

Storying Spiritual Narratives

When is a story just a story? When is a story much more than a story? When is the story we think we know obscuring a much richer story? These questions and more lay at the root of my lifelong quest to understand the power of story. Growing up in a southern rural community, I learned the art of storytelling from my family and neighbors. I often heard with some admiration, “She sure is a good storyteller.” I also heard with disapproval, “He sure can tell some big stories!”

I instinctively knew from both statements that some stories were cherished and brought forth life. Other stories were tall tales of deceit. My upbringing taught me that stories were a part of everyday life, stories influence your personal values, and stories influence how you value others. The “take away” for me was that stories tell us who a person is and is not. In my journey, I found it difficult to figure out how to identify and separate “good” stories from stories that were “tall tales.”

My love for stories drew me to pastoral care because listening to others’ stories carried such power. Those persons who had supportive stories in their lives seemed able to look to the future with at least a glimmer of hope. Those persons who focused on the stories of loss in their lives seemed to be unable to look, even for a second, at future possibilities.

Further complicating this caring for others through stories was my growing awareness that some stories were labeled as pathological while other stories were labeled as “normal.” Never being one to value normality, I found this labeling more and more distressful. Pastoral diagnosing to an extreme seemed to negate the power of a living God who cares for us and struggles with us through pain to hope.

Listening for unique stories that tugged at me personally was part of who I was. However, I was quite surprised when I experienced a call to ministry in college. I was well aware that women were not expected to be ordained as

Southern Baptist ministers. Yet, my calling to the ministry was unmistakable. My home church, Beech Fork Baptist Church in Gravel Switch, Kentucky, ordained me after I graduated from seminary and began ministry. Soon, my world was shaken when the church was disfellowshipped from its association because I, a woman, was ordained there.

I had learned from my culture to work hard and trust God for one's calling. This learning seemed frail in the face of such opposition to women in ministry. Moving from an individually focused view—that I solely was responsible for my story—to a fuller view of how systems operate in stories and lives seemed to better explain both the oppression and the liberation. I sought an approach in my role as a pastoral counselor that expanded my individualistic approach to include an appreciation for family and organizational systems. This desire resulted in my studying family therapy at the Ackerman Institute for the Family.

Still, I yearned in my pastoral care and counseling practice to find an approach that would honor local stories, encourage the emergence of stories, and not hold a normative story as the standard for all stories. It was then I discovered narrative therapy. I first encountered narrative therapy through a workshop with Jill Freedman and Gene Combs. As I sat at the conference, I whispered to a colleague sitting by me, "This feels very theological." Since that experience, I stand by that story with the desire to develop narrative therapy through a theological perspective in liberation theology.

Through the years, I have sought to understand what makes narrative practice appealing to me. That connection comes, in part, from narrative therapy fiercely clinging to making meaning of people's lives. By making people authors of their life stories, narrative therapy finds value in common everyday experience, a discovery that, in turn, is valuable for people (M. White 2004).

STORYING NARRATIVE UNDERSTANDINGS

I believe that narrative therapy offers a rich way to story and re-story our stories of everyday life as well as stories of faith. The power of using story in pastoral care and in ministry is evidenced by a trend in recent years seen through recent publications by the Alban Institute, wide-ranging topics in the Society of Pastoral Theology Annual Study Meeting, and other publications in pastoral care from a North American context.

Certainly, the word *narrative* cannot be copyrighted. It carries a wide range of meanings in pastoral care and ministry. My intent is to identify specific threads in the literature regarding the use of narrative therapy while also making

the case for a narrower focus on narrative therapy and practice as co-developed by Michael White and David Epston.

Since the 1980s, a growing interest in narrative theory and practice has spread in ministry and theological studies as well as other disciplines. In addition to Michael White and David Epston, other postmodern thinkers such as Jerome Bruner, Howard Gardner, Clifford Geertz, Jacques Derrida, Paul Ricoeur, and Hans Frei have influenced the rise of narrative ministry models that, ultimately, influence people in the pew and their spirituality. Narrative theology, narrative preaching, and pastoral counseling in a narrative theme have each contributed to a narrative model for ministry that is now understood to address searching in a postmodern society where many of the master narratives of modern culture no longer exist (Golemon 2010a).

