Volume 9
2012

The Art of Storytelling
Communitas: Publication of The College of Pastoral Leaders

2012
Volume 9
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Communitas: Publication of The College of Pastoral Leaders is published annually by Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 100 East 27th Street, Austin, TX 78705-5797.
e-mail: cpl@austinseminary.edu Web site: austinseminary.edu/communitas

Entered as non-profit class bulk mail at Austin, Texas, under Permit No. 2473. POSTMASTER: Address service requested. Send to Communitas, 100 East 27th Street, Austin, TX 78705-5797.

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COMMUNITAS is a term anthropologist Victor Turner uses to describe the temporary but intense community that develops among pilgrims for the duration of the journey (remember the pilgrims of the Canterbury Tales). For us in the church, it might describe the community we develop with the successive churches we serve, or the community of cohorts of the College of Pastoral Leaders, gathering to study together for a brief period of years.

Turner also employs the concept of liminality to describe that pilgrim experience of leaving the domain of the familiar to travel and to experience new potentialities and powers that lie afield. We leave home, travel light, expose ourselves both to the unknowns in the world of the horizon and the unknowns within our own souls, now freed to be heard in the silence of the road. Again, the cohorts of the College of Pastoral Leaders leave the parish momentarily to hear the experiences of colleagues and to contemplate the ministries seeking to emerge from their own souls. So we are pilgrims in the College, our experience shaped by communitas and liminalities.
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The College of Pastoral Leaders is funded in part by a grant from the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence program of Lilly Endowment Inc.
Introduction

A reading from the Gospel According to Everybody:

I know through my Christian upbringing that it's through story that communities are bound, through story that individual identities are formed, and through story that the Sacred is revealed.

And so it is that in his wonderful account of group storytelling, Mark Yaconelli gets this issue of Communitas started. His opening article rivets me to the notion that, as a Christian, I am nailed to a certain story—a story that takes my own story seriously enough to knit it to and within that larger Story that tells of God's ongoing business with us. What this means is that my own story, your own story, is important because God embraces it, all of it, and kneads it into God's ultimate story. So what could be more essential, for people who call themselves Christians, than considering our stories carefully in our search for the evidence of God's work within our lives?

Kay and I have become part of a new tradition. We travel annually now, just for a long weekend, with dear friends from Dallas—a couple we have known for thirty years. Last year, we all went to the Far West Texas town of Marfa—an artists' haven way out in the high desert basin surrounded by enormous mountains—and enjoyed that hipster “thin place” together so much that we decided to go somewhere different together every year. And so we took another trip this year, and the principle rule was that we each had to write a story that we would share with one another at some point in our weekend. The story could be about anything, we agreed; and, when we had that initial conversation last year, I thought: “A story! That couldn’t be so hard” (me being a preacher, and all). As the months went by, the anxiety of writing the story grew within me. Our couple friends, after all, are both serious writers. Would my story be too sappy, too preacher-y?

This year, on our last night together, we sat around a fire out on the patio of our hotel suite, opened a bottle of wine and some crackers and cheese, and—one by one—we risked reading out loud our stories. It was fiction, but, Lord, it was also so very autobiographical. We each acknowledged our vulnerability in sharing such an intimacy (after all, the two women were both psychologists—are n’t they supposed to be able to see through everybody else?). The lawyer among us had us all in tears before he was finished; the preacher among us had the most colorful language. But the stories! They each bound us together in a common humanity!
“I know through my Christian upbringing that it’s through story that communities are bound, through story that individual identities are formed …”

In the pages to come, Melissa Wiginton recounts how a local Austin eatery became a sacred space one night a while back, when a host of Yaconelli’s grateful pupils at a College of Pastoral Leaders confab stepped up to a corner platform and told their stories into the evening. I wish I had been there. Katherine Willis Pershey and Jenn Moland-Kovash recount the basics of the story each told that night. I wish I had been there! Kara Root shares a profoundly moving story—rooted in baptism and the completion of one’s baptism—of a small community that surrounded one night a dear saint with one foot in eternity, whose stories accompanied her as far as they could. Wish I’d been there. Gregory Cuellar, Suzi Park, and David White punctuate the stories in this issue with reflections from their own disciplines; and David reminds us that “the practice of storytelling demands that we attend closely to the world around us and comprehend the drama that is at the heart of living and how God is hiding there—always alert to surprise endings.”

In that Story, of course, we already know the surprise ending. It illuminates our own stories, and certainly our own endings. And, over and over again, all through our lives, “the Sacred is revealed.”

The Gospel of the Lord.
Praise be to you, O Christ.

Theodore J. Wardlaw
President, Austin Seminary
The Art of Storytelling

The Gospel According to Everyone

Mark Yaconelli

“You have yet to understand that the shortest distance between a human being and Truth is a story.”

—Anthony De Mello

There are three readings given each Sunday in the Anglican church served by my friend Martin Wroe: The Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Gospel According to Everyone. This third reading, from Martin Wroe’s self-published book, is a collection of stories—true, autobiographical stories of the people in his parish and their encounters with God. Martin describes his reason for reading the ordinary stories of parishioners as follows: “When we stop to listen, we find traces of the good news in all our stories; there are signs of gospel in every one of us.”

Thirty minutes before show time I walk upstairs and unlock the front door of the church to find ten people lined up patiently outside. I prop the door open, set out an offering plate, and one by one the eager participants drop their five dollar bills into the wooden platter. These early attendees lay out jackets to mark their seats in the pews and then, without need of instruction, begin setting up chairs in the overflow room. Meanwhile, I take down the cross from the altar, drag the pulpit to the side.

