deeply ambivalent



relationship. In March of 1897, upon leaving the offices of the newspaper together, Bacher showed a fleeting interest in joining Herzl on his planned tour of Palestine. Herzl showed him the organization's travel prospectus and in turn Bacher told him a story he recalled from his youth in Bohemia that Herzl recorded in his diary.

A Jewish woman was once looking out of her window. She noticed on the opposite roof a black cat in labor. She went over, took the cat, and helped her to give birth. Then she made a bed of straw on top of the coal bin for the cat and her kittens. A few days later, the cat who had recovered, disappeared. But the lumps of coal on top of which she had lain turned into pure gold. The woman showed them to her husband, and he said that the cat was sent by God. So, he used the gold to build a synagogue, the Altneuschul. This is how that famous edifice came into being. But the man was left with one wish: as a pious Jew he would have liked to die in Jerusalem. He also wished he could see the cat again, for he wanted to thank her for their prosperity. And one day the woman was again looking out the window and saw the cat in its old place. She quickly called her husband saying: "Look, there sits our cat again!" The man ran out to get the cat, but it jumped away and disappeared into the Altneuschul. The man hurried after it and suddenly saw it vanish through the floor. There was an opening there, as though to a cellar. Without a moment's hesitation the man climbed down and found himself in a long passage. The cat enticed him on and on, until finally he saw daylight ahead again, and when he emerged, he was in a strange place that the people told him he was Jerusalem. Upon hearing this he died full of joy.

Black cats, the magical transformation of coal into gold, and astonishing rewards for kindness rendered are, of course, the stuff of legend, but the most salient feature of this story for Herzl, or at least for Bacher, was the synagogue's secret portal leading directly to Jerusalem. Within the Jewish imagination, one is reminded—though Herzl apparently was not—of the Yiddish folktale Agnon would later recast in his previously mentioned "Fable of the Goat." Bacher said he had told Herzl the story because he, too, had discovered within himself a desire to go to Palestine.

One of the strangest observed and documented belief phenomena in traditional cultures are the cargo cults, an example of associating two unrelated coincidental events as the basis for belief and ritual. Across Melanesia, unconnected communities, thousands of miles apart and speaking unrelated languages, spontaneously generated the cargo cults that developed after WWII. Typically, the natives witnessed the war fought by technologically advanced nations—first the Japanese and then the allies who airdropped vast amounts of weapons and military supplies, medicine, canned food, manufactured clothing, products the islanders had never seen before; at times this cornucopia was shared with the islanders. Thus, cult members connected the foreigners to their deities and ancestors who until then were the only beings powerful enough to produce such riches.

After the war, the cargo planes never returned, and islanders attempted to find a way to lure the cargo planes back to the islands. They began to worship Americans who had brought cargo to their islands during World War II by mimicking the activities and dress of US soldiers such as performing parade ground drills with wooden or salvaged rifles. The islanders carved and wore wooden headphones, fabricated control towers, and kindled signal fires and torches to light up runways. They built life-size replicas of aircraft out of branches and straw and cut



military-style landing strips out of the jungle, hoping to convince the merchandise-laden planes to land once again.

We all have our own personal charter narratives. I always ask my students to tell me their personal charter narratives that have chartered, plotted, or changed the course of their lives. Often, I find the accounts to be stunningly moving. One student, a South Korean fundamentalist Christian minister working on a doctorate at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley shared his charter myth.

When he was born, he refused to suckle and the doctors told his parents that he was the third baby to be born like that in that hospital; the other two had died and their son also would die. His father took him and prayed over him and swore an oath to God that if his son lived, he would dedicate his child's life to God—a modern-day reenactment of the biblical Hannah and Samuel story. He lived and growing up did not think much about his father's sworn oath. However, as he reached maturity, he realized that not to follow his father's oath would render the oath a lie. Then he said, "Then I met God." He explained that as a young adult, his parents sent him on an eight-day religious retreat that he did not want to go on. He hated being there and stayed on the periphery of the program. At the last session, the leader asked each participant to turn to the person next to him and bless him. He meekly put his hands on the shoulders of a man he could not stand, but the man grabbed him and gave him a bear hug. He said, "Then I heard God say, 'Even those you do not like are worthy of a blessing.'"

Another student titled her charter narrative: "You'll Use Up All Your Tears."

"You'll use up all your tears," she said.

Why could she cry but I could not?

She was sitting on a stool in the kitchen when she took me by the shoulders and said, "Why don't you ever cry that your father died?" Then, when my 8-year-old tears did begin to fall, I was shamed for that too.