After reviewing the literature in pastoral care and ministry, I propose that current narrative approaches fall into three general categories: (1) broad narrative methodology, (2) genres of narratives or stories, and (3) psychotherapeutic narrative methodology. Let us discuss these narrative approaches and their contributions to pastoral care and ministry.

BROAD NARRATIVE METHODOLOGY

A *broad narrative methodology* focuses on how the telling of a life story and application of that story can aid in faith development and understandings of Christian belief. In this genre, Charles Scalise's *Bridging the Gap: Connecting What You Learned in Seminary with What You Find in the Congregation*, lifts up narrative theology and posits that it has the promise of healing the rift between history and theology. He argues that narrative provides a natural connection for linking an individual's story with the master stories of the Christian faith. Further, he believes that narrative offers a venue for including others in reflections on faith as individuals share their stories with others. While offering an accessible way to connect life with theology, he also notes that the narrative approach is too closely tied with human limitation and flaws (Scalise 2003).

Doehring's now-classic *The Practice of Pastoral Care: A Postmodern Approach* offers a specific approach to pastoral care that looks at the way careseekers share their lives with caregivers through the lens of premodern, modern, and postmodern perspectives. A *careseeker*, as defined by Doehring, is a person who desires pastoral care from a pastoral caregiver. Doehring argues that, at any one time, careseekers' view their lives almost simultaneously from all three of those perspectives: literal and ritual premodern, critical modern and postmodern

relativist. Finally, in an appendix to her book, she explains her understanding of narrative pastoral care (Doehring 2006). One can argue that Doehring's work offers an overall postmodern sensibility and "narrative" feel.

A carefully constructed broad methodological approach to narrative comes from Golemon in the Narrative Leadership Collection. Drawing on narrative approaches informed by McAdams, Gardner, Bruner, and White through Foucault, he offers four principles of narrative leadership:

1. Redemptive stories of faith place human meaning within the scope of the divine in order to form persons, communities, and their normative values.
2. Narrative leaders in ministry use personal and symbolic intelligence to draw their congregations into story retrieval, construction, and response that is collaborative and intentional.
3. The choice of genre by redemptive motifs for a given story clarifies how the details of character and plot relate to a broader purpose for a faith community and what options of response are available to it.
4. Reconstructive narratives appeal to canonical understandings of tradition and practice but they invite the canon's deconstruction and renegotiation of a sign out of the tradition's vitality (Golemon 2010c).

In short, Golemon offers time, collaboration, genre, and canon as narrative principles of leadership for ministry. This leadership offers a rich variety of narrative approaches as interpreted by scholars, practitioners, and pastors.

Golemon further offers some intentions of narrative leadership in ministry:

1. Living and sharing God's story as leaders
2. Hearing people's stories and linking them to God's story
3. Creating a community of storytellers and actors
4. Reframing traditions and past for a healthy future
5. Engaging world stories with stories of faith
6. Discerning God's call to a new story in this place
7. Embodying congregations' new stories in renewed practices (Golemon 2010a)

Both Doehring and the Alban Institute's methodological approaches are sensitive to the changing world of pastoral care and ministry in its postmodern

context while having a few distinctions. Doehring's approach integrates postmodern theories with modern psychotherapeutic approaches for a pastoral care model that can be used in a variety of cultural contexts. The most distinct characteristic of Doehring's work is that she intends it to be limited to pastoral care and not broadly applied to other ministry functions.

The principles and intentions of the Alban Institute's narrative leadership approach masterfully blend various sources using "narrative." In contrast to Doehring's work, this approach is specifically focused toward a broader pastoral ministry context and minimally concerned with pastoral care as a practice. At the same time, the strength of this approach is that it recognizes the richness of individuals and communities telling their own stories without outside interpretation. As individual and community stories are told and retold, the stories gain a vitality that enables the storytellers to envision these stories into the future. This approach, with its multiple practitioners, endeavors to connect life stories of faith and culture with the sacred story of God. The limitation is that the identified narrative approaches represent a rich variety of ministry settings that are idiosyncratic to their own cultural and faith contexts. In short, while the principles are quite descriptive, a specific practice orientation that can apply to various settings while honoring the local context is absent.

