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Interpretations and Beginnings

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Before I became a college professor, I was a children's librarian in Harrisburg, telling stories to children all over Dauphin County. One thing I learned from that job was that stories have the power to teach lessons. So today I'm going to tell you three stories that I believe will help us think about beginnings, which is what we're here for. For this first one I would like you to imagine that you're an audience of six-year-olds at a library story time. It's called *A Story, A Story; an African Tale* and it was written down by a woman named Gail Haley.[1]

Once, oh small children round my knee, there were no stories on earth to hear. Nyame, the sky god, owned them and he kept them in a golden box beside his royal stool. Little Anansi, the spider man, wanted to buy the sky god's stories. And so he spun a web up to the sky, climbed up, and bowed down before the sky god.

"Oh Nyame," he said, "what is the price you ask for your stories?"

"My stories are not for sale!" said the sky god.

"Please," pleaded Anansi, "what is your price?"

"Very well," said the sky god, "the price of my stories is that you bring me Osebo, the leopard of the terrible teeth; Mboro, the hornets who sting like fire; and Moatia, the fairy whom no one can see."

"Thank you Nyame," said Anansi, as he began to travel back down to earth. However, as he went back down the sky god laughed, "How could a weak old man like you, so small, so small, so small, pay the price I ask for my stories?" But Anansi paid him no attention and simply returned to work to collect the things the sky god had asked for. First, Anansi went walking, walking, walking through the jungle path until he came to Osebo, the leopard of the terrible teeth.

"Aaagh, Anansi," said Osebo, "you are just in time to be my lunch!"

"As for that," said Anansi, "what will happen will happen. But first, let us play the *Binding Binding* game."

The leopard, who was fond of games, asked "How is it played?"

Anansi said, “First I will tie you up by your foot and foot and then I will untie you and you will tie me up.”

“Excellent!” said Osebo, who planned to eat Anansi when it was his turn. So Anansi took a vine and he tied the leopard by his foot by his foot by his foot by his foot. And the leopard said “Okay Anansi, untie me, it’s my turn!”

Anansi replied “I won’t untie you! Now Osebo, you are ready to meet the sky god!” And he took the leopard and spun a web around him and hung him in a nearby tree. Next, Anansi took a calabash—a gourd—and hollowed it out. He filled it with water and put a top on it. And then he took a frond—a leaf—from a nearby tree and he walked over to the nest of Mboro, the hornets that sting like fire. He held the frond over his head and poured some of the water over the hornet’s nest. The rest he poured over the frond so that it would appear to be raining. He called “Mboro, it is raining, raining! Fly into my calabash so that the rain water does not tatter your wings!”

“Thank you Anansi!” buzzed Mboro. And every last hornet flew into that calabash.

Anansi put the lid on it and said “Now Mboro, you are ready to meet the sky god.”

Finally, Anansi took a piece of wood and from it he carved a small doll holding a bowl. He took a pile of yams and mashed them up and put them in the bowl. He covered the whole thing in a sticky latex gum and put the doll at the foot of a flamboyant tree where fairies are known to dance. He tied a vine around the doll’s head, led himself back, and hid behind a nearby bush. It wasn’t long before Moatia, the fairy whom no one can see, came dancing, dancing, dancing to the foot of the flamboyant tree.

“Gum baby,” said Moatia, “may I have some of your yams?”

Hearing this, Anansi tugged on the vine so that the doll appeared to nod “yes.” Moatia picked up the doll, gobbled up the yams, and placed the doll back on the ground. But her hand stuck to the gum. “Gum baby, you let go of my hand!” said Moatia. But the doll didn’t move.

“Gum baby, let go of my hand or I’ll slap your crying face!”

POW!

And she slapped the doll and so both hands were stuck. Now Moatia was very angry and she began to press and push and kick against that doll with one foot and then the other foot and so both hands and both feet were stuck to the gum baby. Anansi came out from behind his bush, saying, “Now Moatia, you are ready to meet the sky god!”

So Anansi took all three of his captives, Osebo, Mboro, and Moatia—he spun a web around all of them, slung them over his back, and marched back up to the sky god. He bowed again, laid the captives at the sky god's feet and said, "Oh Nyame, here is the price you asked for your stories."

Nyame was amazed but he stayed true to his word. He called together the noblemen of his court and said "Little Anansi the spider man has paid the price I asked for my stories. Sing his praises, I command you!"

And all the noblemen sang praises to Anansi. Nyame took that golden box and handed it to Anansi who returned to earth and to the people of his village. He opened the box and all of the stories scattered to the ends of the earth, including this one.

There are two reasons why I told you that story today and why I think it has something to offer us as we think about beginnings. The first reason is that Anansi was not supposed to get the stories. It was nearly an impossible task and according to the sky god, Anansi was small, weak, and old. But Anansi figured it out.

