Introduction

The earliest surviving work of literature in Western civilization is the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. For 1700 years it lay hidden beneath the earth until in 1850 archeologists found it in the collection of an Assyrian king as they were excavating the Royal Library in Nineveh, in what is now Iraq. In 1872 the first translation appeared. It told not only the basic outline of the flood story we have in the Bible, but also and mainly the story of King Gilgamesh, who lived about 2800 BC. Despite the fragmentary versions of the epic scattered over the centuries, enough of the overall plot of the story can be detected, and it goes like this.

> Gilgamesh, the son of a goddess and a human, is the sophisticated, proud, and arrogant king of the great city, Uruk. He is hard on his people, who pray for relief. The gods, who normally couldn't care less about humans, hear their pleas and create Enkidu, a wild, unkempt, uncivilized hairy man who eats grass and lives with the animals, the very opposite of Gilgamesh. Enkidu, however, becomes civilized through his encounter with a prostitute who introduces him to sex and civilization. When Gilgamesh and Enkidu meet, there is a terrible fight, but after the fight they become truly fast friends.
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> Together they set out for adventure. In one of these adventures they come upon a great cedar forest where they kill the forest's fearsome guardian, Humbaba. The gods are angry over the killing of Humbaba and decree that either Gilgamesh or Enkidu must die, one or the other. Enkidu falls ill and dies, deeply regretting that he did not die from some great battle but was ignominiously felled by disease. Gilgamesh mourns deeply his friend's death and suddenly is filled with terror over his own mortality. He therefore sets out to find the one man

> who had ever become immortal, Uta-napishti, to learn from him the secret of avoiding death. Uta-napishti and his wife were the only ones to survive the great flood and so the gods granted them immortality.
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> Gilgamesh's travels take him to the end of the world where he meets a goddess (a tavern keeper!) who tells him to give up his fruitless quest, but if he insists on continuing, he must find a ferryman to take him across the ocean to Uta-napishti. He makes the trip but, alas, it turns out that Uta-napishti cannot transfer his gift to another. It is personal. However, he does tell Gilgamesh how to find a certain plant at the bottom of the sea that will renew his youth every time he gets old. (Immortality on the installment plan.) So Gilgamesh dives into the ocean where he indeed finds the plant, but one night when he is taking a bath in a pool, a snake comes and steals the plant. (Which explains why the snake can shed its skin and renew itself each time! The thieving snake, of course, is also the forerunner of the spoiler serpent in the mythical Garden of Eden.) Gilgamesh sadly returns home but one day as he looks around his great city and its mighty walls, he finally realizes that he will live on in fame and honor, in what he has left behind. Not immortality, to be sure, but not so bad. (The very themes of the Homeric epics: the greatest achievement is to live on in fame and honor—to leave behind a good name—and mighty deeds.)

Thus our civilization's very first story. And its five-millennia-old themes are the universal ones we all relate to: the quest for fame, the fear of death, and the search for immortality. It also addresses the nagging human questions: What is life all about? Are fame and a good name sufficient compensation for death? Then, too, the story raises issues of sexuality, male bonding, and overcoming life's obstacles. So the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, as old as it is, is forever current. It is our epic, our story. And it reveals to us something else about ourselves: from the beginning we are intractably a storytelling people. Moreover, as we shall soon see in Chapter One, story themes get played over and over again, which is why novelist Willa Cather observed that there are really only two or three

basic stories in the whole world. Take the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, for example. Centuries and centuries later, in the twentieth century in fact, its basic theme appears in this folktale, "The King and the Wise Woman."

> He was a powerful king, loved by the queen and feared by his enemies. He had everything but he had no child (no "immortality"). "Who will carry on my work?" he cried. "Who will inherit my power, my memory? I must have an heir!" And so a reward was offered to anyone who could help the royal couple fulfill their dream and overcome their sterility. Many tried and many died as the king and queen remained bitter and childless.
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> One day a wise old woman came to the king and queen. Shown into the throne room, she told them then and there that a child could be theirs if the king would but do one thing. "And what is that?" the king asked anxiously, filled with hope.
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> The Wise One spoke, "Your Majesty, because there is no system in your kingdom for washing away human waste, there is much sickness in the land. All waters are the same. Use your army, therefore, to dig canals through the cities and villages so that the waste water may go to one place while the water for drinking and cooking will go to another."
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> The king was skeptical. "And this will bring me a child?"
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> The Wise One smiled. "It is assured, Your Majesty." It was done. The pestilence that had attacked the people for generations was eventually gone, but after many months there was still no sign of pregnancy.
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> So the Wise One was summoned back before the throne. "You have lied to me. I did as you said and yet no child is ours. Prepare to die."
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> But the Wise One spoke quickly. "Oh, my good king, but you have fulfilled only a part of the requirement. You must now parcel out the land to the serfs and peasants, allowing each a lot large enough for both sustenance and sale."
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> "Why," roared the king, "should I give away what is mine?"
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> "So that you might have one with your name to follow," she said softly.