Mark Yaconelli is an author (most recently of Wonder, Fear, and Longing: A Book of Prayers) and nationally known speaker and retreat leader. He is the founder of The Hearth: Real Stories by Regular Folks. Yaconelli is also co-director for the Center for Engaged Compassion (CEC) at Claremont School of Theology. The CEC seeks to heal broken people and communities through contemplation, creativity, and compassion. He spent ten years directing the Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project at San Francisco Theological Seminary which focused on integrating contemplative practices and awareness within congregational youth ministry programs.
of the room, remove the hanging green cloths with their embroidered doves, and set out the one prop for the night—a lone microphone on a stand.

At ten minutes to seven there are nearly a hundred and thirty people wedged within the plain, 1890 sanctuary built to accommodate ninety. Children are stacked on laps, younger couples sit cross-legged on the floor, and a group of retired men stand chatting against the back wall drinking red wine in plastic cups. Outside the sanctuary in the overflow room, people sit in folding chairs while members from a local non-profit set out photos, brochures, and volunteer sign-up sheets. In the kitchen, helpers set out wine and baked goods donated from local grocery stores. Above the counter a handmade sign reads: Food $1. Drinks $2. All Proceeds to Help Burmese Refugees. At 7 p.m., with people still making their way through the front door, I go to the microphone:

Good evening everyone, and welcome to the Hearth—a storytelling series in which six community members share a true story, told first person, in ten minutes or less, and tied to a particular theme. Tonight’s theme is “Living on the Edge.” As is our tradition, we have found a local non-profit that connects to the night’s theme. All entry fees and concession money collected will benefit Eyes to Burma, an organization started here in Ashland, Oregon, to help Burmese refugees.

After a few more housekeeping announcements, I pause and then give a short, five minute meditation on the theme “Living on the Edge.” Refraining from religious language, I speak about the message given to all of us as children to stay away from the “edge”—the physical edge, the emotional edge, the social edge. “We are told by the surrounding culture to anxiously strive for the secure middle—a middle we never quite find, and yet we keep searching, fearfully hiding our wounds, our longings, our unusual gifts—anything that might exile us to the perimeter of what is acceptable.”

As my opening words come to a close, I invite up a trio of musicians. For each Hearth gathering, my friend Duane arranges songs and singers that match the stories. This night we have a local singer-songwriter accompanied by a fiddler and a woman who sings harmony while playing an Irish hand drum. The first song is full of longing for relationship, a lament at the absence of friends, lovers, and family. The music ends and I introduce the first teller. She is a psychiatrist from the local hospital. She tells a story of growing up off-grid in the Colorado Rockies. The story revolves around a particular night when she and her sister lay back to back, frightened in their tiny loft while their step-dad screams and curses at their howling basset hounds. She reflects on how the bassets’ howling mirrored her own desire to leave the woods, to resist her step-father’s abuse, to stubbornly refuse to be a victim of his oppression.

The next teller is Fred, a retired photographer. He tells us of his childhood outside London in a town turned to rubble by the Nazis. Unruly and full of energy, Fred dropped out of school at nine years old never having learned to read or write. He then confesses a secret he has kept for most of his adult life: at the age of sixty-
eight he is still illiterate. He tells us how he was able to work and make a living, how he hid his illiteracy from friends and business clients and how six years ago he found himself spending most of his time in Thailand’s largest garbage dump. There he began caring for families, spending much of his day teaching illiterate Burmese teenagers how to survive as artists.

Our third teller is a nurse who narrates an intimate moment thirty years earlier when after months of therapy she found the courage to ask her conservative Dutch father if he loved her. The woman is tender and vulnerable as she shares her struggle with loneliness and the desperate need to make a connection with her father.

The musicians play, and then we take a break. The crowd, now a hundred and seventy plus, gathers in the community hall alight with conversation inspired by the tellers. After twenty minutes we reconvene in the sanctuary to hear Daniel, a part-time gardener and musician tell us how he survived a teenage vow to kill himself if he could not cure his self-loathing by the age of thirty. The story is full of humor as he shares his radical attempts at healing—clown school, a farming commune, seven years in a Zen monastery, and relationship with a woman with three young children. The story ends with a deep experience of inner freedom and joy while camping in the mountains outside of our town.

Next is Lucy, a retired emergency dispatcher who chronicles for us how she fell in love with Central America as a college graduate. She speaks of families she met, the suffering she witnessed, and a growing dedication to help the people of Honduras. The story skips forward to this past year when she joined a peace group committed to documenting injustices in Honduras. She recounts a harrowing experience of helping a Jesuit priest escape a government death squad. She ends by telling us her “inner-secret,” a feeling that all of her life has been preparation for helping the marginalized in Honduras.

The night ends with Kevin, a puppeteer and naturalist, who tells how he survived a childhood filled with physical and emotional abuse by retreating to a patch of forest at the edge of a Pennsylvania farm. He gives us a set of tender images of a lonely ten-year-old boy finding comfort and care from a maple tree, a creek, and a variety of forest creatures. His story moves forward twenty-five years. Distraught and heartbroken after a divorce, he wanders into our local city park and sits by a cluster of maple trees planted by a creek. He sits and grieves and then suddenly notices a deep source of compassion and comfort coming to him from the trees, the creek, the birds rustling in the bushes. It is the same deep care the woods offered him twenty-five years earlier when he was a wounded and hurting boy.

The musicians play a final song, I take the microphone and weave together the images and words from the night’s tellers, alluding to the real suffering, hope, and courage present in the evening’s tales. I then ask the audience to reflect in silence, “What do tonight’s stories teach you about your own experiences?”

I thank the brave tellers for sharing a piece of their lives and then ask for volunteers to share stories at the next event to benefit a local conflict mediation center.
About five years ago, my local church began a meal and shower service for the area’s homeless population. I noticed the volunteers who led this ministry made a concerted effort to meet the physical needs of local families and individuals without demanding any allegiance to our church or to the Christian faith. The new program was simply a way of helping people on the margins.