She had some real soul killers, like "I wonder what you did that made God take away *your* Daddy."

"Holy Crap!! I don't know, but I'll try not to do it again since I'm down to one parent now."

He was gone. He was never coming back. I look like him. I think like him. I love like him. I didn't know he was so sick. His third heart attack at 38. Who knew? There's that myth shattered – that children are spared total devastation before they're able to build some resources.

A few months later, Kennedy was shot. The nation mourned. School was cancelled the day of the funeral. People wept. Hearts broke. That was my normal life. It was business as usual at the (Ripley) house. She grew increasingly bitter. She hated her life. She had to go back to work. She hated that. She was single in a coupled world. She hated that. She worried about

money. She hated that. She had to do all the man things of life, as well as the woman things. She hated that. One thing enabled her to get out of bed in the morning. She had a daughter to raise. Her life was crap, but she had a daughter. She would make sure her child did not suffer her fate. Her daughter would *succeed* where she had failed. Her daughter would marry well. She would live in their hometown and raise perfect children and make her mother proud. She sent her to college and pressured her to join a sorority and chose her major. But the daughter had a heart of her own. She fell in love with a Yankee, hippie, Harvard educated, bearded music professor. No amount of railing against him could dissuade her red-headed offspring. “I’ve chosen everything up ‘til now—why won’t she listen to me about this!!” She was enraged. She’s been dead 22 years. I was relieved when she died. Her tapes still play in my head – you’re doing it wrong, that was stupid, where do you get such ideas.

Why can’t I weep for her? I was her only child, her life? I might run out of tears.

A friend of mine told me a story that became the metaphor for his life. When he was 14 years old, he and a friend went outside, but as he left, his mother warned him not to go near the rain—swollen river which was overflowing its banks due to recent torrential rains. Of course, he disregarded his mother’s warning and the two boys were swept into the river where he thought he was going to die because he was pulled under twice and could not breathe each time. The only thing that saved him was a jam of logs that had been carried downstream by the torrents and had accumulated across the river. He was pinned to the logs when he saw his friend coming downstream after him. He mustered all his strength and pulled the friend out of the raging waters, saving his life as well. They made it to the bank of the river and up into farm pastures where they knocked on the farmhouse door. The farmer let them in, built a fire for them to dry off, and sent them on their way.

When he returned home, his mother asked how his day was and he said, “Fine.” She then started crying and showed him the local paper that had just been delivered. The headline read: “Local boys saved from near miss with death.”

He said, “I learned a great deal that day about making promises, being truthful, and following parental advice.”

2016 Republican Presidential Hopeful Dr. Ben Carson wrote of his experience that should be categorized as his charter narrative. His mother, Sonya, married his father when she was thirteen and he was twenty-eight. He turned out to be a bigamist and once he was gone, Sonya supported Ben and his older brother by cleaning houses. When the boys struggled in school, she made them turn off the TV, read two library books a week, and write reports on them. She was functionally illiterate, but Carson said, “We didn’t know that—she put check marks and highlights and stuff.” He went from the bottom of the class to near the top. His mother’s motto, which informs Carson’s conservatism, was: “If you don’t succeed, you have only yourself to blame.” But Carson grew up a devout Seventh-Day Adventist, and his autobiographical book, *Gifted Hands* is also about grace.

When he was in ninth grade, after a friend teased him, he pulled out a knife and thrust it at the friend’s stomach. The boy could have died; Carson could have gone to jail. Instead, the

blade hit his friend's belt buckle and broke. Carson ran home, locked himself in the bathroom with the *Book of Proverbs*, and prayed to God to take away his temper. He says that he walked out a different person.

Dr. Robert Coles, Harvard psychiatrist and author of numerous books, including *Children of Crisis: A Study of Courage and Fear* and *The Moral Life of Children*, features Ruby Bridges, the subject of a Norman Rockwell painting that immortalized Ruby when it appeared on the cover of *Look Magazine*. As a six-year-old first-grade African American girl dressed in a white dress, white socks and sneakers, wearing white ribbons in her hair, Ruby was escorted by menacing-looking Federal Marshals to a once all-white school emptied by parents of white children because of desegregation initiated in New Orleans in 1960. Coles, finishing a two-year stint as a young Air Force psychiatrist stationed in Biloxi, Mississippi, decided to discover how Ruby and three other black children managed the stress they were enduring during desegregation. Coles focused on Ruby's cheerfulness, persistence, good study habits, and friendliness, even though Coles imagined that Ruby must have been anxious, depressed, frightened, and in denial.