GENRES OF NARRATIVES OR STORIES

The second category of narrative approaches focuses on the genres of narratives or stories. In this approach, narratives or stories are categorized according to their type of story, then applications are made to pastoral ministry from these genres. Two helpful examples of this approach can be found in Edward Wimberly's *Recalling Our Own Stories* and Donald Capps's *Living Stories*. Wimberly identifies myths that he contends are harmful to the emotional and spiritual health of caregivers. These focus around personal myths, marital and family myths, and ministry myths. He references White and Epston's re-authoring as a way for caregivers to counter these myths with their own personal stories so that they may be renewed (Wimberly 1997).

The re-authoring found in Wimberly's book offers potential for renewal. However, the approach is not scrupulously true to narrative therapy practice. The myths here offer some structure for caregivers to identify what is sapping their strength. At the same time, a normative genre of myth exists that may be actually too simplistic when trying to understand how personal stories are oppressed by other stories. A critical question emerges about whether one can say that one's personal story is always healing. Does it not have limitations?

Capps loosely follows the same method by identifying three story genres that are life-giving rather than life-defeating. The inspirational story utilizes the power of suggestion, the paradoxical story works at “untying knots,” and the miracle story identifies the exception from problems in people’s stories. Capps helpfully uses a postmodern psychotherapeutic sensibility, making some reference to White and Epston but largely referring to solution-focused therapy, an approach pioneered by Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg. He offers helpful detail for ministers about how this theory actually works in the congregational setting (Capps 1998).

Both approaches have limitations in their focus on story from one context—the personal for Wimberly and the congregational for Capps. I believe people find categories and types of narrative largely helpful in providing some structure for their reflection, but trying to meet the normality inherent in genres can be ultimately oppressive and limiting.

PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC NARRATIVE METHODOLOGY

The last narrative category to discuss is the psychotherapeutic narrative methodology. Outstanding examples of this approach are found with the works of Christie Neuger, Duane Bidwell, and Richard Hester and Kelli Walker-Jones. All three approaches are true to the technique and spirit of narrative therapy as co-developed by White and Epston. I find this discovery so refreshing after reading some literature that claims to be “narrative” in the approach of White and Epston but upon reading bears little resemblance to narrative therapy. Neuger explores the “dominant cultural discourse” of gender in her volume dedicated to narratively counseling women (2001). Bidwell offers an accessible approach for pastors to the spiritual care of couples that is true to narrative therapy. His book offers a rich source of questions that pastors can use in their work with couples (2013). The only limitation to the approaches advocated in the two books is the rather sophisticated level of pastoral care skills pastors should possess in order to implement their proposed narrative practices.

Rounding out the psychotherapeutic narrative approach is Hester and Walker-Jones’s book on clergy peer groups, which was supported by a grant from the Lilly Foundation. The book offers rich insights from several years of work with a group of clergy as they struggle with both personal and pastoral identity. Such a group is well suited to narrative therapy with its powerful emphasis on the ways stories support meaning in our identities. Hester and Walker-Jones use re-authoring or re-storying in a group process to enable participants to acknowledge their stories and what emerges freely for them with

those stories that they have carried from their faith communities (Hester and Walker-Jones 2009). The narrative informed approach is clearly presented so that it can be replicated in other settings.

The only major work of psychotherapeutic narrative methodology that does not fit so nicely in these categories is Andrew Lester's *Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling*. True to the theory of White and Epston's narrative therapy, Lester offers a pastoral theology that infuses a theology of hope from Moltmann with the spirit of narrative therapy, offering pastoral theologians and pastoral ministers' insight to light their journeys of discovery. In many ways, it lifts up the best of all three categories.

FUTURE STORYING

How, then, does the narrative methodology of this book offer something distinct from the approaches discussed previously?

First, this inaugural methodology joins the narrative therapy of White and Epston to the cutting-edge collective narrative practice of Cheryl White and David Denborough of the Dulwich Centre in South Australia. I believe this book uses the collective narrative approach for the first time in North American pastoral care and ministry. These approaches connect the divide between individual and family therapy and community work based on the same theoretical framework. Using a common theoretical framework will strengthen the methodology so that comparisons and applications can be more readily made—beginning with a narrow focus of pastoral care, moving to a broader span of congregational ministry, and ending with community social justice.

