

PROJECT APPROVAL FORM

EMMANUEL CHRISTIAN SEMINARY  
Johnson City, Tennessee

The undersigned committee members agree that *Laura Ann Buffington* has satisfactorily completed the project requirement and has satisfactorily passed the oral examination for the *Doctor of Ministry* degree.

We agree that the two copies of the project are satisfactory as they are herewith submitted.

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*SACRED STORYTELLING AT SOUTHBROOK CHRISTIAN CHURCH*

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Emmanuel Christian Seminary

**Sacred Storytelling at SouthBrook Christian Church**

A Project Submitted to  
the Doctor of Ministry Faculty  
in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Doctor of Ministry

by

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March 2019

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## Storytelling and Spiritual Conversations

Right now, storytelling is a buzzword in creative spaces, corporate culture, educational initiatives, and social movements. Physical sciences and social sciences are issuing studies on the power of narrative to move us and hold us together. The research affirms what we know from sitting around our kitchen tables or coffee tables: storytelling connects us to ourselves, each other, and larger crowds. Narratives tap into our hope that there is a meaningful beginning and end to our lives with some order along the way. They help us find roles to play and words to use.

Over the past five years, I have been a part of a company that teaches storytelling methodologies, primarily for the purpose of communication. We teach the leaders of non-profits, for-profit companies, and a range of people who want to use stories in their work how to construct a personal story. The intention of the workshop is to help people learn the basics so they can translate them into public speaking, marketing, or creative projects. After teaching a number of these workshops, I noticed how often they become a space for working out not only the telling of stories, but the meaning of stories. During one workshop, a woman who works as the Human Resource Manager for a Fortune 500 company told a story about her family's immigration from Pakistan to the United States when she was a young girl. She remembered someone on the flight giving her gum. She also recalled numerous occasions when neighbors called the authorities on her family with suspicion of terrorism. She says the reporting officers often gave her gum to comfort her during the process of interrogation. She wove those accounts into a story about why she does not chew gum now, but also what it is like for a child to deal with the fears of a racist society.

In addition to whatever tangible takeaways workshop participants get for their work, they often reflect on how the workshop can help them move through the world in a different way.

Spending time with their stories helps them to pay attention to what their lives mean. The workshop has also had effects on how people work together, offering them an occasion to connect with the people in their shared space.

Watching the effects of the workshop led me to questions about how storytelling could contribute to the life and mission of the church. Storytelling has always been present in the church but it has been underutilized. There have been seasons when a church might host a night of “testimonies,” allowing people to give voice to how God has worked in their lives. But even when this was a part of a church life, it was relegated to the arena of Sunday nights, or Wednesday night specials. Though the word “testimony” has fallen out of favor, many churches have found a way to keep storytelling alive, letting people share their story through an edited video or as an interview subject complementing the primary message of the Sunday morning. However, testimony, or story, is sometimes seen as a decorative element, rather than the primary work of the people of God.

As the church weathers the storm of partisan politics, competing ideologies and lower attendance, could storytelling give people the tools to connect the story of God to their lives and the lives of the people around them? Since I also have occasional opportunities to teach in Christian spaces, I have developed a Sacred Story workshop using some of the same storytelling principles to help people tell the story of their life with God. I’ve been able to do this in rooms filled with high school students, college students, and adults. Every time, I’ve watched the exercise connect people and draw out meaning for them. The driving question of my project is: How can storytelling help people begin and participate in spiritual conversations?

## Project Trials

After two years of teaching the principles of storytelling, I started to experiment with story training in faith-filled environments. In preparation for this project, I developed content that drew out the role of narrative in the Bible and the ongoing work for the people of God to raise their voice in the great assembly. The content had a dual purpose: to help people see the way God might be operating in their own life and to help them find the words to talk about it. I used some introductory principles of storytelling as the outline for a two-day retreat for junior high and high school students in Chandler, Arizona. We talked about the stories in the Bible, how many of the primary figures had a “before” life, followed by an encounter with God, and then the life that came after that encounter. We talked about how important it is to be able to see how God works, to know the story, and then to live like you are a part of the story God is telling.

At the end of the retreat, the students were given a picture of themselves and encouraged to write their own story, even if it was just in a few words. On one side of the paper, they were to write about something in their life that felt like a struggle to them, whether it was something they had overcome or something they wanted to understand or experience differently in the future. On the other side, they could write a word or a few words on what it was like, or what it could be like, if God was a part of the struggle with them. It was admittedly difficult for students whose lives have not been tested yet to understand the way narratives and lives shift over time but hopefully it set the stage for them to contextualize the stories of their future.

The exercise took on greater meaning for a retreat I led for the women’s ministry of Sunbury Christian Church in Sunbury, Ohio. The content was generally the same, with a few more nuances than the student version. It was easier to assume in this crowd that they had a fully developed “Before” story, some moment of an encounter with God, or a transforming moment

that got their attention, and a story of what life felt like afterwards. After presenting the content and giving them time to talk about it in small groups, I also encouraged them to write their own story. As a group exercise, I also had them write their own story on poster boards, using one word to encapsulate their “before” story and another word on the flip side to tell their “now” story, capturing how an encounter with God had shifted their story. They shared their stories with the larger group. Many of the stories were about healing from shame, the way forgiveness had shifted their self-understanding. Some of them got more specific about their experiences, even with limited words, and conveyed their battles with fertility or motherhood. Some told stories of grief, or mental illness. Some of their “now” stories reflected healing, or dramatic changes, while others reflected stories-in-progress, the tension of how our painful stories last longer than we want them to. As I watched them reveal their stories, I saw the way stories could connect people to their own experiences and to each other.