It occurred to me that while some populations within our town suffer from physical poverty, many more members of our town suffer from spiritual poverty (loss of connection and compassion with self, others, the earth, the Sacred). Could there be a way to address the spiritual needs of these people without asking them to join the church or the faith? My mission was to find a way. How could I create a spiritual “shelter” that matched our homeless shelter?

During this time, I recalled a powerful experience I had when I was twenty-six years old. Morton Kelsey, an Episcopal priest, author, and Jungian analyst, and later my spiritual mentor, was committed to holding the sacred nature of human experience—so much so that he began each of his retreats with something called “life story groups” in which participants were placed in small groups and given forty-five minutes to tell their life story.

I remember the disappointment I felt when I first saw the members of my life story group: a retired pastor, an elderly socialite from Boston, a fifty-something professor of social ethics, a middle-aged homemaker, an English teacher from Florida dressed in golf pants and orange polo shirt. This had to be a collection of the least interesting people in the program. I was certain the day would prove to be an eight-hour slog through tedious tales of faculty politics, plugged milk ducts, and the futility of school testing.

After settling in, our group facilitator asked, “Okay, who would like to start?” The heavily made-up woman from Boston raised her hand. “I’ll go.” I pulled out a bag of M&Ms and prepared for a long-winded tale of museum fundraisers and cocktail parties.

“All right,” the woman said thoughtfully. She paused, gathered herself, and with her eyes closed said, “Twenty years ago I woke up in a motel in eastern Georgia. I was naked, lying on the floor in a room filled with empty bottles of Southern Comfort and vials of morphine. There were used needles and condoms all over the room, and my body was bruised and sore. I got up, showered, dressed, and called the motel manager to ask where I was, what day it was. I had no memory of the past three days. No idea why I was in Georgia, so far from my home. No idea who I had been with, or what had been done to me. I didn’t know where my kids were, where my husband was, didn’t know anything. That was the first day. The first day I realized I had a problem. That I needed help.”

I leaned forward, accidentally spilling my M&Ms over the floor. This was a
shock. I had no idea this well-dressed doctor’s wife could have this kind of recklessness in her. She opened her eyes, looked around the room, took a deep breath, and let her eyes fill with emotion.

We waited while this same woman told a story of a troubled marriage, a prescription drug addiction, a childhood of abuse and neglect, a gnawing self-hatred, hospitalization, suicide attempts, a wise friend, a divorce, a struggle to renew her relationship with her children, a new marriage, a spiritual awakening, a daily struggle for self-acceptance.

The story ended. I sat back in my chair. I had no idea a woman who looked like this could have such pain, confusion, and bravery inside of her.

Around the circle we went, each story full of tragedy, unmet longing, and hurt. Each story unexpected. Each story focused on the struggle to find acceptance and healing. Each story arousing deep reverence and compassion in those of us listening. I left the life story retreat utterly disoriented.

At that time in my life I was attentive to the surfaces of life—appearances, personalities, and achievements. If this group of plain-faced people was full of such pain and courage, what lived deep within the lives of my neighbors, my workmates, my friends and family, the people I passed on the street? Suddenly I was filled with a new sense of curiosity, less judgment, and more compassion for those around me. That life story group had taken place two decades ago and yet I had not forgotten the transforming truth I had experienced: every human being has a sacred story that, when told, reveals our common hopes, our common suffering, our ordinary (and yet miraculous) capacity to bear love into the world.

In every compelling story there is death and resurrection, something dies (an understanding of self, an expectation, a relationship) so that something new can be reborn. My story was that I had spent most of my adult life looking for a way to use my gifts as a spiritual director, retreat leader, and youth pastor to serve the larger community in which I lived. I knew I was called to create a new form of spiritual community, accessible to people who had rejected, or had no interest in joining, the church. Could personal storytelling be the way? Maybe it was time for me to let go of my assumptions of what it meant to be a minister.

In 2008, a friend of mine who knew my struggle suggested I look into “The Moth” in New York City. The Moth is a storytelling series in which people tell true life stories in front of a live audience. I went to the Moth website and found the format I was looking for.

Within a few weeks I had rented out a local bar, created a website, and printed flyers for a new storytelling community called “The Hearth.” Our motto would be “Real Stories by Regular Folks.” I decided to hold the first event on Valentine’s Day. I went around town asking people if they might be willing to share a love story from their own lives to raise money for the local food bank. Within a couple of months I had six locals willing to share a story. I made posters, put ads in the community newspapers, and charged $5—all proceeds to go to the local food bank. I invited the six tellers to my home and together we helped one another strengthen our stories.
On Valentine’s Day, close to eighty people showed up to a pub that had a capacity for fifty. The stories were unusual, authentic, and vulnerable. A mother spoke of the lack of love she felt for her newborn child and the work she did to fall in love with her son. A retired man told about reconciling with his mother-in-law after thirty years of resentment. A forty-something mother talked about the difficulty of dating after a painful divorce. These and other unique love stories kept the room spellbound. At the end of the night my pastor said to me, “I think this is your ministry. This is your church. The church of story.”

Since that night the Hearth has invited barmaids, therapists, landscapers, school counselors, activists, doctors, filmmakers, and dozens of other brave souls to share stories around themes like Wilderness, Letting Go, Tough Lessons, and Strangers in a Strange Land. Each event includes local musicians and poets and every event brings awareness and funds to local non-profits.

Any Christian churchgoer would recognize that the elements from the Hearth are taken from a standard Protestant worship service—an offering to help others, personal testimonies, a homily, silent reflection, soulful music, shared wine and baked goods. Our events are even held (free of charge) in my local church. Yet although each gathering replicates the elements of Christian worship, there is a deliberate (and I would add “freeing”) absence of religious language and symbol which allows the tellers to share stories with a kind of raw honesty rarely permitted in most Christian gatherings.