Second, applying this narrative methodology to this spectrum of pastoral ministry gives the reader an opportunity to delve more richly into one approach. By concentrating on one approach, quite paradoxically, the pastoral practitioner has a clearer map to follow when deciding to travel on unmarked roads. Then, when returning to the main road, he or she can travel with more confidence while exuding an adventuresome spirit in looking for the next unmarked road.

Third, following in a relatively “pure” manner, White and Epston's narrative therapy puts this material closer to the anthropological origins of the approach as gleaned from Gregory Bateson. This methodology honors, in many ways, the increasing bend of pastoral theology to practice a public theology that opens itself to multiple disciplines beyond the behavioral sciences. Further, its anthropological foundation recognizes cultural sensitivity and priority to local experiences.

Fourth, narrative therapy's emphasis on "privilege" and its oppressive effects on human lives will be acknowledged in this volume. Historically, Cheryl White brought a feminist consciousness to narrative therapy so that feminism is a foundation rather than an addition to narrative as acknowledged by Michael White.(White 1995). In addition to sexism, other privileged multiple voices of oppression such as racism, sexism, ageism, ability challenges, and heteronormativity exist in our lives. Our struggle is to identify what privilege we honor at any one time and recognize it as having the potential to rob people of their future hopes and dreams.

Fifth, the narrative emphasis on "practice" values the pastoral skills of ministry as a skill equal to scholarly and academic endeavors. Connected with a practice ethos, the narrative stance of the therapist as being "de-centered and influential" (White, 2005) can refocus attention on the value of being a pastor in the face of cultural norms valuing executives and specialized ministers. White uses this concept of *de-centered and influential* to emphasize the role of the therapist or caregiver as creating a non-hierarchical relationship that, nevertheless, endeavors to gently lift up generative possibilities that emerge in a person's life. At the same time, the careseeker is always understood to be the "expert" on their lives and not the therapist or caregiver. This means that the careseeker has knowledge about his or her life that the caregiver can never know.

The emphasis on issues of transference/countertransference touted in pastoral care and counseling can lead such care and counseling to concentrate on the "psychological" rather than embracing the 'spiritual' of pastoral ministry. The de-centered stance of the narrative practitioner focuses on the humanity of the caregiver while honoring the expert status of the careseeker.

Thus, a pastoral ministry informed by narrative approaches will enable church members, hospital patients, or community persons to trust themselves more fully rather than seeing their human frailties to be pathological. In addition, the narrative practitioner's "influential" rather than "expert" role acknowledges the caregiver's own pastoral skills, which encourages the careseeker to claim his or her own story. Blending both of these qualities will, I believe, move the emphasis of theological education from equipping the ministers to build mutually collaborative relationships between leaders and laity, walking together.

Sixth, this book includes two pieces of contextual experiences. The first is qualitative research based on collective narrative practice called the Staff of Spirit, which is a spiritual formation group process. The second contribution is

a pedagogical methodology of a cultural immersion class taught in Appalachia that focuses on the re-storying of local stories into stories of faith.

Seventh, spiritual narratives are understood in a new way that binds stories, storytelling, and storyteller. Stories belong to the storyteller who has lived the story. The story can be told to oneself and to God. It can be richly thickened as it is told to others whose very listening shapes the story itself. Stories can be written, shared orally, or both written and shared orally. The telling of the story itself to the listeners can result in a thickening of the story in the storyteller's experience (Narativ, Inc. 2013).