I had another opportunity to develop the material with a group of women in a Catholic church in Cincinnati, the St. Monica-St. George Parish. This was a more polished version of the workshop with a fuller story structure and with the participants meeting in groups throughout the morning to tell their stories with as many words and details as they wanted to share. Though they did not share their stories with the full crowd, I watched as the groups shared them with each other through tears and laughs and consolation. At the end of the three hours, many of the people wanted to stay longer to finish telling and reflecting on their stories. I explained to them that this workshop was also a work in process and much of their feedback helped shape the workshop into its current format. They affirmed the value for them of having a story structure to work out the events of their life. They were also very vocal about how valuable the workshop had been in connecting them to people that they saw on a regular basis but did not know very well. Many of

them also felt empowered by thinking that their own story might be a source of strength and wisdom for other people in their parish or their circle of influence.

### The Project and Church at SouthBrook

The final form for this project was a three-hour interactive space to work on a story and to talk about the story with others. The workshop presents material on the basics of narrative, the role of narratives in Scripture, and the best practices on communicating in narrative. The hope is that people will work with a singular story of their life and learn the principles for how to tell the larger story of their whole life so far. As they work out the story, they offer and receive feedback from the people around the table with them. At the end of the workshop, they are invited to share their story around the table.

The primary research question of this Doctor of Ministry project is whether storytelling tools can help people start spiritual conversations. The emphasis in the workshop is on both a framework for stories and a methodology. In a world where less people are interested in attending a formal worship service, there is a greater need for the people of God to be able to articulate the Gospel in new environments. Can storytelling be authoritative in spaces where people used to be accustomed to preaching? While many decry the decline in church attendance over the last years, the moment could also be a time for the redistribution of church authority, as more people find a voice to describe what faith feels like, perhaps more people will hear God at work in the stories of their friends. Stories can be a less direct way of helping people order their lives. They can be subversive, expanding people's imaginations and understanding without having to work through their defenses. They are an invitation to place ourselves in the lives of other people, fictional or otherwise. Stories can convict and counsel, inspire and enlighten. A well-told story, in any medium, can create a moment of decision in a listener, where they have to



decide if the story has anything to do with their own life. The workshop teaches the basics on narrative structure with an emphasis on how that structure shows up in both the stories of scripture and the wider culture.

A secondary issue is the question of whether story training can help people to see the ways God might be active in their lives. Storytelling is being heralded right now as a medium for emotional growth and relational connection.<sup>1</sup> Anecdotally, there is a long history in the church of “testimony” as a way of seeing the work of God. There are consistencies in the way narrative works and using those frameworks to interpret the events in our own lives can provide meaning to us.

There is also much to be said about the way narrative connects us to each other. In a world where people are slow to listen, stories can tap into our inherent curiosity about the lives of other people. We may not lean in to listen to arguments, but we seem wired to listen to stories. As more people describe the way life and faith has felt to them, or the way God has worked around them, we gain a greater understanding of what it feels like for other people to walk around in this world, and to walk in the Spirit.

In order to determine the effectiveness of the workshop, I chose a group of people for one-on-one interviews following the workshop to describe the experience and to give voice to what they may have gained from the time. The questions were open-ended to allow for the same kind of possibilities that storytelling itself allows. The hope is that participants would feel free to articulate the obstacles they felt or the ones they may have overcome. I also asked them to share any insights they may have gained about their own spiritual formation, hoping that the mere

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<sup>1</sup> For example, both the StoryCorps project and The Moth are non-profits with international influence dedicated to helping people change their worlds through the telling of their personal stories.

addition of a story structure would draw out evidence for them of God working in their lives. I also asked whether or not the workshop left them feeling more equipped to participate in spiritual conversations.

In addition to the interviews, I also invited workshop participants to send me their written stories. I did not make this a requirement. I received 23 stories from the 80 participants, nearly all of them within a week of hosting the workshop. The stories gave me a chance to review the subject matter of the stories, to look for recurring themes, and to explore the way people talked about God as active in their lives. The exchange of stories also added a layer of communication between myself and the participants as many of them added notes or feedback to the stories they sent in.