The mention of the one spoke so deeply to the king that he did as the old woman had instructed. Every able-bodied peasant and serf was given his own lot. They could, for the first time in memory, feed their families and guests with ease. Then the king and queen waited. But still no child grew between them. The king was furious and demanded that the old woman be brought before him and he condemned her to death.

"Your Majesty may kill me, but then you will never know if the last requirement will bring fruit."

"The last?" the king asked with suspicion and hope.

"Yes, Your Majesty, one last thing will ensure you an heir. Of this I am sure."

"If it does not," said the king with menace in his quivering voice, "your heirs will be denied their mother."

"Have no fear. The last thing you must do is dismantle your army. For the last two decades our kingdom has fought war after war. Make lasting treaties with your neighbors and dissolve that force that once protected your aggression."

"But my army!" exclaimed the king.

"I give you no choice, Your Majesty." And so it was done. For the first time in the memory of many, young men remained home behind plow and anvil and children danced safely by the borders. The king, having sacrificed so much, was sure that now he would receive his heart's desire.

But the days turned into months and the months turned into a year when the king had a scaffold erected in the throne room and the old woman was sent for. "Now you will die. Do you have anything to say?"

The old woman's eyes looked toward a window and she spoke quietly. "Your Majesty, your wife was barren, as was the land. Your people died of sickness, starvation, and war, and now look at your land. You have given your people health, wealth, and the security of peace. You have given them a better life and your name is spoken with reverence. It is bestowed upon the children of your subjects and will be passed down to their children and their children's children. And it will be

> always a name spoken with honor. You, through acts of loving kindness, will be the father of and remembered by all the children of this land."
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> The king, whose eyes had followed the old woman's, gazed at the new landscape he had created. Taking her hand, he knew she was right. His children would now number with the stars and he would be remembered forever.

This is the same basic theme as in the epic. Like Gilgamesh, the king settled for immortality through the legacy he would leave behind. (In Chapter Six the identical theme will reappear in the Japanese story, "Santoro.")

The Story Behind the Story

Story is a human imperative. Story defines our humanity, lends identity to tribes and nations, asks our questions, poses our problems, cuts us down to size, and dangles mystery before our eyes. It is surely not without reason, as we shall see in this book, that the West's most influential work is the Bible, which is also a storybook, a compendium of stories gathered, reworked, retold, and reedited over the centuries. The "fictionalized history" we call the Bible gives us the stories of creation, exodus, Abraham, Moses, David, warriors, kings, fools, prophets, wonder workers, knaves, Jesus, Peter, and Judas.

To sum up, everywhere in the world at all times and in all places in every era, story is the vehicle of wonder, guidance, reflection, and wisdom. Until very recently, the oral story prevailed for most of humanity's journey. Even with the invention of writing, less than one percent of the people could read and write, so story's dominance, power, and place must be respected. It's only in modern times that story has been denigrated, much, as we shall see, to our loss.

From Word to Page

I just mentioned the oral story and here, for the sake of completeness, I must make three emphatic remarks. The first is one of common sense, that the stories were spoken (and performed) before they were written

for century after century. The second is that in the process these oral stories were endlessly reworked, redacted, and reinterpreted over the centuries before they were written. The third is that the stories were even more reworked, emended, and edited after they were written down. In short, what we get when we pick up the written story—*The Song of Roland*, *The Iliad*, the Qur'an, or the Bible—is the end-product of centuries, even millennia, of vocal and literary activity. There are, then, really no single authors, even though we speak of them. We say, for instance, that Homer wrote *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, but "Homer" is a code word for the hundreds of poets and performers who spoke and gave their own twist to the recitation, the hundreds of scribes who updated and imposed their own agendas. We say that Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, but they too, are the products of many, many hands over a very long time. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are also code names for virtual committees who over many decades had their hands in the production of the gospels. Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* is a retelling of the ancient Arthurian legends gathered from many sources in several languages. The Grimm Brothers reworked and reedited ancient spoken folktales.

