

## CHAPTER ONE

# The Seven Basic Plots

*"I create fiction to tell the truth."*

EUDORA WELTY



A woman went to see the Governor about getting her husband out of the penitentiary.

"What is he in for?" the Governor wanted to know.

"For stealing a ham."

"That doesn't sound too bad. Is he a good worker?"

"No, I wouldn't say that. He's pretty lazy."

"Oh. Well, he's good to you and the children, isn't he?"

"No, he's not. He's pretty mean to us, if you want to know the truth."

"Why would you want a man like that out of prison?"

"Well, Governor, we're out of ham."

That was to get your attention. How about these two:

Tanzan and Ekido were once traveling together down a muddy road. A heavy rain was still falling. Coming around a bend,

they met a lovely girl in a silk kimono and sash, unable to cross the intersection.

"Come on, girl," said Tanzan at once. Lifting her in his arms, he carried her over the mud.

Ekido did not speak again until that night when they reached a lodging temple. Then he could no longer restrain himself. "We monks don't go near females," he told Tanzan, "especially not young and lovely ones. It is dangerous. Why did you do that?"

"I left the girl there," said Tanzan. "Are you still carrying her?"

How about this one from that irreverent and crude Jewish comedian, Lenny Bruce:

You and I know what a Jew is—One Who Killed Our Lord. I don't know if we get much press on that in Illinois—we did this about two thousand years ago—two thousand years of Polack kids whacking the crap out of us coming home from school. Dear, dear, there should be a statute of limitations for that crime. Why do you keep busting our chops for this crime? Why, because you skirt the issue. You blame it on the Roman soldiers. All right. I'll clear the air once and for all, and confess. Yes, we did it. I did it. My father found a note in my basement. It said, "We killed him. Signed, Morty." And a lot people say to me, "Why did you kill Christ?" I dunno...it was one of those parties got out of hand, you know.

We killed him because he didn't want to become a doctor, that's why we killed him.

The first story usually elicits a soft "aha" kind of laughter, signifying that people catch something beneath and behind it. The second story gets an uneasy chuckle. That's because underneath the punch line, it carries a heavy burden. Bruce's monologue is weighted with a painful history. I open this book with these samples because both have their place in storytelling and both point to my main theme: good stories are about more than they are about. They are revelatory of the human condition, the human experience, the human journey. They carry truth. To support this contention, let me, in the first two chapters, build on the founda-

tion laid by Christopher Booker in his magisterial work, *The Seven Basic Plots*. We will follow his outline and frequently use his wise words.

### The More Things Change...

Booker reminds those old enough to remember, that in the mid-1970s people waited in long lines outside movie houses all over the Western world to see a breakthrough horror movie unlike anything they had ever seen. It was Steven Spielberg's *Jaws*, a name that would fall into the common vocabulary of American folklore, become enshrined in Disneyland's Universal Studios, and become a regular rerun on television to rival *The Wizard of Oz*. The story is familiar. The idyllic serenity of a little Long Island seaside resort, Amity, is suddenly shattered by the arrival offshore of a monstrous, oversized shark who violently attacks and devours a hapless girl. Other victims follow, causing great alarm and panic. The local police chief (Roy Scheider) finally convinces the mayor, anguished over all that lost summer revenue as people are scared off, that there is a terrible monster out there. He hires a shark specialist (sardonic Richard Dreyfuss) and a crusty captain (Robert Shaw) to set out to do battle with the monster. After many an encounter, false starts, and near disasters, not the least of which is the devouring of the captain, the shark is slain. The community breathes a sign of relief and there is universal jubilation. The great threat has been lifted. Life in Amity can begin again.

Few of the zillions of people who saw this gripping movie would know they were actually seeing an ancient rerun or that an unkempt bunch of animal-skinned Saxon warriors, huddled round the fire of some drafty hall twelve hundred years before, had listened to the minstrel chanting the verses of that very story. Only back then it was called *Beowulf*, not *Jaws*.

Compare. The first part of *Beowulf* tells the story of another seaside community by the name of Heorot. Its serenity is also shattered by the arrival, not of *Jaws*, but of a monster called Grendel, who lives in the depths of a nearby lake. The people are thrown into an absolute panic as, night after night, Grendel makes his mysterious attacks on the hall

where they sleep, seizing one victim after another and tearing them to pieces. Finally, when it's all almost too much to bear, the hero Beowulf sets out to do battle. He deals first with Grendel and then with his even more terrible monster mother. There is a bloody, climactic fight in the churning waters until at last both monsters are slain. The community breathes a sigh of relief and there is universal jubilation. The great threat has been lifted. Life in Heorot can begin again.

The plot lines in both *Jaws* and *Beowulf* are the same. In fact, they seem to be telling the same story—which, in fact, they are. Do you think that the author of *Jaws*, the late Peter Benchley, copied *Beowulf*? Not likely. More likely, his story arose in his own fertile imagination. Still, the fact remains that the two stories are similar and both are similar to other versions all over the world. How do you explain this convergence? What is the explanation? That we will explore shortly.