When it came time to host the workshop at the church I served for several years for this project, I was particularly interested in how storytelling might empower people to lead and participate in spiritual conversations. SouthBrook Christian Church, near Dayton, Ohio is a church of 5,000 and their primary stated mission is to reach out to “dechurched skeptics.” The church is largely dependent on their weekend experiences to fuel the life of the church. This makes it an ideal setting to measure whether this expands participants’ understanding of authority, and whether they feel empowered to speak about what God might be up to around them. Many of the people in the church are new to faith, or operate as if they are still new. Over the years, the emphasis at SouthBrook has been on inviting people to attend church, rather than encouraging personal evangelism. They have experienced the growth and the challenges of adhering to an attractional ecclesiology, seeing their primary mission to create a place where people can explore faith as observers before they become practitioners.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In recent years, the attractional model has been challenged by the movement to missional models, where churches grow through service and relationships. For a good primer on the difference between attractional and

Attendance at SouthBrook has risen steadily over the last decade but when they have checked in on the spiritual health of the community, the numbers have been less encouraging. In 2012, SouthBrook participated in the Reveal survey carried out by the Willow Creek Church Association.<sup>3</sup> Reveal was a “Spiritual Life Survey” that looked at the personal spiritual practices of the congregation, their satisfaction with the offerings of the church, and how they would self-report their own spiritual growth. In addition to measuring the behaviors and attitudes of each church, the Reveal study also compared each church’s results with the other churches who took the study. The churches were a mix of denominations and geographic homes, joined only by their affiliation and appreciation of Willow Creek’s attractional model. There were several conversations in the realm of church life about the effectiveness of the study, whether churches should allow congregants to prioritize the activities of the church, and whether spiritual life could fit into these metrics. But it did offer churches some hard data on how faith was taking shape in people’s lives and whether their results were comparable to churches that might share their styles and affinities.

The Reveal study measured the personal spiritual practices of respondents, their report on the church’s role in their lives, and their faith in action and gave a score for spiritual vitality to each church. SouthBrook’s overall score was a 66 out of a possible 100, placing them in the lower 50%. The Reveal survey also allowed people to identify with four different stages of faith: Exploring Christ, Growing in Christ, Close to Christ, or Christ-centered. As might be expected in an attractional church, the largest segment of the population identified themselves as Growing in Christ, nearly 45% of the respondents. One in five people answered that they were dissatisfied

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missional churches and how they might synchronize, see Hugh Halter and Matt Smay, *And: The Gathered and Scattered Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Reveal Spiritual Life Survey Report, conducted by Willow Creek Association, September 2012.

with the help the church offered them in their spiritual growth and one in eight reported that they felt “stalled” in their spiritual life. Throughout the report, people mentioned problems with connecting to other people.

There were some key findings from the report that connect to the project at hand: When they were asked how they connected to Scripture, 57% answered that their primary engagement with Scripture happened through a teacher, with only 20-30% engaging the Bible on their own or in small groups. SouthBrook’s numbers were also below average when it came to personal spiritual practices. The survey identified six practices: Bible reading, reflection on the Bible, confession in prayer, prayer for guidance, tithing, and solitude. SouthBrook people scored below average in four of the six practices. When they were asked whether they ever told their story of faith to other people, only 20% of respondents replied yes.

There have been initiatives over the last five years to address these results: an increased focus on discipleship, increased teaching on the spiritual disciplines, and more events designed to get people in smaller rooms together. But several of these issues and scores also reflect the ongoing struggle of attractional churches to make room for the deeper work of spiritual formation. The energy and resources spent on large group experiences limit the potential for more intimate work. The priority is for people to invite people to church, rather than to invite them into their own lives and stories. As culture shifts and more people start to raise questions about the effectiveness of attractional models, it becomes even more important for churches like SouthBrook to create space for these numbers to change. The wisdom they hold about how to draw a crowd and keep its attention has to make its way from the few to the many.

Since one consideration of this project is whether storytelling can help disperse the role of speaking about God, it seems important to note my own relationship with SouthBrook: over

the course of 13 years as a full-time staff member, I played different roles. I was often the “host” of the services, leading through transitions, announcements, and offering. I was a teaching pastor, preaching a few times a year. Behind the scenes of the weekend worship services, I served for several years as the programmer and creative director. I planned and produced creative content, planning song sets, writing dramas and producing media pieces. After several years in that role, I transitioned into a Spiritual Formation Pastor role. In a strange way, I set out to correct some of what I perceived as an overemphasis on the large group weekend gathering by helping the church to think about what our different gatherings were teaching people about what it means to be the church. For instance, I started paying attention to how many of our offerings encouraged passivity. We had very few spaces where people were encouraged to actively participate through conversation, or connection. There were plenty of opportunities for them to physically serve, as support for the weekend services or in the care of the children or students. But our small group and discipleship efforts were lacking.

In the lexicon of SouthBrook culture, the language for spiritual growth emphasizes the 5 S’s: Solitude, Scripture, Service, Support and attention to Significant Events. There are many opportunities for Service, but relatively few places for people to practice Solitude, to learn Scripture, to offer Support, or to process the Significant Events of their lives. As an effort to bring more balance to the spiritual life of the church, I tried to develop and host smaller group offerings, getting people in rooms of fifty to one hundred people for more focused teaching and practice. I developed some self-guided prayer experiences, hosted book clubs, taught a six-week course semi-annually on how to read the Bible, and hosted roundtable conversations on social issues. These experiences showed me that there was a hunger in the church for people to gather in mid-size rooms and to connect with God and each other in meaningful ways. There was at

least a subset of people in the church who wanted to practice their faith in ways that were different from the rhythms and environments that defined the church. In a church that offered a place to explore faith anonymously, there were also those people who wanted to know and be known. In a church that often preached and taught with the lowest common denominators of faith and biblical literacy in mind, there was a crowd of people who wanted to learn more about Scripture than a weekend service could offer. And in a church that was highly invitational, there was the danger of people losing the ability or the drive to invite. There was (and is) also the looming questions in the larger world of the church and society if the attractional church model is setting the right stage for the spiritually curious and questioning to explore faith.