Eighth, the weaving of liberation theology, narrative therapy, collective narrative practice, and real life experience comprises a unique approach to pastoral care and ministry. Experiences of laity are honored while at the same time ministers in various ministries are encouraged to lift up their unique contributions to laity. At this beginning juncture, I name this approach liberative narrative ministry.¹

Before moving on the bridge toward spiritual narrative, it is important to introduce the North American theological community to collective narrative practice, which will be more fully developed in future chapters. Collective narrative practice intends to take away the delineation between what is individual and what is community. The methodology, based on the following principles, was developed in responding to trauma people face around the globe:

1. To listen for double-storied accounts—descriptions not only of trauma but of the ways the person responded to trauma
2. To find a way to richly acknowledge the real effects of the abuse the person experienced
3. To link the person's life and experiences to some sort of collective
4. To enable the person to make a contribution to the lives of others
5. To conceive of the person as representing a social issue
6. To enable the person to join a collective endeavor in addressing, in some local way, that social issue
7. To enable people to speak through us, not just to us (Denborough 2008)

1. "Liberative" comes from Loren Townsend's *Introduction to Pastoral Counseling*; narrative therapy as developed by Michael White and David Epston; and collective narrative practice as developed by David Denborough and Cheryl White.

BRIDGES TO SPIRITUAL NARRATIVES

These collective narrative principles focus broadly on listening to multiple levels of a story and finding ways that the person telling the story can thicken it through broadening life experiences. Also, importantly, the storyteller uses the social issue represented in the story to connect with others struggling with the same oppression. Collective narrative practice is a way of expanding individual experience to include others.

Blending the distinctions of a narrowly focused narrative methodology accomplishes a few tasks that enrich pastoral care and ministry and their effects on congregants and community members. It invites multiple voices to be present when collaborating. It lessens the oppression of the so-called normative “right” way to do things in church. It understands that adding complexity rather than oversimplifying a problem is more generative. It understands that interdisciplinary collaboration is more nurturing than the current silos present in ministry and theological education.

I argue now that Seward Hiltner, many years ago, offered a foundation to pastoral theology that would honor these premises. In his pioneering work, *Preface to Pastoral Theology*, written in the 1950s, Hiltner offers what was then and truly is now a startling premise: pastoral ministry is interlaced with multiple viewpoints that are always present and always influencing each other. He calls this approach the perspectival approach—truly simple yet brilliant (Hiltner 1958). Hiltner’s perspectival approach helpfully addressed the dilemma of theological specialization that promoted and still promotes the insular seminary education of future ministers. Also, inherent in the perspectival approach was theological reflection on pastoral activities. So, oddly, the argument Hiltner largely began—contending that pastoral theology was not applied theology but theology of a different approach—is still being discussed.

Theological reflection on pastoral activities undergirded Hiltner’s concern for the fledgling field of pastoral counseling. In my work with Hiltner as a masters and doctoral student, he always emphasized the need for pastoral counseling not to become over “psychologized” and separate from the life of the church. Thus, theological reflection must always utilize contributions from psychotherapy in an integrative enterprise.

Hiltner’s perspectival approach lends itself as a foundation to the multiple voicing that narrative practice calls for. Moreover, it expands narrative’s foundation of anthropology and its emphasis on acknowledging personal biases that is so critical in our global world. These emphases enrich a search for stories of faith that church members, community members, and congregations hold. Then, the uncovering of spiritual narratives can occur as believers find

unclaimed stories that deepen their faith and ultimately strengthen them while living in a culture where narratives of meaning are largely absent. The uncovering of spiritual narratives is enabled by revisiting the meaning of spirituality with its goal of thickening spiritualities in people's lives. Now we move to understanding more deeply the power of story and the way in which spirituality emerges from it.

STORYING SPIRITUALITY

Much of these pastoral ministries' interest in narrative studies originates from the rich use of stories in the Bible. Biblical stories illustrate how people can live and the possibilities of life in a faith context (Meteyard 2008). Biblical stories are more than just "stories" in an everyday sense. They serve to connect believers to a God who offers possibilities for people beyond their everyday vision. Stanley Hauerwas says, "We are a 'storied people' because the God that sustains us is a 'storied God'" (Hauerwas 1981, 91).

In my earlier book, *Re-storying Your Faith*, I present several ideas that are developed in this book. This "storied identity" is built through multiple layers of experiences that go beyond the chronological order of events. As people interpret events in their lives, they develop a sense of who they are quite apart from the actual historicity of events. This "interpretative scheme," according to George Stroup, includes ideals, values, preferences, and goals. In turn, Christian identity is formed from the interpretation of these stories into "identity narratives" that stand up against Christian narratives (Meteyard 2008, 100).