### **The Prevalence of Story**

But first we must take note of this phenomenon. At any given moment, right now, all over the world, hundreds of millions of people are engaged in what is one of the most common and familiar of all forms of human activity: the story. Reading stories, telling them, formally or informally, watching them on television, on DVDs, the computer, the stage, in movies, magazines, books, the newspapers. Our history books are largely made up of stories. The first historian, the Greek Herodotus, penned his work in the form of stories. The Bible is basically a story-book. Even much of our conversation is taken up with recounting the events of everyday life in the form of stories. "Did you hear about...?" "I read the other day..." "Well, Joan told Alice and she told me that..." "Have you read *The Kite Runner*? Great book." (Indeed it is.) We're daily awash in stories. So deep and so instinctive is our need for them that, as small children, we have no sooner learned to speak than we begin demanding to be told stories, evidence of an appetite likely to continue to our dying day. And we have to tell them in exactly the same way, as every parent or grandparent knows. Don't you dare condense three little pigs to two little pigs to save time!

So central a part have stories played in every society in history that we take it for granted that the great storytellers, such as Homer or Shakespeare or Jesus or Dickens or Elie Weisel, should be among the most famous people who ever lived. In our times we also take it for granted that certain men and women, such as Humphrey Bogart, Lawrence Olivier, Meryl Streep, Kathryn Hepburn, or Anthony Hopkins, are regarded as among the best known figures in the world, simply because they have acted out the characters from stories on the movie screen. Nor do we find it odd that we have named many of the most conspicuous heavenly bodies—Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Orion, Perseus, Andromeda—after characters from stories. (Nowadays, some parents, raised on television, even name their children after television story characters.) And we are unconsciously giving a nod to traditional tales when we buy a Midas muffler, shop at the Jack and Jill clothing stores, visit a Shangri-La or Humpty's restaurant, stay at the Sandman hotel, buy a Mercury, and use Apollo car washes or Mitchum aftershave. So, stories persist and are expressions of our lives, revealers of our souls, and mirrors of our culture. Here's one called "The Soul-Taker."

Once upon a time there were three sisters who lived high in the hills and they honored God alone. And one day as they were roaming through the hills looking for things to eat, and looking for some things that might be of some benefit to them, they discovered a cave. And inside the cave they found a huge, huge chest full of gold. It was so heavy it would have taken a dozen people just to lift it, let alone try to move it. They looked at it and were stunned. And finally, one of the sisters, in a moment of panic, yelled out, "It's the Soul-taker! It's the Soul-taker! Let us flee!"

And so the three sisters ran out of the cave yelling and screaming, running right into the arms of six robbers who happened to be hiding out in those very hills. They kept fighting the robbers off and saying, "No! Get away! Get away! It's the Soul-taker! We must get away!" Finally, the robbers calmed the three sisters down and said, "Now, what is this Soul-taker you're shouting about? Show us. And so the three sisters led

the robbers to the gold. And when the robbers saw the gold and how much there was, all they could do was dream and fantasize that they wouldn't have to rob ever again. They had more than enough gold right here in front of them. However, while all the robbers were looking over all that gold, the three sisters slipped away and hid out.

Now, these six robbers had been in the hills for a long time and they were very hungry. And they were also very weak from running from various groups of people, and so among the six of them, they couldn't budge the huge chest full of gold. Yet, they didn't want to leave it there. They were afraid somebody else would find it. But they didn't know what to do. They sat down thinking until they finally decided that the best thing would be if three of the robbers would go into town with three of the gold pieces and buy food and provisions for everybody and the other three would stay and guard the chest. So it was decided. They took a few of the gold pieces and three of them went off into the village and the other three stayed at home to guard the treasure.

The three that stayed in the cave silently looked over the gold for a long, long time until finally they began talking to each other saying, "You know, gold splits three ways much better than it splits six, right? Why do we have to share it with everybody, especially the other three?" But they said, "Yeah, but what can we do?" They thought a while and finally said, "We'll fix an ambush. That's it! When the other three come back, we'll jump out, kill them, and then we can divide the gold just among the three of us. We'll be twice as rich."

Well, the fact is, they weren't the only ones scheming and plotting. The three that had gone into town just happened to be thinking the same thing. They said to one another, "What would it be like to have all that gold and split it just among the three of us instead of all six of us?" And they said, "Yeah, but what can we do?" They thought about it for a while on the long trip into town, and finally they said, "We won't just buy food and provisions, we'll buy some poison. We'll eat our food before we go back. We'll put the poison in the other food

and then they'll eat and die. And then we can split the gold just three ways."

So it was all decided. Smiling to themselves as they came back toward the cave, they weren't expecting the ambush. The three hiding inside jumped out and slaughtered them. Then they took the provisions and the food and went inside the cave. Rejoicing at their cleverness and new-found wealth, they ate the food, got organized for their escape, but before they could do another thing, all three of the robbers lay there dead along with the other three they had killed.

It was weeks and weeks, in fact, almost a year, before the three sisters came back toward the cave. What did they see? At the outskirts of the cave they found the skeletons of three of the robbers. And inside with the gold they found the other three skeletons. They were astonished. And the sister who had originally yelled "Soul-taker" looked at the other two and said, "I told you it was a Soul-taker. We must get out of here!" And with that, they all ran out of the cave, again yelling as loud as they could, "Soul-taker! Soul-taker! Soul-taker!"

This is a timeless story of greed and it is found in many variations throughout the world and it fascinates us.

We even find everywhere the irresistible lowest form of humor story, the dreaded pun. For example:

After Quasimodo's death, word spread through the streets of Paris that a new bell ringer was needed. The bishop decided that he would conduct the interviews personally and went up into the belfry to begin the screening process. After observing several applicants demonstrate their skills, he decided to call it a day, when a lone, armless man approached him and announced that he was there to apply for the bell ringer's job. The bishop was incredulous. "You have no arms!"