In its own way, the Hearth has become a refuge for many—allowing people to confess their joys, their desires, their fears, and sufferings, unfiltered, to the local community. In this act of personal storytelling, we all become more available to the Divine image that God has created us in. The sacredness of our gatherings is made clear by the number of people who refer to The Hearth as “my church.” It’s no surprise that over the past two years, without encouragement or proselytizing, we’ve had over twenty regular participants in The Hearth join my sponsoring church.

I know through my Christian upbringing that it’s through story that communities are bound, through story that individual identities are formed, and through story that the Sacred is revealed. As a minister, I have skills that are desperately needed in our society. I know how to create a safe place. I know how to design gatherings in which the Holy is accessible. I know how to find meaning in human experience—how to communicate hope, courage, faith, and redemption. As a minister, I trust that God is hidden within the reality of human experience and if we pay attention to what we’ve lived, this God becomes available and accessible.

During this past year I’ve expanded my “ministry” of personal storytelling. I’ve led community retreats in which people from across town are placed in life story groups. I’ve met with local hospice volunteers to design small groups in which cancer patients tell stories of the “legacies” they are leaving their families and communities. In a tense water-rights committee made up of local Klamath Indians, ranchers, and government officials, I noticed how easily people wept with one another as I invited them to share stories of their upbringing with particular focus on their
relationship to the land. In all of these groups there are moments of deep communion, moments when God shows up, moments when we fall into silence and reverence for what we’ve known and lived.

All of us who work in the church know that the present forms for Christian community are no longer meeting the needs of people. We know traditional Christian institutions, language, and rituals no longer communicate the mystery, grief, alienation, and ecstasy of modern life. We all know the old ways are dying, and as pastors and Christian leaders we need to be open and aware of the new practices, new language, new life that God is trying to bear into the world.

Last week, the board of the local United Church of Christ where I attend voted to take me under care as a Minister of Narrative Arts. They did this because they suspect that the new forms of God’s life in the world will only be discovered by inviting people to sit down together and share stories of what we know is true.

A few months ago our town’s local paper did a cover story on The Hearth. In that story I was asked to explain why I volunteer my time to make this happen. Here’s what I said:

I do it because I’ve been changed by stories. Because I love to tell stories. Because I grew up in a church that told stories. Because of all the people who come to me and say, “I have a story I need to tell.” Because stories are what make us human. Because listening to stories is one of the great pleasures in life. Because every one of us has a sacred story to tell. Because when we listen to each other’s stories we become more connected to ourselves and others. Because everyone wants (and needs) compassion for what they’ve lived. Because everyone deserves to be heard. Because it raises money for beautiful people working for beautiful causes. Because when we tell stories we gently alleviate shame and celebrate ordinary courage. Because every one of us has a truth we’ve lived—a funny truth, a tragic truth, a heroic truth—and when it’s shared, the community becomes more honest.
Cohort Reflections

Confessions of Preachers: Real Pastors Tell True Stories of Life Beyond the Pulpit

Melissa Wiginton

On a warm October night, fifty pastors from across the U.S. and the Protestant church piled out of cabs on Guadalupe just past 41st Street. They walked into a medium-size Austin diner and bar, the NeWorlDeli, to the live music of two Austin Seminary students performing on a small platform built into a corner as a stage. On the door was a big poster announcing the night’s entertainment: not the usual local singer-songwriter or open mic, but “Confessions of Preachers.”

These fifty pastors comprise the 2012 Class of the College of Pastoral Leaders. They had spent the day with Mark Yaconelli telling their own life stories, playing with the notion of storytelling and the power of hearing true stories in God’s work of love. To extend our learning, and to explore public storytelling as practiced by Mark in his hometown, six brave adventurers agreed to tell a story for their colleagues and whoever else appeared for dinner at the deli. The stories were in turn funny, poignant, wry, suspenseful, short and pointed, long and indirect. Interspersed, musicians among the group told their stories with fiddle, guitar, poetry in song. Listeners heard their confessions: We pastors are deeply connected with humanity, our own and that of people whose humanity lies before us in ministry.

In this volume of Communitas, we publish stories by members of College of Pastoral Leaders cohort groups; two of which were shared at the NeWorlDeli. They are, in all candor, stories told by writers and so easily adapted to the written word, and the writers reflect on the difference between speaking what one has written and telling a story. The other stories told and heard that night remain with the listeners in mind and heart as memories to be relived with other listeners, but not memorialized in print.

Melissa Wiginton is the vice-president for Education Beyond the Walls at Austin Seminary and principal of the College of Pastoral Leaders.
Every Sunday before worship, the members of my tiny congregation cooked breakfast for whoever showed up. It started out with just pancakes and coffee, but their hearts were too tender for the ragged crowd that responded to the invitation emblazoned on the large vinyl banner bungeed to the Christian education building: Come and Be Fed. Soon they were serving a full meal, complete with sausage, donated pastries (some staler than others), and reconstituted orange drink. The neighbors didn’t like the program; they didn’t like the church to be such a magnet for “transients” (the word preferred by the local government because it allowed them to pretend that the many homeless residents were simply passing through).

I loved the program—sort of. I realized early on in my tenure as pastor that I only theoretically loved ministry with the “least of these” (the word preferred by the Bible because it reminds us that God will turn everything upside down). In reality, I was intimidated and set on edge by the crowd. In my defense, I’d been given a few good reasons to feel this way. A few regulars all-too-regularly harassed me, and one briefly stalked me. I took to making an appearance at the breakfast and then slipping off to my office to tinker with my sermon. Thankfully, the volunteers from the congregation did not share my unease. They were kind and hospitable and, when necessary, appropriately firm.