The form in which people choose to interpret their stories into these narratives is critical and has a direct effect on how people live out those narratives. For example, if a person reframes a story of having to overcome obstacles in a context of tragedy rather than liberation, it takes on a very different form. Finally, a part of people's narratives important in religious life is the ability to disrupt and reform canons of meaning inherited from religious tradition.

In a Christian context, biblical writers often take an accepted metaphor or symbol and then change the meaning of that metaphor to make the narrative more meaningful. An example of changing the canon of meaning can be seen in Paul's use of the old Adam and the new Adam as he explains the power of transformation in life when one is transformed in the image of Christ rather than the human image of Adam (Golemon 2010c).

The lifting up of common, everyday experiences to create a full meaning of life uses a very human vehicle—story—to accomplish its task. Through story, we as humans create a cohesive understanding of what has happened to us—both good and bad. As we move through life, our past stories come along on the journey as we create new stories and anticipate new stories in the untraveled future.

Stories for people of faith through the centuries are about meaning. Through storytelling, believers have shared their spiritual experiences with others in the community of faith to strengthen their faith as well as the faith of fellow believers. Important beliefs of faith are conveyed through these stories both explicitly and implicitly. Spiritual stories are never neutral. They carry with them discourses of meaning. Often in the community of faith, certain stories are privileged. They are viewed as adhering to a “normal” route for faith development. Particular denominations may validate certain spiritual stories that support their doctrinal beliefs.

What happens then when believers, through the vicissitudes of life, have stories that challenge those privileged stories of faith? This question piques my interest and provides direction for this book in developing narrative practice as an approach to uncover spiritual narratives. To that end, let us create a working definition of spirituality.

NAMING SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality is defined in many ways. Spirituality may refer to a rather expansive sense of being uplifted. Others define spirituality as some kind of practice, such as working with the homeless, which gives their lives meaning beyond themselves. For other people, spirituality can name anything that gives life meaning quite separate from belief in any deity. Ecological concerns, social service, meditation, psychotherapy all have aspects of spirituality that move their practitioners beyond themselves.

Exploring spiritual narratives requires a Christian definition of spirituality that specifically draws on the sacred story of Christian faith and the faith stories of believers. Further, distinctions and commonalities between spirituality and religion will create a methodology for exploring spiritual narratives in multiple faith contexts.

Spirituality and religion are understood to overlap while having different constructs. In a Christian context, spirituality is understood as a relationship with God that gives a sense of meaning in life. Religion is understood as the formalized structuring of spirituality so that it may be transmitted from person

to person and generation to generation. It is formed in community with people who have had similar experiences (Hodge 2005). As soon as even a few people share a similar spiritual experience, religion starts to form. In the beginning of a religion, the experience of believers forms a personal spiritual connection. All believers of a new religion hope that such spiritual connection would continue. This hope, however, is not always realized. When religion loses its spiritual connection, new stories of spirituality need to be uncovered with the support of a rich definition of spirituality.

Spirituality in a Christian context is thus defined here as “that meaning from life that encompasses an experience bigger than self and relationships sparked by connecting with God through Jesus Christ as co-creator of story and the Spirit as sustainer of story” (Coyle 2011b). With this focus, spirituality draws from people’s lives the very deepest experiences from which meanings emerge, forming foundational beliefs that people that can return to again and again. This spirituality links believers to Jesus Christ through both personal and community experiences and motivates them to look for meaning in those transformative experiences that connect them closer to Christ. As these experiences form into stories, hearers or readers then experience profound transformation through Jesus who engages believers in discovering and expanding their faith stories. From here, we will look at how spirituality is being expanded through narrative practices in the church and ministry studies and how the narrative practice in this book is both similar and different from those practices.

STORYING SPIRITUAL NARRATIVES

Common and sacred stories are then an essential thread of believers’ faith, their congregations’ identities, and their communities’ futures. Only by telling those stories, others re-telling those stories, and the community members re-telling the re-telling of the stories can a tapestry of faith stories emerge (Coyle 2010). This tapestry shows the rough nubs of pain as well as the beauty of life colors. Its multiple layers of thread give it strength to better withstand the wear and tear of life.

