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Faith: 'Our stories shape our souls'

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“The unrest we see and experience daily calls us to engage in creating a new, more nuanced story where we forge authentic trust, a world where faith in ourselves and in Divine help prevails — a story where we truly come to love one another with no exceptions.”

Real-world violence in the daily paper raises a disturbing specter. We weep at the tragic loss of young lives to each successive school shooting. We are shocked at the frequent use of lethal force by rogue law officers. In candid video clips, we see strangers confront each other violently in road rage incidents. School bullying is a major social problem. Domestic violence is so commonplace it doesn't make front page unless a celebrity is involved.

Perhaps our stories shape our souls. Jesus knew that stories show whereas rules merely tell. Using parables, he taught spiritual truth by engaging the emotion and empathy as well as the intellect. Great stories retold through the ages come to embody our beliefs.

America has evolved its own cultural myths that capture our unexamined beliefs. One such story is “The Lone Ranger.” The details vary, but in each episode, evil and injustice are thwarted by a heroic and altruistic masked stranger who employs his remarkable skill with guns and silver bullets to impose justice in the Wild West. Victorious, he rides off into the sunset and someone asks, “Who was that masked man?”

Stories of Superman, Batman, even “Dirty Harry” employ a similar plot — a solitary larger-than-life loner unleashes devastating violent force to eliminate bad guys. The myth saturates our adrenaline-fueled video games, where the

player takes the mantle of a combat superhero laying waste to hordes of bad guys.

How do these vivid contemporary myths, these virtually lived experiences, shape us and our American culture?

We are living our Lone Ranger myth in national policy. Our nation spends vast sums of money to uphold America's fearful military superpower status. Few of us question the belief that our ability to deliver overwhelming violence is basic to America's survival. We earnestly believe that lethal violence is the answer to global threats. We spend more than the next 12 most powerful nations combined.

I don't recall Christ teaching that we should always carry a really big stick. Loving one another without exception was what He lived and preached. None of his stories are Lone Ranger stories. In His teaching, evil is transformed by love and caring. "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me," is His message.

The Lone Ranger myth ignores the reality of community. Our lives in America are completely interdependent economically and socially. The hands of strangers produced everything in my refrigerator. Even if I were a farmer, I'd still depend on others for the seed, the tools and the water. Though it's less obvious, all that I know about how to make my way in the world, I learned from a long succession of others who contributed to building and preserving humanity's vast store of useful knowledge. American society supports a system of laws that foster commerce and constrain those few among us who are predatory. There is no Lone Ranger. In the real world, the heroes are men and women like you and me who work together for the common good within a vibrant, interdependent community we've organized for mutual prosperity and peace.

Our American individualism myth cries for an update. Forty percent of Americans believe that, like the Lone Ranger, they need a gun to prevail against evil even though statistics show otherwise. Our culture needs stories and experiences that teach us to resolve conflict peacefully and without violence or threat of lethal force. The unrest we see and experience daily calls us to engage in

creating a new, more nuanced story where we forge authentic trust, a world where faith in ourselves and in Divine help prevails — a story where we truly come to love one another with no exceptions.

Richmond Shreve is a member of the Newtown Friends Meeting and lives in Newtown. From a Faith Perspective is a weekly column written by members of Lower Bucks faith communities.