R___ was a regular at the breakfast. He had the shaggy sun-bleached hair and leathery skin of a man who had no place to lay his head. He also had a trumpet slung on his shoulder by a rope made out of empty latex balloons. He sounded it loudly and often. After word got out that he had been issued a ticket for playing The Word Made Flesh

Katherine Willis Pershey

Katherine Willis Pershey is the associate minister of the First Congregational Church in Western Springs, Illinois. A graduate of Claremont School of Theology, Katherine previously served as the solo pastor of South Bay Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Redondo Beach, California. She was one of the founding editorial board members of Fidelia’s Sisters, a publication of The Young Clergy Women Project. In addition to writing a personal blog, she is the author of Any Day a Beautiful Change (Chalice Press, 2012), a contributor to the Christian Century, and a storyteller for A Deeper Family. She is a member of Reverent Writers cohort.
Star-Spangled Banner on the pier without a permit, our music director had an idea: let’s invite R___ to play in worship. He accepted the invitation enthusiastically, and soon thereafter played a lovely (if out-of-tune) rendition of “Amazing Grace” for the prelude.

R___ became a regular in worship, even when he wasn’t in the bulletin. Within the year, he informed us that he wanted to join the church and get off the street. I set about researching his options; whenever I had a lead, I’d wander through the park where I could usually find him sleeping beneath a tree. When a church member uncovered a local program that offered exactly the services he needed, I drove him to his intake session. I was pregnant, and completely at ease.

After R___ settled into a group home a half hour away, church members took turns driving out to pick him up for worship. Almost a year after he joined, he presented me a gift during worship: a brand new silver trombone. His roommate’s family owned a music shop, and he wanted someone with whom to play duets during the offertory. I’d played trombone in the high school marching band and not since, and certainly never expected it to become a part of my ministry. After a few months of playing scales to retrain my embouchure, we played our first duet. We played our last duet during the service celebrating the 100th anniversary of the congregation.

This is where I wish the story ended. This makes such a great story, doesn’t it? But the story does not end on the high note of redemption. That 100th anniversary celebration happened shortly after R___ inherited money, and shortly before I left to become the pastor of a different congregation. Falling into money was just about the worst possible thing that could have happened to R___. I do not know all of the details, and even if I did it wouldn’t be my story to tell. But all of his progress was abruptly undone in a frenzy of self-sabotaging decisions. As for the congregation, their slow decline has accelerated greatly. I knew it was coming, and indeed part of my need to leave was my sense that there were some crucial decisions that could not be made so long as I was there. Still, their demise breaks my heart. I loved them, and though I am bound by the awkward role of being their former pastor, I still love them.

I do not know what will become of R___. I do not know whether the church will die gracefully or with acrimony. But I believe in resurrection. I believe that God is working, that there will yet be the new heaven and new earth prophesied by our sacred scriptures.

And I hear the final push for redemption begins with the sound of a trumpet.

That’s the story I told when it was my turn at the NeWorlDeli microphone ... more or less. It didn’t quite come out that way. And I am surprisingly at peace with this.

I am a writer. Indeed, the vocation of pastoral ministry first caught my attention when I realized that being a preacher could encompass being a writer. I am
unsurprisingly very dependent upon my sermon manuscripts, though I take pains not to appear so. I compose with an ear for the oral, and enlarge the font enough to see by merely glancing down at the page, freeing me to not merely read but deliver the words. Accordingly, when I signed on to tell a story publicly, I planned to flagrantly ignore Mark Yaconelli’s request that the stories be told sans notes. When Mark pushed back, I protested mightily. I told him about how the only time I really get nervous during worship is when I share the announcements, because I do them without a manuscript. I boasted that I am so good at my large-print manuscripts that you’d never know I’m cheating anyway. But most importantly, I swore that the words themselves were just too important to leave them fluttering around in my head. How could I guarantee that I would find the right words if I hadn’t wrestled them into the proper order ahead of time?

I finally agreed to tell the story without a manuscript, though I did so with no small amount of fear and trembling. And, okay, griping. (Thanks for putting up with me, Mark.)

The story came out in fits and starts. Superfluous details snuck in. Phrases that I’d loved on the page eluded me. At one point, I couldn’t think of the word I wanted to say and queried the audience; they graciously supplied it. Instead of pacing the story into tidy paragraphs, always anticipating the proper tone for each pre-planned sentence, I told the story with utterly uncalculated feeling. As I neared the end of the story—where the redemption unravels— I found myself pressing my palms against my cheeks in an awkward but authentic expression of grief. It was messy and imperfect and very much alive.

I do not see myself forsaking my beloved manuscripts anytime soon. I think there is value in the meticulous syntax and careful theology I can only attain on the page, and I trust that the Holy Spirit can work through ink. But telling a story like this was like grasping hands with the Word Made Flesh.

Exhilarating.
The Good Samaritan Fund, Jonathan, and Me

Jenn Moland-Kovash

I started my story by saying, “Every year between Christmas and New Year’s my husband, son, and I travel to Minnesota to visit family.” The Minnesotans in the restaurant whooped and clapped, and I grinned with that familiar state pride. We’re fiercely loyal to our state, a virtue not unique to Minnesotans, I understand. Then I continued, “And every year while we’re gone, and before the tax write-off deadline passes, someone writes a check for $25,000 to the congregation’s Good Samaritan Fund. Over the coming year, it is my sole responsibility to disburse those funds to the community in need.”

I wasn’t sure how confessional my story was when I first suggested to Mark that I tell this particular tale. When I have shared other stories that come from this role, people ask, “Where are you in the story? I’d love to know more about you and what you’re feeling as you interact with these people.” Part of my invisibility is intentional—these aren’t always my stories; they are the stories of the people who come to me, desperate in their need. But the question is well taken, and for an evening of storytelling under the headline “Pastoral Confessions,” I knew I needed to show up in this story.