Spiritual narratives are at the same time both faith stories and not faith stories. One can share a story about his or her faith journey, which I later refer to as “formative spiritual experience” (Coyle 2013). I can tell a story about an encounter with God. If that story remains isolated, it is just a story. It may have meaning at some times, and at other times it seems rather ethereal. If I take that story and reflect deeply about it, I may discover that that story reminds me of another story in some kind of “aha” moment. The more I reflect on that initial

story and the other stories connected with it, the stronger those stories become. Then, I share those stories with my best friend. She responds to those stories. Surprisingly, I have a different perspective of those stories. Together with my remembrances and my friend's re-telling, I now am beginning to experience a similar and different story than the first initial story.

Further, the initial story and the subsequent storying bring to my mind some stories that are not explicitly spiritual. I think further about those stories. Then, suddenly, as if from nowhere, I think about the seemingly "nonspiritual" stories. I may reflect with fondness on a family trip when I was a child. Such "nonspiritual" stories seem to fit with the "spiritual" stories with a new richness.

This journey of imagination lifts up the essential qualities of spiritual narratives. Spiritual narratives are those stories that are bound together with meaning and serve as a source of strength that one can draw on in the face of hardship. Spiritual narratives weave multiple stories that span the past, present, and future of our lives. They can be explicitly spiritual or have an implicit spirituality.

I have named these spiritual narratives "spiritual" because I believe that we too often compartmentalize our lives so that even when we have a spiritual moment, some of us are likely to explain it away. On the other end of the spectrum, some of us believers may be apt to think of everything as explicitly spiritual. My notion of a spiritual narrative is a resilient story that connects with both the sacred and common of life in a way that lifts us out of ourselves and our relationships to yearn to view the world and its people through God's eyes.

Further, spiritual narratives are never static. Unlike the initial conversion experience we tell over and over again without change, spiritual narratives are told over and over again and become richer with each re-telling. They are flexible yet strong, engaging yet distinctive. Change does not threaten a spiritual narrative. New life experiences do not weaken a spiritual narrative because those stories are woven in with the old and new.

Spiritual narratives do not listen to normative stories for what they should be. They listen to lost stories that may offer rich guides for hopes and dreams of the future. Spiritual narratives are not fixed in the past, hoping that all pain and disappointment will be worked through. Spiritual narratives live in the present, honor the past as teacher, and look forward to the promise of the future.

Spiritual narratives do not see only theological language and religious places as being friend. They see the world God created as embracing both the common and the sacred under God's care. At the same time, spiritual narratives do not think that spiritual language is unnecessary. At times, what is spiritual can only be expressed in spiritual language. The words themselves

“enflesh” God’s presence in the believer’s spiritual experience. Words become more than just words. Spiritual words express the immanent dwelling of the Spirit in the life of each believer. The Logos in John says, “In the beginning was the word and the word was God” (John 1:1, NRSV). Words are more than representations. They embody who the person is (Coyle 2007).

Stories of faith, in a similar way, enflesh the believer’s spiritual identity. They are more than events and places. They sometimes aspire to be symbolic as well as true experiences that enrich one’s faith. A believer makes meaning out of stories, and the story, in turn, becomes past, present, and future experiences. Narrative practice as developed in the next chapter will offer an approach that honors storytelling in a deeper way.

PRACTICES

- Think of a simple story that occurred to you within the last day. It does not need to be excessively complicated, painful, or sad. Then, turn to the person sitting beside you. As the storyteller, take five minutes to tell the story to your partner. The partner is to listen attentively. Then, in the next two minutes, the partner is to tell the story back to you. Conclude by sharing with the listener what connected with you as authentic in the listening and retelling of the story. The listener now becomes the storyteller in the same procedure. Conclude by discussing for five minutes what make the telling of the story and the listening of the story difficult or simple. Attend to the process, not the content.
- Share with another person what you know about how you got your name. Who selected the name? Were you named for someone? What is the effect of that knowledge on you and who you are? Take turns. (Adapted from an exercise at Dulwich Centre in Adelaide, South Australia.)