# First Stories

Contributed by Donald Williams
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from The Educated Heart, a work on stories and narrative action in Jungian analysis

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We do, however, come prepared to love and be loved. We come into the world ready to love a mother and mothering people. Mothering people mean the world to us. We love the mother who gives us sweet warm milk, whose breast looks good and soft like it tastes, smells, and feels. We feel happy and excited with the mother who smiles at us and smiles bigger when we smile back. We are soothed by the mother who strokes the back of our head and says "There, there, there," when we fuss. We love how stroking hands and words softly fade away and then come right back to soothe us over and over. For the first few months, the people who mother us are the entire world. For years after that, they remain the most compelling, fascinating piece of the world we know. We never forget them for this.

We started to soak up our mother's stories before we ever understood her words. Our heart pumped with her blood and life. Her body, her looks, her voice laid the foundation for our own private creation story, for the first story in our personal mythology. We started constructing pieces of this story from the day we were born, probably sooner. Our first stories were wordless, emotional foundations: This feels good, that doesn't; this makes me smile, and that makes my back arch.

With good enough mothering, a child gradually constructs a more elaborate story about herself and others. The story may go like this: "I am loved by someone important, and I love this person. Whatever happens, I can count on this love. Their love protects me." This story works like a deep channel that water will always find. It reads like the Biblical stories that say, "We are loved and needed by our Creator." As children, we construct intelligent powerful stories about our first world, and we experience these stories for the rest of our lives with religious conviction and clarity.

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Parents have their hands full with their own love problems, their histories—the commands, charms, or black holes of childhood—and their current wounds. As a result, most children don't grow up too happily or smoothly. A child with a depressed mother may not be sure that she is loved and needed. She constructs this story: "When I am hungry, the person my life depends on does not notice. When I smile, she doesn't often smile back. When she turns away from me, I am sad at first, still hopeful, then scared, then even sadder." We can hear echoes of another Biblical theme: "God is sometimes veiled from our sight. I am here alone." (1) "All is vanity," says the prophet.

If the depressed parent sometimes loves well, the depressed child may settle on an active, heroic narrative: "I will do whatever I can do to stop my mother from withdrawing her love." Or more hopefully, "I will do whatever I can to make my mother happy." However, if the depressed parent is frighteningly unreliable, the child may reach a frighteningly bitter conviction: "I will never depend on another person. People cause pain. I will hide my needs from myself and others." In all of these situations, the child can seldom escape a secondary narrative line like this: "Something must be wrong with me."

Our first and lasting lessons in love come from our parents. They show us how they love and how they want to be loved. We learn from our parents to love devotedly, anxiously, distantly, expressively, empathically, aggressively, nicely, or responsibly. The practices of love are endless. As we grow older and ready for other loves, we watch and listen to other stories. We talk to friends, watch television, go to movies, read books, remember key lines, and collect useful facts.

Family members, too, take us aside for their personal commentaries, amendments to the official story, occasional soliloquies: "Your father really loves you but just doesn't know how to show it," for example, or "If you'd just do what your mother tells you to do, she wouldn't get nervous." As we grow up and prepare to marry the wrong person perhaps, a good aunt or uncle may come forward and whisper, "You know, you don't have to do it...."

As we grow older, the world grows with us, adding fathering people, siblings, grandparents, and an unending line of strangers—friends, the parents of friends, teachers, people on television or radio, and characters in books. We watch closely, we act, reflect, and we learn. We test our stories using the world around us. We may try to write our own. In any case, everyone has a love story, whether it's an original, copyrighted, co-authored, inherited, borrowed, picked up on the street or off the shelves.

I emphasize childhood as a love story because years of analytic practice and my own analysis convinced me—as it does most analysts and clients—that our first love stories shape, color, bend, or twist our images and expectations of the bigger world. We make our first approaches to school, work, friendship, intellectual life, marriage, parenting, and individual interests with the same convictions that animated or burdened our first loves. One person automatically expects to be appreciated by others while her companion automatically expects to be ignored. Such convictions affect whether or not we will ever say, "Look at me" or "Listen to me," and mean what we say. Fortunately, the world exists independently of our convictions and some people may listen to us despite our disbelief. Other people have their independently crafted stories, and they may refuse to accept a role we scripted without their knowledge. The unexpected does happen.

Our first stories stay with us forever. We learned these stories when we were infants, toddlers, kids, teenagers, and new adults—through the years when we would learn anything that seemed to have our name on it. Our parents may hold onto these stories—and often do—to the grave, and we may do the same. Stories have consequences. We may be lifted up or drowned by the weight of family talk—either way we are still inside the story. If we get the chance to inspect this story, we should use every creative, psychological, or editorial skill we possess to adjust or even hammer the familiar narrative line. With grace or luck, an emotional shock, the inspiration of a stranger, the effect of art, or another person's convincing respect will reveal a point outside of our first stories, a point to mark the beginning of a new story.
Footnote

- See Reynolds Price, A Palpable God (New York: Atheneum, 1978), pp. 13-28.

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