"No matter," said the man, "Observe!" He then began striking the bells with his face, producing a beautiful melody on the carillon. The bishop listened in astonishment, convinced that he had finally found a suitable replacement for Quasimodo.

Suddenly, rushing forward to strike a bell, the armless man tripped and he plunged headlong out of the belfry window to his death in the street below.

The stunned bishop rushed to his side. When he reached the street, a crowd had gathered around the fallen figure, drawn by the beautiful music they had heard only moments before.

As they silently parted to let the bishop through, one of them asked, "Bishop, who was this man?"

"I don't know his name," the bishop sadly replied, "but his face rings a bell."

There's more to this story to make you groan.

The following day, despite the sadness that weighed heavily on his heart due to the unfortunate death of the armless campanologist, the bishop continued his interviews for the bell ringer of Notre Dame. The first man to approach him said, "Your Excellency, I am the brother of the poor, armless wretch who fell to his death from this very belfry yesterday. I pray that you honor his life by allowing me to replace him in his duty."

The bishop agreed to give the man an audition and, as the armless man's brother stooped to pick up a mallet to strike the first bell, he groaned, clutched at his chest and died on the spot.

Two monks, hearing the bishop's cries of grief at this second tragedy, rushed up the stairs to his side. "What has happened?" the first asked breathlessly. "Who is this man?" (Here it comes.)

"I don't know his name," sighed the distraught bishop, "but he's a dead ringer for his brother."

Stories and puns like these are found everywhere in every era and in every culture. As I noted, we are innate storytellers.

### **The Commonality of Stories**

Yet, the question lingers: Why do we indulge in this strange form of activity? Why are we such a storytelling people? What real purpose do stories serve? Not only that, but note that wherever men and women

have told stories, all over the world in any time frame, the stories emerging in their imaginations have tended to take shape in remarkably similar ways. In short, no matter where they arise, the stories are the same all over and at all times. Folktales, for example, tell the same basic story in places culturally and geographically worlds apart. It is one thing, for example, as Booker puts it, for variants of Cinderella to be found all over Europe, from Serbia to the Shetlands, from Russia to Spain; at least all these share some common cultural and linguistic traditions. But when the very same story is found in China, Africa, and among North American Indians, it becomes clear that there has to be a common source rooted deeply in human nature itself.

What's going on? Why such similar basic plots? "Is a puzzlement" as the musical *King of Siam* said. One current theory says that the cause for the similarities lies in the human heart, the human mind itself. The human mind is so constituted, some scholars say, that it works in certain forms or grooves and around certain basic ingrained images. Something like the water that takes the shape of the glass it's poured into. In our deeper unconsciousness, our basic genetic inheritance, our psychic configuration, is the same for all people and that sameness provides the elemental stuff for images and symbols that are the stuff of story. Theologians would say that humankind is made in the image and likeness of God and that is the common element, and that common origin is behind the common ways we tell the same stories and use the same images.

Whatever the case, we find consistent themes and consistent patterns underlying all stories. Even the same basic figures keep reappearing: witches and ogres, giants and wicked stepmothers. Personified evil comes in the guise of Stromboli in *Pinocchio*, the Wicked Witch of the West in *Oz*, Specter or Goldfinger in the James Bond movies. Personified goodness comes in the guise of wise fairies or animals: Raphael, Gabriel, Fairy godmothers, Jiminy Cricket, Gandolf. Courage is personified in such heroes as Moses, David, Dr. Jones, Frodo, and John Wayne. In fact, scholars have come up with seven basic plots that play over and over again all over the world and in every age. Again, following the schema given by Christopher Booker, we might describe these as seven basic plots of the human journey. Let's look at them—and recognize them in our own lives.

## 1. The Combat Myth, or Overcoming the Monster

To briefly recap from the Introduction, the earliest known version of the “overcoming the monster” theme is the ancient Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Among its subplots is this one: the kingdom of Uruk has fallen under the terrible shadow of a monstrous figure called Humbaba who lives across the world in an underground cavern in a cedar forest. The hero Gilgamesh goes to the armorers who equip him with special weapons. He sets out to find Humbaba’s lair. There is a series of taunting exchanges and finally Gilgamesh kills his opponent.

Five thousand years later, in 1962, millions gathered for the latest version of the “overcoming the monster” theme. It was the premier opening of a new movie about the Gilgamesh story. Only this time it was called *Dr. No*, starring Sean Connery as James Bond, kicking off one of the most popular series ever. But the plot, notice, is exactly the same. The Western world falls under the shadow of a great and mysterious evil, the mad and deformed Dr. No who lives halfway across the world in an underground cavern on a remote island. The hero, James Bond, goes to the armorer, Q, who equips him with special weapons. He sets out on a hazardous journey where he finally comes face to face with the monster. They engage in a series of cat-and-mouse exchanges and ultimately, as they must, enter into a gigantic struggle. Bond finally manages to kill his opponent. The Western world has been saved and Bond can return home triumphant, with, of course, his latest female conquest.

Every culture has some version of this “overcoming the monster” theme. The Greeks had tons of them, such as the famous stories of Perseus overcoming two monsters; Theseus, who kills the monstrous Minotaur; and Hercules, who slays the many-headed Hydra. The Hebrews had David and Goliath, Samson and the Philistines, Saint Michael and Satan. Christians had Saint George and the Dragon, Harker and Dracula, Aslan and the Winter Queen. In storytelling, the monster is a potent symbol, representing everything in human nature that is somehow twisted and less than perfect, threatening and fearful. Notice, too, that every monster in storyland is enormously egocentric. The monster is simply heartless, unable to feel for others. We would call them

“cold-blooded killers.” Cold blood. No feeling—like the hired killers of the movies or the mechanical killers like Chucky or Freddy Krueger in the slash movies.