After seeing how a storytelling workshop could help people discover meaning in their own stories, and help them to see value in the stories told across the table, I went into this project to discover whether storytelling could empower people as a practice of spiritual formation that would encourage them to participate in more spiritual conversations. On a small scale, in the room on a Sunday night, I saw a microcosm of how this could work. I saw people come to life as they told their stories and listened to others. I heard the hum in the room go from hesitancy to excitement. I saw people go from introducing themselves to crying and laughing together. I saw people close the night in prayer around their tables. I heard from people who saw God at work in the stories of their past in a way that might affect their futures. And I saw a possible way forward for the larger church wrestling with how to keep the story of God alive and amplified in the wider world.

## A Literature Review

### Stories and Authority

In Psalm 107, the people of God recount the stories of how they arrived at the temple. They describe the perils and rescues that brought them from their everyday life to the moment of meeting with God and God's people for the purpose of worship. The stories all follow the same pattern: a state of distress, a cry to the Lord, a salvation to match the moment, and cause to bless the Lord. The collective celebration of the stories allows the crowd to hear what God has done in other places and in other lives. For each person who sings along, they can reflect on the way God has moved around them and apart from them.<sup>4</sup> While this Psalm reads like a script for an actual worship moment, there are a number of Psalms that outline the call for this: In Psalm 40, the song leader proclaims, "I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation" (Ps 40:9 NRSV). There is storytelling present in the Psalms that reflects the larger emphasis on narrative in the whole collection of Scriptures. The entirety of the Holy Scriptures depends on the idea that a collection of stories of how God moves in the lives of people will reveal to future generations what God is like and how we relate to that God. There are breaks in the action, to record laws, collect songs, track lineage, or teach doctrine, but they serve the larger narrative. It is from a story that we draw out where humans come from, where they might be going, and how they can get there in the company of God.

In *Scripture and the Authority of God*, N.T. Wright proposes that the work of the church is to continue the story of God and likens our work to the writing of a fifth act of a play, with the

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<sup>4</sup> Hans Joachim-Krauss emphasizes the importance of understanding the "Great Congregation" as a key to appreciating the Psalms in *Theology of the Psalms*, trans. Keith Crim (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986).

first four acts centering on Creation, The Fall, Israel, and Jesus.<sup>5</sup> As the church, he argues that we need to know the first four acts intimately in order to finish the story well in our lives personally and collectively. This picture not only illuminates the narrative arch of scripture but draws us into the greater story God is telling. It highlights the way our story completes and continues the story that has already begun. Of course, Wright's proposal comes out of a context in which the church is struggling over how to appeal to the Scriptures for authority. He notes that there has often been a tension between allegorical readings and literal readings. He walks readers through the external forces of the Enlightenment and Postmodernity movements that have altered the way people have understood written authority.<sup>6</sup> The human conundrum of reason and experience is not new, though it continues to take new shapes in our world. His Five-Act model is a way to appeal to the unique way story can operate as authoritative through these changing contexts. This model also gives language to what we see the people of faith in Israel doing when they tell their stories of rescue in the Great Assembly of the Psalms.

In *The Great Emergent*, Phyllis Tickle checks in on how the church is doing at the task of keeping the story of God going in the world. She argues that the church is in the middle of a transformation story of its very own, a cycle that she sees happening every five hundred years or so.<sup>7</sup> She calls readers back to the story of the Great Schism, when the life of the church was threatened by papal battles for power and reborn through the monastic response. She also recounts the story of the Reformation and the effects on both the brand new Protestant movement and the Catholic response. Just as both of these crises were wrapped up in changes happening

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<sup>5</sup> N. T. Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today* (New York: HarperOne, 2013), 122.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-105.

<sup>7</sup> Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 2012), 16.



both inside the church and around the church in culture, she argues that there is a similar opportunity in front of the church right now.

Tickle uses the metaphor of a rummage sale to describe the process the global church is going through whereby we go through our closets and basements, pull out what makes up our life together and decide what still has value and what needs to go.<sup>8</sup> Tickle makes the case that these rummage sales often become necessary because of questions over authority: Who gets to decide what stays the same in the church as the world changes? When there are competing stories about what it means to connect to God as humans, or to represent God as the church, whose story wins? Tickle also uses a picture of religion as a cable that connects humanity to purpose and power. She describes story as the “waterproof casing” or the “shared history—mythic, actual, and assumed—of the social unit.”<sup>9</sup> For this latest “rummage sale,” or the Great Emergence, as she names it, this casing, or shared story, has been under pressure from cultural changes: television, automobiles, more free time, exposure to other cultures and religions.

Tickle also cites the changing views of consciousness, our understanding of what it means to be a person. As our metanarratives have gotten more varied and complex, Tickle cites the importance of personal narratives to hold the church and the faith together. She sees a future for the church that is shaped by new language embedded in our personal stories. She calls this “the song of the vibrating network.”<sup>10</sup> Over the course of her work, Tickle argues that this reliance on story (rather than authority) should sound like a hopeful change for the church, just

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 160.

as the previous “rummage sales” left the church in a healthier position with a lighter load that let it move around the world and time.