"Now here was a little girl...with the whole world against her and her family—two and three hundred people ready to kill her twice a day, shouting obscenities at her, telling her that this was the last day of her life if they had their way. Coles was the first physician Ruby had ever met. Her mother gave birth to her without an obstetrician. Ruby had never seen a pediatrician. Both of Ruby's parents were illiterate. They had never gone to school, but they were church-going, hard-praying people. Her father, a janitor, lost his job when the building owner found out who his daughter was, and her mother took care of children by day, and by evening, took a bus to a bank where she got down on her knees and scrubbed the floors from 10 p.m. to 4 a.m.

Every day, Ruby was accompanied to school by fifty armed federal marshals while the police protected the right of the mobs to harass her. Coles also visited her teacher, who remained in the classroom because a judge ruled that if she didn't stay, she'd lose her retirement benefits. She reported that she had seen Ruby stopping in front of the crowd, the federal marshals also stopping to protect her, and her lips moving. He asked Ruby about stopping and saying something to the people. Ruby said that she didn't say anything to the people but said her prayer for them.

Coles asked, "Ruby, you mean you're saying prayers every day for those people?"

"Yes, twice a day."

"After all the horrible things they say to you and all the threats you hear from them?"

And she looked at Coles and said, "Well, don't you think they need praying for?"

Finally, he asked Ruby what she said in those prayers. "I always say the same thing," she answered. "I always say, 'Please, dear God, try to forgive those people because they don't know what they're doing.'" Coles knew where that prayer came from and that this belief was transmitted to Ruby from her mother, father, grandmother, and aunts and uncles, who spent long

hours in church on Sunday and some weekdays, doing hard praying, putting life and soul into their prayer. Coles was forever changed by his encounter with six-year-old Ruby, who then served as the touchstone for the rest of his life.

**Now for one BIG caveat.** A charter narrative can be a trap. Taking the example of the early followers of Jesus, it would appear that they backed themselves into a corner by signing onto the unalterable charter narrative, written-in-stone, fixed Holy Writ. They held that Moses received the divine perfect law that could not be changed, clearly acknowledged by Matthew 5:17-20: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. 19 Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.” In other words, Matthew sought that to confirm early Christians supercessionary claim to the biblical tradition as their own, they would have to be even more fastidious than the Jews in the observance of the Law.

Nevertheless, the Jews who followed Jesus outmaneuvered the requirements of the law, most notably the observance of the sabbath, dietary laws and circumcision.

John’s (13:34) overriding message was not that the Exodus traditions had been abrogated by Jesus, but that they were superseded by harkening back to the era of Abraham, before Moses received the immutable Law at Mt. Sinai, thus outmaneuvering the immutable sacred Law. In short, the followers of Jesus proved their point by quoting Jeremiah, “I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel (Jer. 31:33).” Simply stated, they harkened back to the time of Abraham before the later giving of the Law, thereby setting aside the observance of all Mosaic Law. They substituted faith for Law, claiming that Abraham did not hold to the Law because it had not yet been given (Galatians 3:6).

Early Christians found a way out of the requirement for circumcision by broadening God’s blessing to the circumcised and uncircumcised, teaching that Abraham received God’s blessing before he was circumcised, thus making him the father of all who believe without being circumcised as Galatians 3:17 declared, “I have made you the father of many nations.”

In summary, our lives are directed by our charter narratives whether or not we are aware of their influence upon our behavior and belief, as Leonard Cohen wrote: How can I begin anything new with all of yesterday in me? At times, people seek to savor and reenact sweet memories. But there are also moments when we are haunted by sadness, unfulfilled promises, unspoken words, unjustified anger, threats, and worse. All these bitter, or sweet, or bitter-sweet memories seek expression in different ways. Clergy constantly meet people who are trapped by

such memories, whose longing or homesickness sometimes makes it impossible for them to be kind to their children and spouses, let alone their clergy and other authority figures. Others smother their loved ones with an overbearing love because of their own unfinished business, their own excess baggage, their own unresolved situations, and the need to return to the scene of their crimes. A man once said to me: "Every time I yell at my child, I hear my father's voice." Everyone hears voices from the past that own and direct thoughts and actions. That comment reminded me of John Cheever's short story "La Bella Lingua" in which the protagonist remarks: "Fifty percent of the people in the world are homesick all the time. You don't really long for another country. You long for something in yourself that you don't have, or haven't been able to find." Albert Camus captured this tension present in everyone, but suggested that we not allow it to own us in these words: "We all carry within us our places of exile, our crimes, and our ravages. But our task is not to unleash them on the world, but to fight them in ourselves and in others..."

Thank you!