Of course, that is also always the monster’s fatal flaw, what we call the “Icarus effect.” Icarus was the brilliant son in Greek mythology who wanted to fly, but ignoring his father’s warning, flew too close to the sun with his wax wings and plunged to his death. So, the monster. He is so egocentric that there is always something he overlooks. Pride, in short, gives him a blind spot and that is why in the end he can be outwitted, just as the martians were in H.G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds*. They overlooked something as apparently insignificant as the destructive power of bacteria. The same theme is sounded in this variation of the story of the nasty monstrous polar bear who didn’t count on the courage of a tiny gray bird, as told in “How the Robin’s Breast Became Red.”

Long ago in the Far North, where it is very cold, there was only one fire. A hunter and his little son took care of this fire and kept it burning day and night. They knew that if the fire went out the people would freeze and the white bear would have the Northland all to himself.

One day the hunter became ill and his son had to do all the work. For many days and nights he bravely took care of his father and kept the fire burning. The great white bear was always hiding near, watching the fire. He longed to put it out, but he did not dare, for he feared the hunter’s arrows. When he saw how tired and sleepy the little boy was, he came closer to the fire and laughed wickedly to himself. Well, one night the poor boy grew so tired that he could keep awake no longer and fell fast asleep. Then the white bear ran as fast as he could and jumped upon the fire with his wet feet, and rolled upon it until he thought it was all out. Then he trotted happily away to his cave among the icebergs.

But a little gray robin had been flying near, and had seen what the white bear was doing. She was greatly worried when she thought that the fire might be out, but she was so little that she could do nothing but wait until the bear was out of sight. Then she darted down swiftly and searched with her

sharp little eyes until she found a tiny live coal. This she fanned patiently with her wings for a long time. Her little breast was scorched red, but she did not stop until a fine red flame blazed up from the ashes. Then she flew off to visit every hut in the Northland. Wherever she touched the ground, a fire began to burn.

Soon, instead of one little fire, the whole North Country was lighted up, so that people far to the south wondered at the beautiful flames of red and yellow light in the northern sky. But when the white bear saw the fires, he went further back into his cave among the icebergs and growled terribly. He knew that now there was no hope that he would ever have the Northland all to himself. This is the reason that the people in the North County love the robin, and never tire of telling their children how its breast became red.

The Christian version, of course, is that the robin's breast became red when it pulled a thorn from Jesus' head.

Monsters are our worst fears appearing as concrete characters. In novels, Dickens's Nicholas Nickleby finally has to confront his monster, Uncle Ralph. In World War II dramas, the monster is the enemy: the Nazis, the Japanese. More recently, there is al-Qaeda. The Hollywood westerns are classic hero versus monsters stories. The heroes in *The Magnificent Seven* confront the cruel outlaw gang devouring a Mexican village. Gary Cooper overcomes gunmen out to get him in *High Noon*, and Luke Skywalker and Princess Leia defeat the dark lord, Darth Vader.

Monsters and overcoming them are a staple of human stories because they are a staple of human living. We all have our fears. The child fears abandonment and dark forces under the bed. The adolescent fears unacceptance, being different. The adult fears failure. The elderly fear death. No wonder "monsters" are also a staple of the stories of the spiritual journey: betrayal, temptation, the seven deadly sins (pride, avarice, lust, greed, anger, envy, gluttony). To the unredeemed, unforgiven, and unresurrected, Jesus offers acceptance, forgiveness, and eternal life. Jesus' stories promise victory.

## 2. Rags to Riches, or Constriction to Expansion Stories

In this category, the ordinary, insignificant person, dismissed by everyone as of little account, suddenly steps into the center of the stage.

An obscure little squire, Wort, accompanies his master to London for the solemn ceremonies surrounding the choice of a new king. A mighty stone has appeared in St. Paul's churchyard with a sword fixed in it, with the inscription that anyone who can pull out the sword shall become king. All the great men of the nation try and fail. But to everyone's astonishment the unknown squire steps forward and removes the sword effortlessly. He becomes King Arthur, the greatest king his country has ever known.

This "rags to riches" theme persists because it's our favorite fantasy: someday, perhaps, all will recognize—even without cosmetic surgery—how powerful, how great, how wonderful we are. We shall be known and loved or, in adolescent jargon, popular; no, a celebrity!

The notion of transformation is beguiling. Cinderella gets a makeover and dances with a prince. Orphaned Aladdin becomes a hero and wins the princess. Puss in Boots transforms the orphaned boy, Dick Wittington, into the Marquis of Carabas. Lowly flower girl Lisa Doolittle goes to the ball and is taken for a princess. Despised and abused Jane Eyre marries Rochester. An obscure chorus girl, Ruby Keeler, dances her way to fame in *42nd Street*; dowdy Charlotte Vale becomes a woman loved in Bette Davis' stunning movie, *Now, Voyager*. Every Christmas, the reindeer with the bright, bulbous nose who was at the bottom of the heap and wasn't allowed to play reindeer games, becomes Santa's sled leader.