Women and people of color, often limited to the margins of power in the church, have been asking questions about authority and raising new possibilities for a very long time. Letty Russell proposes an authority marked by partnership over and above authorities that come through experience or domination.<sup>11</sup> She proposes it as the only possible way forward for feminist theologians and appeals to the metaphor of church as a household to describe how the church might operate. She pulls from the poetic language of Martin Luther King Jr., the New Testament language of bodies and temples, along with the household code language of Ephesians to establish a framework for how to talk about the role church members might play in each other’s lives, with shared resources and wisdom, and no room for any one member to preside over another.

In *Preaching as Testimony*, Anna Carter Florence also takes on the dispersing of authority through narratives, focusing on the history of women testifying to the movement of God in the margins of society. Through the stories of particular women, Florence points to the general rule of how stories can subvert systems. She highlights how women have been able to connect scripture to their lived reality in ways that are unique in the history of homiletics.<sup>12</sup> Florence believes the women who have lived and told their stories are tapping into a different kind of authority: one that is rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures of people getting to know God and describing God’s action in their own lives. She leans into the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur and the biblical work of Walter Brueggemann to make her case that the practice of offering testimonies

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<sup>11</sup> Letty M. Russell, *Household of Freedom: Authority in Feminist Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987), 21.

<sup>12</sup> Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), xx.

is proclamation that invites interpretation. In her words: “Preaching is not just good news; it is making good news.”<sup>13</sup> She argues that the words and stories of women like Anne Hutchinson and Sarah Osborn bring the gospel to life in their communities. They rely on the authority of people seeing their lives and the meaning they speak out of their lives to make inferences about the nature of God.<sup>14</sup> This is particularly important in communities, and eras, where scholarship and resources are limited. She writes: “When you are most powerless in the eyes of the world, you have the greatest authority to proclaim. When you are forbidden to represent the Word, you brush closest to its liberating power.”<sup>15</sup>

Fred Craddock is also concerned with the links between storytelling and preaching in his work, *As One Without Authority*. Like Phyllis Tickle, he foresees a struggle in society over the nature of language and truth and wonders whether sermons will eventually become the stuff of “museum pieces.”<sup>16</sup> Craddock wrestles over the nature of language, whether spoken words will carry much weight in a world with more and more visual mediums and fewer learned auditory learning skills. This concern is prescient, written in 2001, before the rise of social media and the bombardment of words that have altered the way we take in and process words and pictures. But he sees the coming crisis and pushes against the arguments that words rank lower than actions, appealing to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s argument that “Words are deeds.”<sup>17</sup> He believes there ought to be a “theology of speaking,” an understanding of what it means for words to point us toward God and to embody the work of God. He calls for more preachers to do the work that Florence

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<sup>13</sup> Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 88.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>16</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 4th ed. (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001), 14.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

sees in the biographies of the women she covers: to embody the life they describe in their preaching and to let their authority come from the way they live, as opposed to coming only from what they read.<sup>18</sup>

Craddock also begins to describe how preachers might draw this out of the congregation through the use of inductive preaching rather than deductive.<sup>19</sup> By using their own lives as a model, they are showing the congregation what it means to live in concert with Scripture. He is concerned not only with the preacher's integrity but with their role as models the congregation might follow. He wants preachers to lead people through the work they go through themselves, looking for places where their own lives illustrate the truth of Scripture. He sees this as far more effective at engaging a crowd than a more education-based, deductive style. In Craddock's estimation, it is more important for preachers to communicate one deep truth than fifty shallow ones.<sup>20</sup> Overall, his work on authority draws out the need for more imagination and more integration between the stories we read and the stories we tell.

An important work on the interplay between theology and narrative is Frederick Buechner's *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*. As the subtitle gives away, Buechner uses the nuance of story types to breathe new life into what it means to speak of Jesus. This book also underscores his treatment of Scripture in his theological work. His writing mingles the life of humans with the description of God. Buechner skims the surface of literary theory arguing that our talk of God should include elements of tragedies, comedies, and

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 43-62.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 83.

fairy tales.<sup>21</sup> There ought to be uncomfortable truths and unsettling drama, much like tragedies. There should be elements in our stories that are whimsical and unexpected, like comedies. And there should be some notion of the impossible, or the magical, like our best fairy tales. The stories we tell about how God is working cannot be removed from the reality of human lives even as they expand our understanding of what humanity is up to.<sup>22</sup> This work focuses primarily on the work of preaching and how the elements of solid storytelling should serve the proclamation of God's work from pulpits. However, this work also informs the rest of Buechner's body of work, including memoirs where he applies these principles to the telling of his own life story.

