

"Happy Endings"
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The movie *Atonement* is a tragic love story- sort of. First the audience sees the tragic end of the main character on the battlefield, far from his beloved and knows that all hope of happily-ever-after is lost. But then the director inserts a strange scene- a close up shot on a lipsticked mouth. The mouth is saying that this ending won't work, that it must be rewritten, that people need happy endings. Then the film shows an alternate ending, an uber-happy image of the couple reunited and walking on a beach together instead of divided by death. The scene is soundless to emphasize its unreality, and combined with the message of the floating mouth, all of the feel-good impact of that happy ending is lost. The message of the movie is clear. Life is tragic and absurd. Happy endings are for bad movies and those who watch them

This idea is nothing new, of course. Life's meaningless, absurd, and tragic nature has by now risen to the level of cliché. If it's true that we as a society or as a species like feel-good stories, we tend to believe the tragic ones. We may prefer to watch happy endings, but we don't necessarily buy into them. For our theme of success stories, I want to challenge that cultural cynicism, which I find in myself as well. As a person of faith, when I look at life I look for meaning, not meaninglessness. And as Christian, I feel called to speak good news, to tell stories with happy endings, to believe that your story and my story- that the story of all creation- is a success story. It is an essential part of my faith that life is not absurd, tragic, and meaningless, but it is a difficult case to make since so often *our lives* are.

When I came to interview at UCG about two and half years ago, the search committee did an amazing job of bringing out everything about me. They employed an extremely effective combination of warm and welcoming hospitality and what are now known as enhanced interrogation techniques. One of the stories I told them was about my Playstation Year- a year in which my primary activity was playing the video game system, Play station. Now, I did have a part-time job, I interned at a local theater, and I spent endless hours lying on my bed wondering what to do with my life, but the chief way I remember that year was playing lots and lots of Playstation. It probably wasn't the most impressive anecdote to offer a search committee, not the first story you pull out at a job interview, but it happened, and I'm stuck with it- stuck with making sense of it when I tell my story.

My Playstation Year came at one of the lowest points in my life. I had graduated from undergrad a year early to go into music school, with the dream of becoming a professional opera singer. But music school was not what I had envisioned. I never clicked with my voice teacher, I was wracked by performance anxiety, and for the first time in my life I wasn't enjoying singing. After a year, I knew I couldn't stay. But I had no idea what to do.

As a student of dramatic writing, I remember telling my pastor at the time that I was searching for a through-line, that thread that links all of a character's actions through a play or movie; the thread that makes sense of all that has happened and points the way into the future; the thread which the writer ties into a tiny bow for the

happy ending. All of my training in writing and a lifetime of movie-watching and music-listening had led me to believe my life, my story should have a certain movement and shape: boy gets girl; hero conquers villain; hometown team wins the championship- a story with a little trajectory. And to that point, my life had at least a semblance of that feeling, enough to ignore any outlying plot points. I had a sense that I was proceeding in accordance with the script; there was a through-line which would be wrapped in a bow by minute 90. Mine was to be an unqualified success story. Then suddenly the main character seemed to forget his lines, to question his motivation, to lose his thread. Suddenly I was moving and acting without purpose, simply accumulating time, until I had had my Playstation Year.

This anomaly appeared off the curve from all the other plot points, but it refused to be ignored or downplayed. I recognize, of course, that there are greater tragedies and absurdities than a quarter-life crisis for which one must account. Since then, I've experienced a few, and there are no doubt more to come. My Playstation year is not the only point off the curve, nor was it even the first. It was simply the most undeniable mark that the success story of my life would not fit in the confines of a 90-minute Hollywood blockbuster. It is the errant plot point which showed me that my life is really more points than plot, which showed me the crazy constellation of events and relationships, disconnected and disjointed, which are my story.

Perhaps your life has a few of those points as well, a few fragments and failures which don't fit neatly into the story which you had hoped to tell. Maybe you, like me, have an expensive education for something you don't actually do. Maybe you, like me, have failed to keep up important relationships, lost touch with old friends. Maybe a relationship in your life has been radically interrupted by death or divorce. Maybe you've lost a job or a career. Maybe you are in a kind of Playstation year yourself, a place of uncertainty and indirection from which you are hoping to emerge. Maybe you too are not living a Hollywood blockbuster. But maybe that's not what real happy endings look like, anyway. Perhaps sometimes success looks more like Jonah.