The Anansi story changes the framework of the concept of power; of who's in charge and how to be in charge. That's an important lesson to us today—frameworks are not meant to be fixed.

The second reason this story helps us today is that the Anansi story is known to us in the story-telling world as a pourquoi tale; a story that answers the question why or explains something previously thought inexplicable. So the Anansi story teaches me that it's a good idea to ask questions, especially about things I've never thought about. It flips a framework, it asks an important question.

Now I have a second story. This one is about some people that I know, and they're two of my favorite people in the world: my Aunt Whoopie and my Uncle Tootie. This is really what we call them; everyone who knows them calls them that.

One day, Aunt Whoopie and Uncle Tootie were driving down the road when my uncle accidentally cut off a nearby driver. This being New Jersey, the driver responded with a characteristic gesture, involving the raising of a specific finger on one of his hands. Nonverbal communication scholars refer to the class of gestures that have direct verbal translations as emblems…this was an emblem. I don't really need to translate it for you today, nor do I think I should. That said, my uncle got a little angry. As his blood began to boil however, Aunt Whoopie said, "Toot, don't be angry. Maybe he's just saying 'One way to Jesus'."

How in the world did my Aunt Whoopie interpret that gesture as anything but crude? Because, and here's what I think this story has to offer us, my aunt seeks to interpret other people's actions as kindness whenever she can and she truly means that. She has a unique interpretation of the world.

This is the third story—and this one I'll paraphrase for you from one of my favorite novels. The novel is called *In the Beginning* and it's by the American novelist Chaim Potok.

I love this story because it's about a struggle.

The story centers on a young boy named David Lurie growing up in New York in the 1930s. David is a gifted young man and is studying the Torah, the Jewish Bible. In the backdrop is David's family: his younger brother Alex and his mother and father, and his extended family, and many loved ones in his Orthodox community in New York and still back in Russia. Now if you know your history, you know that the 1930s was not a great time for Jewish people in Russia. In fact, it was a terrible time.

So in the backdrop, David's family is using every ounce of everything they have to get their loved ones out of Russia. All of their money, all of their time, all of their energy, they're sacrificing their health, they're giving everything. But in the foreground, we have David, studying. He's so gifted that his parents hire tutors for him. He studies and he studies. As he matures in age, faith, and love of God, his family, and his community, he begins to study the Talmud. The Talmud is a collection of rabbinical arguments about the laws that are set down in the Torah.

But one of the things that David starts to notice as he studies is that some of the rabbis in the Talmud disagree with one another. These were *interpretations* of the scripture. He's bothered by the fact that some of the rabbis disagree with each other about what the Bible means. And he needs to know more because the questions are so compelling that he can't just accept other people's answers.

The problem is that David doesn't know where else to look except to the writings of Christians. Now, remember the backdrop: his parents are sacrificing their lives to get Jews out of the evil hands of Christians—and David wants to go study them!? To his family, this is *at least* a waste of time and at most an abomination—a sign of his hatred for the Jews. But it's what he has to do in order to understand the religion that he loves. It's a journey that threatens those foundations.

What to do?

One night, David and his brother Alex are going to sleep. They're in their late teens at this time, it's dark, and they're lying in their beds in their shared bedroom, and they're having an argument about something in the Torah. David tells Alex, "Alex, the answer is easy. It's in the Talmud" and he quotes the place where the answer is.

Alex says, *"Davie, I know all the questions and I know all the answers and the questions are better than the answers.*"[2]

This is the moment that David knows that he has to take the journey; the journey with questions that will have difficult answers and a beginning that may not have a happy ending.

What I love about that book is that David took the difficult choice. He could have grown up, been ordained, become a rabbi, and led his community. And never asked another question. But he chose the difficult questions.

So today I've told you three stories and now I'm going to help you connect them. Why have I told you them? Three reasons:

Because we professors are going to ask you to give us answers for the next four years. But we're going to do that because we hope that they will help you to develop the questions that excite you the way that David Lurie was excited by his questions.

Because we professors want you to interpret the world in your own unique ways.

And because we professors want you to challenge the frameworks that we offer you.

Chaim Potok, the author of *In the Beginning*, wrote, "All beginnings are hard. Especially the beginnings you make for yourself."[3][E1] So today I won't conclude with an ending but with a beginning: yours.

When will you begin?

NOTES

[1] I have taken liberties with this story, and have embellished it quite a bit from its original text, as written by Ms. Haley. Her version of the story is considered by most librarians, at least, as the standard, as the picture book won the 1974 Caldecott award. See, Gail E. Haley, *A Story, A Story; an African Tale* (New York: Atheneum, 1970).

[2] Chaim Potok, *In the Beginning* (New York: Knopf, 19), 396.

[3] Potok, 1.