Mark Allan Powell also takes on the topic of storytelling and preaching, though he does it through the lens of research. In *What Do They Hear? Bridging the Gap Between Pulpit and Pew*, he considers how social and geographical factors alter the way we hear and tell stories in church. He finds that different groups of people choose to empathize with different characters, and end up drawing various meanings from the texts. In a survey of listeners to the story of the prodigal son in Luke 15, he found that people of privilege, who had been able to fill their pantries for most of their lives, tended to overlook the fact that a famine was going on in the story. They did not consider it a factor in the events of the story. Listeners in Russia, who had known famines in their own lives, noticed the famine and considered it an important enough factor to include the detail in their own retelling.<sup>23</sup> Powell also conducted research in Tanzania on how people heard

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<sup>21</sup> Fredrick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>23</sup> Mark Allan Powell, *What Do They Hear? Bridging the Gap Between Pulpit and Pew* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 15.

the story of the Good Samaritan: people with a greater understanding of poverty understand why the Samaritan must stop. They are more likely to understand it as a story of survival. They know what it is to live in a world without any room for prejudice in the face of life and death.<sup>24</sup>

Powell's work is a reminder that stories invite listeners to bring their own perspective to the story and that the full meaning of stories can only be known when different hearers are also able to become interpreters. This is particularly clear in his research on Mark 7.1-8, where the Pharisees and the scribes chastise Jesus and his followers for not washing their hands before they eat.<sup>25</sup> Powell had people listen to their story and write about what the story meant to them. He found that many pastors connected themselves to Jesus in the story and drew out an interpretation that called them to be more like him. The lay participants connected more with the disciples in the story and drew their meaning out from playing that role. One could argue that all people of faith ought to see themselves in both of the roles and that power plays a part in how we read and interpret the texts. Powell's work highlights the complexity of using narratives in sermons, while also drawing attention to just how important it is that the church allow room for everyone to speak and reflect on the stories of Scripture.

Scripture sets a precedent for God's people to speak the language of story. It may very well be way that the church can speak authoritatively through story in a world crowded with voices. It may be a way for preachers to help the story of Scripture come alive again through pulpits and sermons. Metanarratives and personal narratives may speak specifically into the current crisis of the church. As the church engages a world where people put less and less trust into old-guard authorities, stories can operative in the vacuum of authority. They can describe the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 38-54.

life God wants for people, and people want for themselves, without relying on prescriptive methods. Crisis or not, Scripture paints a picture of a God who loves a good story. There is plenty of precedent in the Bible for story to be the container of language about God. But there is science too. There are reasons why narratives continue to rise to the surface of the conversations about words and authority. And the science of narrative calls the church to recognize that stories belong to people other than the preachers.

### Our Brains on Stories

As storytelling becomes more and more of a social and spiritual touch point, scientists have weighed in on its power. Paul J. Zak records a series of studies he did on oxytocin in his book, *The Moral Molecule*. Oxytocin is a chemical in the body that increases along with the experience of intimacy and trust. Zak used several experiments to test how generosity and oxytocin relate to each other. His experiments give people the chance to give to other people with a rotating list of changing factors that may contribute or negate their generosity and their oxytocin. In one iteration of the experiment, he showed people footage of a father and a young son spending time together without any context and then invited them to give money to this family. He also showed people the same series of images with a story attached about how the young son was dying and the man was unsure how to communicate with his son. When the images have a story with them, people were more generous and their oxytocin increased.<sup>26</sup> Zak studies the connection between narratives, empathy, and action, describing this process as the “virtuous cycle.” We become more generous when story draws this out of us and because of the nature of oxytocin, our bodies are more likely to give and connect when stories are told.

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<sup>26</sup> Paul J. Zak, *The Moral Molecule: How Trust Works* (New York: Plume, 2012), 53.

James W. Pennebaker and Joshua Smyth are also concerned with the connection between storytelling and the body in their book, *Opening Up by Writing It Down*.<sup>27</sup> Their series of studies focuses on the effectiveness of expressive writing to reduce stress and increase people's overall physical and emotional health. They found that writing for several sessions or days in a row regularly had a positive impact on participants. College students who wrote regularly reported fewer visits to campus clinics and doctors. They noticed a significant difference in results for people who wrote in response to prompts that invited them to tell a story as opposed to making lists or writing in any other form. In their estimation, the invitation to write or tell a narrative gave structure to the process and was a determining factor in the differing results between people who told stories and people who made lists. They encouraged people to use the writing exercises to "let go" of difficult life experiences. They also connected their work to the larger data of how the disclosure of painful stories can have physiological effects. The book makes a strong case for how telling and writing stories helps people to process their lives without spending a lot of time or effort on why this might be.

On the other hand, Dan P. McAdams spends most of his words in *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self*, on the "why" of this connection.<sup>28</sup> McAdams offers a very helpful walk-through of how our brains deal with narratives at different stages of development from infancy to older age. He finds that as people age, we are able to grasp stories that offer more detours, more imagery, and more ambiguity. We see more layers to our stories

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<sup>27</sup> James W. Pennebaker and Joshua M. Smyth, *Opening Up By Writing It Down: How Expressive Writing Improves Health and Eases Emotional Pain* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2016).