Note how many are orphaned; being orphaned is a metaphor for how disconnected and bereft they are. All of these heroes go through many alternating crises, from lows to highs to new lows and final highs. It's not a smooth path. The path of spirituality is nothing if not about the lifting up of the lowly, the forgiveness of the sinner, the healing of the lame, the rising of the dead, a slow falling in love with God, as it was for Francis of Assisi. The rags to riches motif symbolizes the fulfillment of those who love God. Indeed, "the last shall be first." That's why Mary

sang, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Why does she sing so? "[F]or he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant." Miss Nobody becomes Miss Somebody!

### 3. The Quest

The Quest type of story abounds and has a recognizable pattern. The hero or heroine gets a call; for example, a group of government agents calls on Dr. Indiana Jones to find the Holy Grail before the Nazis do and he takes off on an amazing series of adventures. There are dastardly villains to be overcome, lovely damsels to be defended before finally attaining the goal of his quest, the Holy Grail. Dorothy Gale wonders if there is anything over the rainbow and is "called" by a knock on the head to find out. Then there are always villains. Dorothy's villain is the Wicked Witch of the West. And there are always mentors. Her mentors are the Good Witch and an unsteady trio of a scarecrow, a tin man, and a cowardly lion. Finally, there is the denouement. Dorothy returns, having found out what really matters.

Identical quest stories are *Star Trek*, *The Divine Comedy*, *The Odyssey*, *Watership Down*, *Treasure Island*, *Pinocchio*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Sorcerer's Stone* in the Harry Potter series, and *Peter Pan*. They have their stock heroes and villains: wicked stepmothers, Prince John, Monstro, Voldemort, Captain Hook. They have their helpers along the way: Tobias, Gandolf, Ron Beasley, Jiminy Cricket. The pattern, as I said, seldom alters. Let's recall it. There is a call. For the hero or heroine to remain quietly at home becomes impossible. The "times are out of joint" and a response must be made. Dr. Jones, Dorothy Gale, Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Jesus—they are compelled to act.

Second, as we indicated, there are always companions: helpers, friends, animals, those who sometimes complement the hero or heroine's qualities and supply those he or she doesn't have, such as Raphael for Tobias, Sam Gamgee for Frodo, and Horatio for Hamlet.

Third, there is the journey itself with its trials and ordeals and fears. There are the familiar journey tales of *Alice in Wonderland*, the Indiana Jones series, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Star Trek*.

Here's a Mideast story of some spiritual journeyers. It stings a bit.

I'm a beggar. And you know what? I like being a beggar. You know what else? I'm good at it. Over the years I've really learned how to get you to part with your money. Now, in the beginning, when I found out that the Almighty, the Compassionate One, had chosen a path for me, it was begging. I wasn't overjoyed. But in his mercy, he allowed me to see the world the way he does when I was faithful to my path. You see, my path in life as a beggar is to make your journey lighter, whether you want it or not. And when you pass me by on the street, God, in his mercy, now allows me to see you the way he does all the time, because no matter what you do or you don't do, I see you for what you really are.

For instance, I'll tell you about a few of the people who pass me on the street during the day, and I'm sure you'll find yourself in one of these people. I'm leaning up against the wall. I'm in the same place every day. I haven't had a bath in weeks. You can smell me half a block away. I've got my hand out. You're coming down the street. You're about to attack the world again. You've got your attaché case, your briefcase in hand. You're heading there. You're on time. You know I'm there, so what do you do? You very discreetly cross the street at the corner and you go down the other side of the street so you don't have to deal with me. And then at the corner, of course, at the light, you turn and cross the street again, and nobody knows. They just think you're getting through the crowd quicker. But I saw you, and so I pray God, in his mercy, will come as close to you in your need as you have come to me in mine.

You're a woman. You had a rough morning. You were screaming and yelling at your kids, your husband. You couldn't decide who was going to pick up the kids at school. Everything was going wrong. You couldn't find the keys in your purse. You're late for work. You're running down the street. You forget I'm there. You're on me before you even know it. You smell me first. Your nose wrinkles up and your eyes scrunch up and you mumble something. And I stick out my hand, and you grab your purse and say, "Uh, uh, uh, I'll

catch you on the way back. It's too hard to get anything right now. I'm late." Off you go. I saw you too. And so I pray God, in his mercy, may deal with you as quickly as you have dealt with me. He'll catch you on the way back.

Or you're coming down the street; you're feeling pretty good, you have a few coins, a couple quarters. You see me. You see me every day. And you know you shouldn't give the coins to me because I'm just going to buy a bottle of booze. But you drop the coins into my hand or my cup or in my basket and you say, "Now get yourself a cup of coffee or a sandwich. Don't buy booze." Off you go. And I give thanks that God will be as gracious to you as you have been with me, but that he will always make conditions with the gift.

You're coming down the street. You're feeling pretty good. You've got a couple extra bucks. You buy a lottery ticket. Then you think, "Why not give it to the poor?" So you give me your lottery ticket. You give me a buck or two. "God bless you," you say. And I say, well, there's still a little generosity left in the world. At least he talked to me, you know, and he said God bless me. So I watch you go down the street and I pray God, in his mercy, will give at least a hundredfold to you as you have given to me and a quick blessing as you go.

Now, you come down the street. You've got a lot of money. You're feeling good. It was a good day. You've seen me day in and day out. You stop. You give me five or six dollars. You tell me where the shelter is—as if I didn't know already. You tell me where to go get a cup of coffee. You tell me to go get a shower, clean myself up, and you wish me well. And I watch you go off and I pray God, in his mercy, will heap blessing on your head, running over in the fold of your garment, for your simple kindness to me, because there is still generosity left in the world. And then if you should happen to pass me on the street and you should happen to give to me what I need before I have to beg for it, then it is me who backs away from you and wonder who you are.