That’s the thing that I discovered about telling this story, though, as opposed to writing it down: When I was on the small corner stage of a restaurant on Guadalupe, I couldn’t help but show up—even if I wasn’t sure where in the story I fit. When I write, there is distance between my bleeding heart and the page; I can dry my tears and blow my nose before I print the pages. Standing before my newly met friends and colleagues, as well as some complete strangers, there were mere inches between the story and the microphone—and that felt like miles compared to how close the crowd was to my heart.

So I took a deep breath and continued with this story, a story that became mine again for the first time:

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The Art of Storytelling

In the back of my mind, there was a kid who stopped by to see my colleague when he was administrator of the Good Samaritan Fund. I could tell the kid was a force without even speaking to him. Short and wiry, tattooed arms, a star stamped on his neck, he moved with energy—nervous or purposeful, I couldn’t tell. He only glanced at me, a distraction on the way to his goal, as he walked into my colleague’s office and closed the door.

When he left with a check in his hand, I stuck my head in Len’s office.

“Are you ok?”

“Yeah, that’s just Jonathan,” he responded. “Oh, he’s harmless.”

And that was the last time I’d thought about Jonathan until last year—nearly six years later—when a young woman came in looking for help with rent. She carried a squalling and squirmy toddler in her arms, and presented me with a story about a job that did little to contribute to the bills. She just needed a little help, a few hundred dollars. So I helped her, printing the check in my office and signing my name as I told her that I hoped things changed for her—that she would be in my prayers.

When she left, I searched my records; her last name had seemed familiar. She was Jonathan’s sister.

He showed up about a week later. He needed help with a repair on his truck so he could get to work. He just needed this one thing. So I helped him, again printing the check and telling him how I hoped this would be the thing that made him get back on track and that he would be in my prayers.

And then he showed up again. And again. And again.

His stories were always complex. Something else happened to his truck. Or he needed gas to get to the good job that was four hours away. His wife would leave him if he didn’t get that job. And I helped him. Again and again and again.

In less than a month I gave him nearly $2000.

Overseeing this assistance fund can make me feel like I’m making a difference in people’s lives; at the same time I can feel like a newly born sucker. Confessing to a group of pastors who have sat across from their own Jonathans that I gave this kid $2000, I felt more than heard the room collectively gasp. In many congregations that would be the entire budget for assistance. And while part of my story was my skepticism of what Jonathan told me, the other story on stage was my naiveté—I had paid a premium for stories that I doubted.

I started saying, No, when he called, but he didn’t stop calling, his voice full of pleading.

The stories took on a new urgency. His son got sick and was in the hospital. In Houston. Hours and states away. Still I said, No.

My six-year-old son and I went grocery shopping one evening before dinner. We rounded the end of an aisle, busily chatting about recess and the day’s spelling test, and there was Jonathan, a ways down the store, but facing toward us. I felt myself freeze, and then I steered my child into the next aisle.

Jonathan called the next day.
I steeled my resolve to again tell him I wasn’t assisting him. And I did tell him, No. Then he paused and said, “Did I see you the other day in the grocery store, with your son?”

“I don’t know,” I responded, trying to sound light and breezy. “I go to the grocery store, and sometimes I’m with my son.”

“I just want to know: if it was your son who was in the hospital, wouldn’t you want someone to help you?”

“We’re not having this conversation,” I said, “I’m not helping you anymore.”

And then I hung up.

I was desperate to say that if my son was in the hospital, I would not be facing having burned every bridge of relationship I’d ever had. I wanted to yell that I wouldn’t be lying to a kind-hearted pastor. I was aching to say that I would never be in that situation—I have a master’s degree, and no criminal record; I am smart if not entirely financially secure. But even as they bounced about in my head, I hated those words, and I hated myself.
Body of Christ
When you join Lake Nokomis Presbyterian Church, you must tell a story. Technically, this is called, “being examined by Session.” It sounds like this should involve a cold stethoscope and a gown that opens at the back. But we’re small, and not very formal, and we’ll let in just about anybody anyway, so we changed it up a bit.

The first thing we do is rally some good snacks. We line up our baked goods, cider, fancy cheeses, and bars of chocolate along the counter and brew a big pot of good coffee. Then we abandon agendas, reports, and the boardroom table. We relocate to the comfy seats, because in real life being church together feels like sitting on couches side by side with mugs of hot coffee.

Once we’re settled, we take up a single question sent out in advance, such as What is your earliest memory of prayer? Share a time in your life when you experienced God in a mystical or moving way. When has a specific passage of scripture impacted you, and how?

And then the stories begin. As we listen, we see our own stories woven together with the people we are welcoming and with the people we’ve known for decades.

Before we pray and descend on the snack table, I get to say to these new folks, something wonderful like, “As you come into this community, not only will this congregation impact your life, but you will change the community. Your own passions, gifts, struggles, dreams, losses, and joys will shape the life we share together, and will help form the ministry and calling of this congregation. By the Holy Spirit,
who binds us together, as our stories intertwine and journeys unfold, we will all be changed.” Amen!

**Resurrection**

A few months before Easter, I contact a handful of folks: Would you be willing to reflect on where you have known resurrection in your life? How have you experienced hope from despair, life out of death? It doesn’t have to be big and dramatic, I say, because we all have stories of resurrection. What is one of yours? And, then, would you consider sharing for our Stories of Resurrection Service?

I always get a few “No thank yous” to sharing publicly, which, without fail, give me a chance to affirm the faith of these sisters and brothers expressed in other ways. I also get some delicious, “I’ve never really thought of my life in that way. I’m not sure I would know what to say. Could we talk about it?” Those are my favorites. Those inevitably mean coffee (and usually some kind of pastry) and a lovely conversation exploring together the presence of God in extraordinary and ordinary ways in someone’s life.