<sup>28</sup> Dan P. McAdams, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1993).



and we understand their various textures and possibilities. He goes into detail about how narrative can affect people in childhood, late adolescence, and the various stages of adulthood. McAdams sees a particular shift in middle age as more people look for their story to take a generative turn and are concerned with leaving something that lasts beyond them.<sup>29</sup>

His work parallels other studies that focus on human development, psychology, and faith, with a concentration on the lens of narrative. McAdams posits the existence of “Imagoes,” or shadow character roles that we are all trying to fill in the stories we live.<sup>30</sup> These imagoes may be characters that we are trying to play or the actual attributes we take on in different contexts. These personal myths help us initiate and navigate change as we age through life and interact with others. They provide us with script-like language and direction. In all the possible versions of these stories, McAdams believes humans are primarily concerned with two driving forces: agency and communion.<sup>31</sup> He believes we want to feel free to move about our stories but we also want our stories to connect to other people and other narratives. The book incorporates several case studies of how stories are operative in the lives of individuals and how the stories they tell themselves about their lives allow them to change and connect at the same time.

Many of the people writing about the ways narratives help us to live and make sense of living appeal to the ideas of Viktor Frankl in *Man’s Search for Meaning*, his account of surviving life in the concentration camps of Nazi-ruled Germany during World War II. His work is a defining text for the idea that story not only guides us but sustains us. Frankl recounts how the existence of an inner life helped some prisoners to survive: “The intensification of inner life

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 108-113.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 133.

helped the prisoner find a refuge from the emptiness, desolation, and spiritual poverty of his existence, by letting him escape into the past. When given free rein, his imagination played with past events, often not important ones, but minor happenings, and trifling things.”<sup>32</sup> He plays on the famous quote from Friedrich Nietzsche: “He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.” Frankl’s experience in the camps contributes to his own career as he spends the rest of his career developing “Logotherapy,” a focus on meaning-making as a tactic in therapy: “What [a human being] actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal, a freely chosen task.”<sup>33</sup>

The connections between narrative and psychology also have a grounding in the work of Joseph Campbell. Campbell is a mythologist whose work on the shared stories of people looks for patterns to understand our subconscious struggles and desires. His ideas gained popularity largely through the “Power of Myth,” a series of interviews with Bill Moyers that gave voice to the findings in his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell breaks the stories of all cultures down into a series of events he calls, “The Hero’s Journey.”<sup>34</sup> He believes most of the stories we dream, tell and live move through a predictable pattern of death and rebirth. Just as the characters in stories experience shifts in consciousness as they face trials, so do the people who tell and pay attention to these stories. Campbell appeals to biblical stories like Jonah and the big fish, as well as popular movies, and cultural legends to show this pattern. For Campbell, these journeys are all a way for humans to move towards a treasure, which he considers to be a place

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<sup>32</sup> Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, trans. Ilse Lasch (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 38.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>34</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd ed. (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2008), 28-29.

that exists inside of ourselves, only knowable and reachable at the conclusion of the story.<sup>35</sup>

Campbell's work is often used as a filter for understanding stories of the past but it is also often cited as a form for the telling of modern myths and screenplays.

A number of writers have weighed in on how narrative places us in the drama of our own lives. In his work on narrative and theology, Stephen Crites makes a connection between story and another artistic medium: music. He uses the analogy of music to begin to talk about the way narrative can help us place ourselves in time and allows people to express style and meaning. Crites goes on from the analogy to work on the connection between the mundane stories of our lives and the sacred ones, picking up Campbell's work on meaning-making myths. He argues that stories are a way for us to bridge our memories with our present and our future selves.<sup>36</sup> George Stroup cites Crites work on personal narratives in his own attempt to talk about stories and identity. Stroup adds a discussion on conversion and the difficulty of rewriting our understanding of our lives. Stroup warns of the danger of deceiving ourselves in this work and how important community is for a wise interpretation of our own lives.<sup>37</sup> Community is also a key in Alasdair MacIntyre's work on virtue and narrative. He works in the realm of classic dramas from Shakespeare and Kafka to talk about the interplays between authors, actors, and their readers. As he says, "We are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>36</sup> Stephen Crites, "Narrative Quality of Experience," in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, edited by Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1989).

<sup>37</sup> George W. Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology: Recovering the Gospel in the Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997).

<sup>38</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 213.

In recent years, this exploration between mythology, movie-making and spiritual formation has gained a great deal of attention. Donald Miller popularized the potential of this connection in *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years*. He mixes the wisdom of mythology with the techniques of screenwriting, and his own life story to argue for storytelling as a device in spiritual formation.<sup>39</sup> Through the experience of writing his own life story into a movie, Miller makes connections between what it means to tell a good story and how to live a good story.

While Miller's work is written for the consumption of many, this idea is supported by other substantial work also trying to connect the practice of storytelling with the reality of story-living. In *The Physical Nature of the Christian Life*, Warren S. Brown and Brad D. Strawn take an expansive look at the connection between our bodies and the things we might call our "minds" or "souls."<sup>40</sup> They explore this separation we make in both language and practice from the things about our lives we might regard as physical, and the parts of our lives we might attribute to the mental, emotional, or spiritual realm. Brown and Strawn combine the fields of theology, biblical studies, psychology, and spiritual formation to imagine a more integrated understanding of what it means to be people inhabiting bodies alongside other people in bodies.<sup>41</sup> As they write and illustrate in profound ways, there are actions, words, and realities that exist in our bodies and greatly influence our spiritual reality. They attempt to redraw, or rejoin, the truths we have separated into categories. They emphasize the important of attachment theories and how early development contributes to our emotional health. But they also note that we are not limited

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<sup>39</sup> Donald Miller, *A Million Miles in a Thousand Years: How I Learned to Live a Better Story* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009).