Because even all of you, who have everything you want practically, you know what it's like in your deepest need for some-

one to give you that before you have to beg for it. And it is only God who comes to visit in every generation, in every religion, who gives before we have to beg. And it's me, then, who wonders who you are, and whether or not God has come to visit me in my misery as he is wont to do.

So, you see, no matter what you do when you pass me on the street, I know you for who you really are. I see you in that moment the way God sees you every moment of your life. He has given me that great gift. And the next time you see one of me on the street, and there are a lot of us these days, be careful. Make sure you know who it is you're dealing with when you pass me by. And every time you see one of us, I want you to just think about this question. I know what my journey in life is. I'm here to make your way lighter. Do you know what your journey is?

This is the human journey—with its trials, temptations, challenges, and fears.

## Obstacles

The fourth element in the pattern is the fearsome obstacles. There are, for example, the monsters. The Cyclops threaten Odysseus and his men; the Harpies plague Aeneas and later the Argonauts; Professor Moriarty tries to kill Sherlock Holmes; the Winter Queen contends with the children from the wardrobe. Like the Sirens or the Lorelei who bewitch sailors and lure them to their deaths, there are the women who try to seduce Sir Percival, and the fox who lures Pinocchio to Pleasure Island. In movieland, Lola tries to seduce Joe in *Damn Yankees*, and married Miles Fairley tries to seduce the widow Lucy Muir in *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*. Again, the same cast of characters accompanies the spiritual journey: dark figures like greed, materialism, pornography, ambition, infidelities, addictions, consumerism, and so on, and the bright figures in the biblical stories and lives-of-saints stories provide us with a pattern for coping.

#### 4. Voyage and Return

Easy examples of this type are *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *The Time Machine*, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Lord of the Flies*, *The Third Man*, and the movie *Brief Encounter*.

The latter, a 1946 film written by Noël Coward and directed by David Lean, is a gem that will break your heart. The “normal” world is represented by the humdrum home life of the heroine Laura (played by Celia Johnson), married to Fred, her kindly, unimaginative, boring husband who likes nothing better than to sit by the fire doing a crossword puzzle. In interior monologue, with a romantic Rachmaninoff piano concerto blasting out of the gramophone, she unhappily reconstructs how, some weeks before, in a train station refreshment room in a nearby town, she had unexpectedly “fallen into another world” by meeting a handsome, sensitive doctor named Alec (played by Trevor Howard), also married. She recalls how they fell in love, snatching several more surreptitious meetings, visits to the movies, drinking champagne in a restaurant, walking in the country.

Their affair goes through the familiar cycle of the dream stage, frustration stage (as she feels growing guilt, lying to her husband, is spotted by friends in the restaurant), and nightmare stage (their attempt to make love in a friend's flat is aborted when the friend unexpectedly returns; Laura and Alec both realize the affair cannot last and he tells Laura he is about to leave with his family for a new job in South Africa). After they have made their final farewells on the station platform, she returns miserably home to the “normal” world of Fred and his crossword puzzles, puts on the Rachimaninoff, and relives in her mind the whole sad story.

The voyage and return motif is found in those who have left the church or abandoned religion and returned. Examples include the prodigal son, C.S. Lewis, and Dorothy Day.

#### 5. Comedy

This category comes easiest to us. Right away we think of *The Marriage of Figaro*. No? Too high brow? How about *A Night at the Opera*, *The Importance of Being Ernest*, *A Night in Casablanca*, changing room numbers in *Some Like It Hot*, Laurel and Hardy, Martin and Lewis, the

Smother's Brothers, Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, and a million jokes? Or, if you're old enough, you might remember the Burma Shave signs along the highway:

Cattle crossing  
Means go slow  
That old bull  
Is some  
Cow's beau

My job is  
Keeping faces clean  
And nobody knows  
De stubble  
I've seen

Pedro walked  
Back home by golly  
His bristly chin  
Was hot-to-Molly.

Of course, today the signs along the road have been replaced by the bumper sticker: "Out of my mind. Be back in 5 minutes." "There are three kinds of people: those who can count and those who can't." Then there is the elderly priest, speaking to the younger priest.

The older priest said, "It was a good idea to replace the first four pews with plush bucket theater seats. It worked like a charm. The front of the church fills first."

The younger priest nodded, and the old priest continued, "And you told me a little more beat to the music would bring the young people back to church, so I supported you when you brought in that rock 'n roll band. We're packed to the balcony."

"Thank you, Father," answered the young priest. "I am pleased that you are open to new ideas."

"Well," said the elderly priest, "I'm afraid you've gone too far with the drive-thru confessional."

"But, Father," protested the young priest, "my confessions have nearly doubled since I began that!"

"I know, son," replied the elderly priest, "but that flashing sign on the church roof that says 'Toot 'n Tell or Go to Hell' can't stay."

The usual source of comedy is misunderstanding: characters donning disguises or swapping identities, men dressing up like women or vice versa (the comedy *Some Like It Hot*), secret meetings when the wrong person shows up, scenes in which characters hastily hide. To that degree we might say that the essence of comedy is always that some redeeming truth has to be brought out of the shadows and into the light.