My point is that since the great stories, epics, and folktales of Western civilization (including the Bible) were first spoken, sung (the psalms, *The Song of Roland*), or, more accurately, performed, two cautions immediately stand out. First, we must appreciate that we miss entirely the rhythms, cadences, and puns of the original performance. We miss the modulating tone, the facial expressions, the raising of the eyebrow signaling that the sober word that has just been said might possibly be nonsense. We miss the shouting, whispering, speeding up, or slowing down. We miss the gestures, grimaces, smiles. Our use of punctuations, italics, capitals, and boldface type can't really convey all of this.

This was brought home to me when in my college days I was attempting to read Shakespeare. Even with the footnotes, I wasn't getting anywhere. Then one day I bought a recording (an old 78 record, the size, back then, of a dinner plate) by the great actor Sir John Gielgud called "The Seven Stages of Man." It contained excerpts from Shakespeare's plays. I was mesmerized. Gielgud's performance, his interpretations, his

voice brought all to life, and I could sense the genius of the playwright, the magic of his poetry, the seduction of his words.

As you read the written story, try to be aware of the voice(s) behind it. (The written word, to be sure, has its advantages, not the least of which is preservation.) Our worship of and reliance on the fixed written word—and now the lifeless digital word—has dulled our appreciation of a true performance, and worse, made us believe that truth in found only in factuality, a recent conceit, as we shall see. And, as I indicated above, this has robbed us of some good puns. Here's an example from the gospels. John the Baptist says, "Do not imagine you can say, 'We have Abraham for our father.' I tell you that God can make children for Abraham out of these stones." For a long time interpreters scratched their heads trying to figure out what possible connection there could be between "children" and "stones." That is, until the scholars took the Greek text and put it back in the original performing language that the Greek was translating: Aramaic, the language Jesus and John the Baptist spoke. There the word *ben* (as in, for example, Ben Sirach) means "son" or "child" and its plural is *banim*. The word *eben* means "stone" and its plural is *ebanim*. So John the Baptist was saying that God was able to make *banim* out of *ebanin*, a nice pun, an obvious play on words, and so spoken, it would have brought smiles.

Truth Claims

Thus, we finally come to the point of why I told the story of Gilgamesh and why I wrote this book: to help people see the centrality of stories, to read and hear Scripture as story and not as history, and to learn to enrich and expand their lives by looking at the "story *behind* the story." I want to break readers out of the literalism that constricts their spiritual and social lives, to give them an appreciation of metaphor and symbol, and, if you will, the "sacramentality" of the world.

Finally (and I shall mention this again at the end of the book), I want to disabuse people of something they learned in school, namely that scientific truth is the only truth. Scientific truth, it is claimed, is clear, demonstrable, and obvious. Anything else is subjective, personal, and

unacceptable for public discourse or policy. That "truth" equals scientific truth is an accepted and established axiom. But this *shibboleth* is disastrously wrong. This book maintains that there exist truths of a very different order, and that truth comes in different ways and resides in other modes and at other levels. The falling apple demonstrably obeys the law of gravity. That is a truth. But so are the fictions of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, the fables of Aesop, and the parables of Jesus. They carry truth as well. As the old saying goes, "Some stories are factual. All stories are true." This book makes a point of that.

This book is based on a series of lectures that I have given several times and reflects much of its original tone. The first eight chapters cover the ways stories can enrich our lives. Chapter Nine deals with some of the sociological realities that support the first eight chapters. The title of the book indicates that it is filled with stories. Indeed it is: some old, some new, some favorites repeated from some of my previous books.

> Many centuries ago, a rich sultan in Baghdad gave a banquet in honor of the birth of his son. All the nobility who partook of the feast brought costly gifts, except a young sage who came empty-handed. He explained to the sultan, "Today the young prince will receive many precious gifts, jewels, and rare coins. My gift is different. From the time he is old enough to listen until manhood, I will come to the palace every day and tell him stories of our Arabian heroes. When he becomes our ruler he will be just and honest."
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> The young sage kept his word. When the prince was at last made sultan, he became famous for his wisdom and honor. To this day, an inscription on a scroll in Baghdad reads, "It was because of the seed sown by the tales."

May these tales for the human journey seed your heart.