When Stories of Resurrection Sunday comes, we have three people lined up to share 3-8 minute stories. At least one of them is usually a surprise to folks, Wow! I never saw them as an upfront, sharing type! We hear the gospel in three different voices, refracted through the lens of three different lives, often with words and images that might never appear in my preaching, but which connect deeply with people. Before we sing our hymn, I stand beside this person and invite us all to lift them in gratitude. I thank God for their story, and for the resurrection hope that we witness in their lives.

People tell me every time how grateful they are for this service, and I watch these peoples’ stories become a sacred and shared text in our community.

**Baptism**

One day we gathered for a very different kind of storytelling. The communion table was left conspicuously open, the cup and platter in one back corner, a couple of candles in the other. A big, soft chair, with a homemade quilt over it and a puffy footrest sat in the center of our space, flanked by rocking chairs and pews forming an intimate circle, the font on one end, the table on the other.

People came in with tissues in their pockets or purses; some couldn’t bring themselves to come at all. Most entered timidly, quietly, apprehensively. Then she came in, walker slowly pushed in front of her. She was guided to the special seat, her feet propped up on the plush cushion.

“Welcome to our ’Keeping the Faith Ceremony,’’ I said. We acknowledged that our dear sister’s life was coming to an end, and we had been blessed beyond measure to share it with her. We read scripture and sang a hymn. We prayed and then the time came for us to fill the table. And we did. People brought items—trinkets, jars of jam, silly gloves, magnets—that had stories attached to them, sharing memories of her. One person brought 8 mm footage of a family celebration, ending with
our guest of honor forty years earlier cheekily dancing at the camera. Some brought flowers; a few brought “just myself and my words.” Some merely stood and said how deeply they loved her, and that the rest of what they had to say was in the note in the basket by the door.

We gathered around and laid our hands on her. We prayed for peace and God’s presence, we poured out our gratitude for her life and our sadness to be losing her. We anointed her with oil and blessed her, just as she was anointed at her baptism, claimed by God and marked as Christ’s own forever. We hugged her and returned to our seats to listen to sweet sopranos singing, “May the Lord bless you and keep you …”

And then it was over. Except nobody wanted to go. We lingered nearly an hour. Someone rustled up some cookies and someone else made coffee. We placed them with a jug of cider and some paper cups on the communion table, and lingered in the sacramental fellowship of love, the sacred space held by the Spirit of God. In the shadow of death, we will fear no evil. For Thou art with us.

Two weeks later she died; her baptism was complete. We held in sacred gratitude that day we had spent with her, celebrating how her story is forever woven into our own.

Being church together means seeing each other’s story as glimpses of God revealed. And it is a sacred, blessed, and wonderful business, indeed.
The Art of Storytelling

Give Me a True Story Any Day

Kristin Saldine

When I’m looking for a good story I turn on the radio, because I’d rather listen to stories than read them. I’m drawn to the human voice. I prefer stories of ordinary life spoken in an authentic voice. It’s old fashioned, I know, to listen to sound from box that has an antenna and a tuning knob. But I love the anticipation of turning the dial to just the right frequency at just the right time to hear the beginning of a good story. I’ll listen to a podcast in a pinch, but I can take my radio anywhere—no need for electricity or Wi-Fi. My favorite story program is “Story Corps,” a national oral history project in which people record and share stories of their lives, all archived at the Library of Congress. The stories are short, poignant, and reflect a broad spectrum of human experience. I also enjoy “Selected Shorts,” a program of short stories interpreted by gifted readers. When I can, I listen to The Moth on podcast. The Moth is an organization dedicated to the art of storytelling (their motto: “true stories told live”). On the Internet, I’m a sucker for TED talks.

Besides hearing stories, I like to see them. I’m a fan of documentaries—again, life stories told in authentic voices. Last spring I attended the South by Southwest film festival and saw over twenty movies in nine days, most of them documentaries. A good documentary tells a surprising story with passion, power, and relevance. I watch documentaries when I want to be inspired, outraged, amused, or informed.

As for reading, I’m drawn to non-fiction. I’ll read short stories (authors Alice Munro and Ron Carlson come to mind) but I gravitate to well written, in-depth nonfiction that unfolds with depth and complexity. Some recent reads include works from Natalie Angier, Laura Hillenbrand, Erik Larson, Tim Weiner, Jeffrey Toobin, and my longtime favorite, John McPhee. An aural learner, I enjoy listening to audio books. I find that reading and listening to nonfiction helps my own writing and storytelling. When you think about it, sermons are nonfiction—they seek to tell the truth about how our human stories intertwine with God’s story.

Kristin Emery Saldine is associate professor of homiletics, having joined the faculty in 2006. Prior to her appointment, she was minister of the chapel and associate director of the Joe R. Engle Institute of Preaching at Princeton Theological Seminary. She is a teaching elder in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Her academic interests include what she terms a “geo-rhetorical homiletic,” an interdisciplinary method through which theology, visual rhetoric, and geography provide a means to understand the contextual and imagistic power of preaching. Dr. Saldine’s publications include contributions to the Abingdon Women’s Preaching Annual and the Feasting on the Word and Feasting on the Gospels (forthcoming) commentary series.
Rhetorician Walter Fisher argues that human beings are *homo narrans*, essentially storytellers who live in a narrative framework. Some of the best storytellers I’ve heard are in the congregations I’ve served. I remember a mentor telling me once that the best way to overcome sermon block is to go calling on parishioners. People have amazing life stories to share. I don’t include those stories in my sermons, but I often return to my writing desk with my creativity sparked and memory stirred. Like the stories in the Bible, their stories help me make the theological connections between the living Word of Scripture and our everyday lives.
Within my discipline of biblical studies, a premium is placed on museums and archives as places for discovering the story behind biblical texts. As Michel-Ralph Trouillot argues, archives do not simply exist as spaces from which historical truth can be discerned, they are part of the very constitution of knowledge that determines how the true story is to be known. Hence, it is assumed that without an adequate amount of archeological data or extra-biblical resources by which to compare, no “true” story can be ascertained from the biblical text. Museums and archives, therefore, emerge as not just preservers of facts but as institutions that fashion stories. Indeed, these stories are shaped by the values and perspectives of those governing each particular museum and archive. Through the processes of appraising, collecting, and preserving artifacts and documents, one story is privileged over against another. Often the experiences and voices dismissed from museums and archives are the stories of those poor and disenfranchised in our society.