We might also say that the function of humor is to provide us with a more or less harmless way of diffusing the social strains created by egotism. This is why comedy focuses on people who take themselves too seriously, giving the rest of us a chance to see how foolish this makes them look. So if a poor little old lady walks down the street and slips on a banana peel, we do not see this as funny. We offer sympathy. If the same thing happens to a pompous lady cocooned in self-importance, we find it comical precisely because we like to see her bubble burst.

We laugh at people who think they are self-made and have everything under control, when in fact they do not. So we laugh at the officious Laurel and Hardy trying to get the grand piano down the stairs and see it constantly slipping out of their hands. Or John Cleese in *Fawlty Towers*, with his persona as a cool, efficient hotel proprietor wallowing in chaos behind the scenes. The "inferior" butler, Jeeves, constantly redeems the mess of the upper class.

One-liners turn around our expectations. Some Henny Youngman classics:

I've been in love with the same woman for forty-nine years. If my wife ever finds out, she'll kill me!

The wife and I have the secret to making a marriage last. Two times a week we go to a nice restaurant, a little wine, good food. She goes Tuesdays; I go Fridays.

We always hold hands. If I let go, she shops.

She was at the beauty parlor for two hours. That was only for the estimate.

I just got back from a pleasure trip. I took my mother-in-law to the airport.

There was a girl knocking on my hotel room door all night! Finally, I let her out.

A drunk was in front of a judge. The judge says, "You've been brought here for drinking." The drunk says, "Okay, let's get started."

A car hit a Jewish man. The paramedic says, "Are you comfortable?" The man says, "I make a good living."

Comedy is rooted in tragedy. It flourishes in hard times. Humor says in jest what you can't say out loud. For instance, the doggerel, "Froggie Went a-Courting" allowed the English to poke fun at the queen, which they couldn't do openly for fear of losing their heads. The Queen of England, you see, was being courted by a Frenchman.

Humor is at the heart of the Christian faith. In a homily I gave one Easter I began by telling jokes, and after the people had stopped laughing I said that in telling these jokes I was imitating the ancient tradition of telling jokes on Easter Sunday to imitate God's cosmic last laugh on Satan who thought he had won with the death of Jesus, only to be upstaged by the resurrection (storified, you may recall, in Aslan's "resurrection" in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*). All laughed at his discomfiture and comeuppance.

## 6. Tragedy

Who better to introduce this category than Shakespeare? Listen to Richard III on the eve of his death:

Have mercy, Jesu! Soft! I did but dream.  
O coward conscience, how thou dost afflict me!  
The lights burn blue. It is now dead midnight.  
Cold tearful drops do stand upon my trembling flesh...  
All several sins, all us'd in each degree  
Throng to the bar, crying all "Guilty! Guilty!"  
I shall despair. There is no creature loves me.

Two endings to stories seem the most dominant in tragedies. Either the story ends with a man and woman united in love or in death—and a death that is violent and premature. The usual scenario in tragedy develops like this: the hero, or protagonist, somehow frustrated or incomplete, divided within himself or herself, is in need of change. He or she is being tempted into a course of action that is in some ways dark and forbidden. Examples are Voldemort, Faust, Anna Karenina, Madame Bovary, Dr. Jekyll, Hamlet, Lex Luther, Carmen, Bonnie and Clyde, and Judas.

They all ultimately “answer the call,” as it were, to evil. In the quest stories there is also a call, remember—like Jesus calling Francis of Assisi—but we know it is a call to do right and we have no doubt it should be answered. In tragedy, however, there is unease. The call is more akin to temptation. It’s a call to an appetite, an obsession: the obsession for power or sex or conquest, sensation (extreme television), all of which violate some convention or duty or standard of normality. And we know—and the protagonists know—something is out of sync and we see them wavering or struggling with the decision to keep their dark impulses out of the light, until, at one fateful moment, the bounds are overstepped. Soon they are into obsession and it blinds them, and this blindness is their weak spot and eventual undoing.

There are predictable steps to the story pattern of tragedy. At first there is exhilaration and things go remarkably well for the hero, like Faust’s joy at signing a pact with the devil or Joe Boyd in *Damn Yankees* (Faust retold musically on Broadway) who gets to the World Series. Then there is Humbert Humbert finding his Lolita; Macbeth getting royal power; Dr. Jekyll being able to escape at night to indulge in nameless wickedness; married Anna Karenina seducing Count Vronsky; Bonnie and Clyde knocking over one store and bank after another and getting rich; John Foster Kane at his apex in *Citizen Kane*.

Then, inevitably, after a time, things begin to go wrong. The hero, such as Dorian Gray, for example, cannot find contentment and goes deeper into evil, until things slip out of control and the forces of opposition or fate close in. The dwarfs and animals hunt down Snow White’s wicked stepmother; Holmes closes in on Moriarty; the hapless

Don Jose stabs Carmen to death; the police riddle the bodies of Bonnie and Clyde; and the once powerful John Foster Kane dies alone whispering "Rosebud."

Basically, these protagonists have been taken over by a fantasy (I am invincible) that inevitably spins them out of control. At first, there is elation and a sense of power and control, and then a loss of both, a capitulation to addiction. The perfect metaphor of this loss of control is the sorcerer's apprentice from a tale by the second-century Roman poet, Lucian. It was the subject of a poem by Goethe in 1797, transferred to a musical version by Paul Dukas in 1897, and, of course, animated in Disney's *Fantasia* in 1940. You know the story.