I asked Jenny and Amanda to read most of Jonah's story to give you an idea of its shape. I had them leave out the prayer in chapter two, which is so boring it makes a whale throw up. You're welcome. Jonah's is certainly not your typical success story. Jonah is a reluctant prophet to say the least. He is called to go to Nineveh, the capital city of Assyria, one of the civilizations which conquered and exiled the Israelites. Instead he takes off in the opposite direction, running from God. He fails in his escape, throwing himself from a ship in a storm, and ending in the belly of a great fish. Despite all his running, he ends up in Nineveh anyway, but, still determined not to be a prophet, he phones in his message. He walks into the city and delivers a single sentence. But to his horror, the entire city repents and is saved. He rescues all of his enemies from death and destruction against his own will. Then he takes off to pout under a tree, which dies, and he gets in a fight with God, which, let's face it, you're always going to lose. Jonah's story is hardly a Hollywood blockbuster. It is a tragedy- absurd, full of fragments and failures. But also, I think full of success and capable of pointing us toward new ways of telling our own stories, of finding, among our pitfalls and Playstation years, a happy ending.

For one thing, Jonah is perhaps the most successful prophet on record. While Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Amos and Micah rail helplessly, seemingly making little

difference, Jonah's single sentence leads to the most spectacular instance of repentance in the Bible. Humorously, not only do the citizens of Nineveh don sackcloth and ashes, they also fashion sackcloth outfits for all their livestock. Jonah is a spectacularly successful prophet. It's just not the story he wants to tell about his life.

Sometimes the difference between failure and success is simply realizing what story we're telling. Sometimes the success stories we are writing are just out of view, just on our periphery, until suddenly they take center stage. As I sat depressed on my friend's couch, taking little pleasure in my growing hand-eye coordination, I believed the story I was telling was of blocked writer or stage-frightened singer, but at the same time the final seeds were being planted of my career in ministry. I became involved in a church, which later hired me to run its food pantry, gave me the opportunity to preach, and paid for my books when I started seminary. And like Jonah, those stories may not be the ones we want to tell about ourselves, not the ones we might have chosen. Perhaps you never intended to fall into this career, but now you're thriving. Perhaps the story you had envisioned didn't include raising a child with special needs, but you're doing it and doing a wonderful job. Perhaps you thought your story was drawing to a close, but a new opportunity for service or love or friendship has arisen. Our success stories may not be those we had scripted; they may be those from which we are running, but if we'll turn into them, live into them, they may show us things about ourselves that we had not known.

Jonah is also a great success in what he and his story begin. The lines which God speaks at the end of this book are revolutionary lines. The New Revised Standard Version has God speaking this way: "Should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?" These are some of my favorite lines in the bible because of what they point to, what they mean for a world which Jonah cannot even imagine. Here, for one of the first times, the God of Israel's love is understood as expanding beyond the chosen people; the Bible hints that all people are chosen people, all people are God's people. This passage points the way toward the faith of our own compact which seeks to welcome and to care for everyone. It is a success which Jonah can never know but one which he helps to plant.

And sometimes our lives are success stories in that way too. In fact, I would venture to say, all of our lives are that kind of success story in many different ways. We plant seeds that others will water and still others will harvest. We set things in motion, the impact of which we cannot fathom and we may never learn. Oftentimes our actions and our lives are fulfilled only in the passing of time, from generation to generation. Dr. King is famous for saying, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." We plant seeds today of justice, of peace, of love, which may seem futile, or fragmentary, which may even seem absurd, but those absurd stories can still have happy endings. Our very willingness to start something new is a testament to our belief in those happy endings, even the ones that we will never see.

Still, there are pieces of our stories which can only be understood as tragic, endings to which there is no happiness. While we may smile at Jonah's melodrama, this piece of his story is, for him, an unremitting tragedy. He is crushed. Sometimes we are crushed. There is no success in the death of a child; no happiness in the long goodbye of Alzheimer's. There are moments when the meaninglessness, the absurdity, the

tragedy of life are center stage, full screen, like a giant mouth telling us that every happy ending is a lie. In those moments, the comfort I find is that my story is not only my own, that I am also a tiny character in a larger story, in a universal story, an eternal story- in God's story. My story is known and loved. My life, with its tragedies and comedies, its successes and failures, is added to Jonah's and to yours and to that of everything that is, has been, and will be. My short character arc is a plot point on a larger and even messier story, being played out through eternity. I hope, and I believe it is a success story- one which leads to a world of peace, a world of justice, a world of loving kindness, a world of happy never-ending. Amen.