Rather than only use official museums and archives to ascertain the story behind the biblical text, I also try to affirm grassroots stories that lie outside of the purview of the archive. For example, I gain rich insights into the migratory stories in the Old Testament through borderland ballad songs and Mexican narrative paintings about immigration (http://mmp.opr.princeton.edu/). Indeed, the oral arts and other cultural forms of expression set my storytelling landscape to a different frame of reference. Listening to the everyday struggles of contemporary widows in nursing homes helps attune me to the flesh and blood story of widowhood in the biblical text. Accessing the grassroots stories of common people requires a trip not to the local museum and archives but to poor and marginalized communities. By entering these communities with a posture of humility, I am granted access to a manifold of “unofficial” stories of faith, survival, and struggle.
The Art of Storytelling

Stories for Talking Back

Song-Mi Suzie Park

When I tell people what I study and teach—the Old Testament—many are initially quite surprised. An Asian woman does not really seem the type to be involved or interested in literature stemming from the ancient Near East. What could she possibly have in common with these stories? Oddly, what drew me to the Old Testament—and what draws me to any story—is the way in which it mysteriously talks to me and allows me to talk back.

Martha Nussbaum states as much when she writes in her book, *Love’s Knowledge*: “We do ‘read for life,’ bringing to the literary texts we love … our pressing questions and perplexities”(29). In other words, the best stories are those that open up space to engage with our issues and queries anew; those that allow and induce a conversation.

The conversations may and indeed do vary. Like friends, depending on the mood and context, we prefer one kind of story to another. Sometimes we want to be comforted by a soothing, happy, optimistic voice. At other times, we want to indulge our darker side and feel depressed or deep. Sometimes we read stories to forget, and other times to be reminded of something. Sometimes we read them to be told the hard truths; at other times, to be told that things are going to be okay. But no matter the type, we go to them because we see ourselves in them—because, in some way, they talk to us and help us make sense of our world.

As a biblicist, and as someone who studies the Old Testament in particular, I have to admit that the Old Testament is where I start. It is the text with which I am the most familiar and which I encounter every day. Luckily, it contains not one story but truly a library of stories for the variety of moods that strike. But when I don’t feel like being so serious, I admit I love reading the weird news section of the news blogs on the web. No story is more conversation-inducing and more truthful than real life.

Suzye Park joined the faculty as assistant professor of Old Testament at Austin Seminary in 2011. Previously, she was visiting professor of religion at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. She completed her PhD at Harvard in 2010, writing a dissertation that traced the development of stories about King Hezekiah in the Hebrew Bible. Her primary research interest centers on the literary and theological interpretations of the Old Testament. In particular, she is concerned with the ways in which biblical literature reflects historical, ideological, and theological struggles, especially as they relate to the politics of identity.
 Surprise Endings

David F. White

What are good stories and where do we find them? First, a good story has certain features that distinguish it from mere chronology, which is simply an account of what happened next. Among other things, a good story presents a drama—a conflict between two individuals or entities or values—that is eventually resolved in one way or another. In great stories, as Greek tragedies, such conflict illumines character flaws or virtues. If the story is told well, the situations are so richly described that those hearing the story sympathize with the characters—and the story becomes a mirror in which we see our own lives, dramas, flaws, and virtues.

I believe some people, perhaps due to genetics or family culture, are simply better suited as story tellers. My wife, Melissa, is such a person. She experiences the world narratively. For example, when we are dining out, I merely see a couple sitting at the next table; but she sees a heartbroken ingénue and an ambitious Wall Street banker who are having a romantic breakup. I see discrete entities; she sees texture, relationship, emotion, and causality. In fact, she is so intrinsically curious about other people that often she comes home from trips telling about people she met on the plane or with whom she struck up a conversation while ordering yogurt in the terminal. When watching a movie, not only does she attend to the staged drama, but she also wonders about the actual lives of the actors—"Are she and Brad married yet? I wonder what their children are like? I heard the youngest has been ill. Do you think their work is fulfilling? I heard he once thought about going to seminary. Do you think they are happy? He looks a little sad to me."

I have another friend, Mark Yaconelli, who, like Donald Miller in his book A Million Miles in a Thousand Years: How I Learned to Live a Better Story, is convinced that the art of living involves being able to experience and express your life as a

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good story. He is also convinced that the story of Jesus Christ strategically intersects his own story/life; hence he is always, like Jesus, looking for the story with a surprising ending. Therefore, when we are together he recounts stories, such as the time he threw a “surprise wedding” for a friend, or the time he walked through a blinding Oregon snowstorm to declare his love to his future wife, or the time he and a teenage friend decided to give away all their possessions, just to see what would happen.

If Dorothy Bass is right when she insists that Christian practices make demands upon us that enlarge our hearts, then the practice of storytelling demands that we attend closely to the world around us and comprehend the drama that is at the heart of living and how God is hiding there—always alert to surprise endings. This is all to say when seeking good stories it helps to have a few very odd friends. They are my teachers.

The College of Pastoral Leaders is an association of church leaders committed to learning in community, over time, for their own flourishing in ministry and the sake of the Gospel. Through this two-year program, Austin Seminary offers pastors resources to enliven, invigorate, and sustain the life of ministry.

Cohort groups are admitted to the College once each year. Applications for admission are available on March 1 and must be submitted no later than May 15. The application is available on the Austin Seminary web site, austinseminary.edu/cplapplication.
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