An old sorcerer has to go on a trip and he leaves his apprentice to fetch water from the well. The boy eventually tires of this grunt work. Then he remembers the spell used by the master to command a magic broomstick. He uses the spell to order the stick to do the work. For a while all goes well and he takes it easy. But by and by, enough water has been brought in, in fact, more than enough. The boy suddenly realizes with horror that he doesn't know how to turn it off. As more buckets pile up the water, he takes an ax to the stick. (A dark deed piled on the previous dark deed: a common pattern.) All that this accomplishes is to split the stick in two. So now he has two sticks bringing in twice as much water. Just as the whole house is about to be washed away, the sorcerer returns and orders the broomstick to stop. The day is saved, and the boy is sadder but wiser.

The story is an allegory of an out-of-control addiction. The addictions of sex, alcohol, drugs, gambling, and pornography, including internet porn, have the same elements of tragedy.

## 7. Rebirth

This last category of the seven basic plots concern stories of new beginnings and inner transformation, rebirth. In the Bible there is Zacchaeus the tax collector, the woman at the well, the good thief. In popular culture there are the films *Overboard*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, and *The Sound of Music*.

In fairy tales, for example, *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty*, the heroines fall under a dark spell, some wintry physical or spiritual imprisonment, until liberated by the hero, in this case, the prince. In *The Frog Prince* and *Beauty and the Beast*, it is the heroine who liberates the hero. In literature there is *A Christmas Carol*, the story of Scrooge's rebirth. In *Crime and Punishment*, Rodion Raskolnikov, the murderer, is redeemed by Sonia. *The Secret Garden* shows us three characters who are imprisoned: Mary Lennox, the snobbish, sour-tempered heroine; morose and bent Mr. Craven; and his sickly son Colin. They are all reborn. In real life there are the conversion stories of Saint Paul, C.S. Lewis, Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, recovering alcoholics and drug addicts, and millions of others who have found forgiveness, redemption, and second chances. We celebrate such people in the nearest thing we have to a national religious anthem, "Amazing Grace," which sings out, "I once was lost, but now am found / Was blind but now I see."

### Conclusion

In summary we might put it this way: all classic stories have the same psychological and spiritual patterns and images. There are always basic figures and situations, basic plots around which the stories take shape. Some stories have just one plot, others have several, and rare ones, like *The Lord of the Rings*, contain all seven plots. In any case, this is why we resonate with stories, because there are elemental human needs and yearnings at stake for all people: the need to grow, to mature, to find our way to God. Saint Augustine said it well when he wrote that our hearts are meant for God and that they are restless until they rest in God. Therefore, life is a journey, however uneven and however perilous, toward that fulfillment. Quest, tragedy, comedy, rebirth, and the rest are subplots of that journey.

Now, as a link to the next chapter, here is a story to think over. Ask yourself the critical question of this and every story, including eventually the biblical ones: not "What does it say?" but "What does it mean?"

There once lived a poor woman who faithfully visited the shrine of her guardian spirit each morning. She was so devout-

ed that one day the guardian spirit left a gift for her in the shape of a small green cap. She put the cap on and, to her great surprise, was able to understand what the birds, animals, and plants of the forest were saying. "It's a listening cap!" she cried happily.

Just then two robins landed on a nearby branch and began to converse: "It's so sad about the maple tree," said one.

"How true," replied the other. "I heard it crying again last night. Do you know the story behind the tree's sadness?"

"Yes," said the first robin. "I was there the day it happened. The town mayor chopped down the maple in order to make room for a teahouse in his garden. Unfortunately, he didn't dig up the roots, and that's why the tree still cries out in pain. It isn't dead, nor is it alive. It just remains under the teahouse."

"Is that why the mayor is so weak and sickly?" asked the other bird.

"Yes," said the first. "The maple has put a dark spell on him. On the day the tree finally dies, the mayor, too, will be carried to his grave."

Upon hearing all of this, the poor woman rushed home and made herself up to look like a wandering doctor. With the listening cap still on her head, she walked up to the door of the mayor's grand house. The wife of the mayor gladly welcomed the doctor. She asked her to examine her husband, adding that she had already tried all the known remedies without success.

"When did your husband have the teahouse built in the garden?" asked the doctor. "Just last year," said the mayor's wife.

"And has your husband been sick ever since?"

"Yes," she said. "How did you know?"

"It's a special talent of mine," answered the doctor. "Before I examine your husband, I would like to have a cup of tea in the garden."

"Of course," she replied. "I'll fill the pot."

The phony doctor went into the teahouse and sat quietly. Soon she heard a low moan coming from beneath the floor. "Is that you, poor maple tree?" asked a butterfly floating into the room. "Are you feeling any better today?"

"No, I feel much worse. In fact, I'm going to die soon, and when I do, so will the mayor. I'll see to that."

"Please don't die," said the butterfly.

"No, don't die, don't die," echoed the garden roses.

The doctor rushed to the mayor's bedside and said, "If you want to live, have the teahouse torn down at once! Then tend to the maple whose roots still rest beneath it. Help the tree to grow strong again."

He agreed and told his servants to demolish the teahouse. The sickly mayor cared for the maple himself. Soon it began to send healthy green shoots into the air.

"I will live!" cried the tree at last.

"The maple lives!" shouted the garden.

Within a few days the mayor was feeling much better, and after only two weeks he was well and strong again. The wandering doctor was given a large bag of gold, and with the listening cap still on her head, the once poor woman went on her way with a gentle smile upon her lips.