<sup>40</sup> Warren S. Brown and Brad D. Strawn, *The Physical Nature of Christian Life: Neuroscience, Psychology, and the Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

by the early experiences of our lives. We are able to reorganize our lives and make meaning from them with our use of language and stories.

In fact, Brown and Strawn argue that the stories of Scripture are filled with examples of people whose early stories might have destined them to certain endings but were able to change. They cite the apostle Paul as someone whose story represents the dynamic nature of people and the tremendous potential for change. In chapter five, they lean specifically into the metaphor of life as a script, citing Pennebaker and Smyth to make case that narrating our own stories contributes to our sense of personhood.<sup>42</sup> The gift of Brown and Strawn's work is that they expand this notion of changing narratives to be operative for the communal body and not just individual stories. They show how feedback and embodied faith in the church can help people to break patterns and restart their stories. They reverberate with the call of Phyllis Tickle and others, concluding that there is a felt necessity for the church to provide alternative narratives to the loudest ones of our culture.

#### Memoirs and Storytelling Resources

If we assent to the need for narratives in the church, and in the lives of people trying to embody their faith, there is a wealth of wisdom to be drawn from the world of writers themselves. Mary Karr, writer of a number of successful memoirs, reflects on what she knows in *The Art of Memoir*. She provides an invaluable resource on how to tell the truth about our lives to ourselves or to an audience. She deals particularly well with issues of memory, whether we should trust our own accounts of our lives, and issues of accountability, whether we should tell the parts of our stories that might be painful for others to hear. Karr sees the work of memoir-writing as a chance to ask ourselves difficult questions and argues that there may be

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 71-87.

breakthroughs in the process: “A curious mind probing for truth may well set your scribbling ass free.”<sup>43</sup> Karr encourages writers to include as many particular details as possible in their stories. Following the trail of details leads to better recall and more honesty: “If I wrote vaguely enough, I risked nothing.”<sup>44</sup> The best memoirists, Karr contends, probe their own motives and intentions. They ask themselves hard questions about their role in their own story.

In *The Trip to Echo Springs: On Writers and Drinking*, Olivia Laing explores the effect this kind of exploration has on professional writers, even writers who disguise their own lives in works of fiction. One of her subjects for study is John Cheever who once remarked on storytelling and healing: “The tonic or curative force of straightforward narrative is inestimable.”<sup>45</sup> But over and over in the lives of famous writers, Laing sees writers using their stories as a way of releasing pain. Many of them describe the process as an emptying, and their drinking as a way to refill after the work is done. Laing finds a pattern of desire and drinking, emptying and refilling. The authors use both writing and alcohol to meet a longing and to restore a sense of wholeness when they feel like the pieces of their lives do not fit. The connection between the catharsis of writing and the refueling of alcohol repeats itself often, perhaps most clearly and particularly in the story of Ernest Hemingway.<sup>46</sup> Though this risk of connecting one form of escape to the other is strong, Laing sees it as a fundamental part of being human: “We are told stories as children to help us bridge the abyss between waking and sleeping... I tell

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<sup>43</sup> Mary Karr, *The Art of Memoir* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), xviii.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>45</sup> Olivia Laing, *The Trip to Echo Spring: On Writers and Drinking* (New York: Picador, 2013), 157.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

myself stories when I am in pain and I expect as I lay dying I will be telling myself a story in a struggle to make some link between the quick and the defunct.”<sup>47</sup>

The novelist E.M. Forster also writes on writing in *Aspects of the Novel*. It is an adapted book from a series of lectures he gave that were a mix of criticism and instruction. Though he is primarily concerned with writing fiction, his work touches on the primacy of story in the human experience and offers some principles for crafting compelling stories. Forster believes stories are a means of survival for humans and cites the story of Scheherazade in “One Thousand and One Nights” as evidence. He recounts the legend of a king who marries a new virgin every day and has her killed as a way to avoid the infidelity he dealt with from a previous wife. When he chooses Scheherazade to be his wife for a day, she insists she have a chance to tell her sister a bedtime story. He allows this but eavesdrops on them. She stops the story midway through, forcing him to let her live for another day so he can hear more of the tale. After 1,001 nights of this same trick, he falls in love with her and lets her live. Forster uses this story to show how telling stories can be a means of survival.<sup>48</sup> He believes there are seven important aspects to a novel: the story, people, plot, fantasy, prophecy, pattern, and rhythm. Forster returns again and again to the importance of movement in stories: “In a novel, there is always a clock.”<sup>49</sup> The element of time, whether explicit or implicit, is what keeps listeners’ attention.

In their book, *New Directions in Teaching Memoir: A Studio Workshop Approach*, Dawn Latta Kirby and Dan Kirby get very practical about how writers can go through the process of telling their own stories, and editing them. They offer a valuable section on potential prompts,

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>48</sup> E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: RosettaBooks, 2002), 26.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 29.

frames, or types of personal stories.<sup>50</sup> They spend a good bit of time on the search for a scheme, as a matter of writing but also as a way of considering our lives. Schemes raise questions and allow people space to find answers or ideas they had not seen before.

A scheme, or a story spine, can become a useful tool in storytelling as a personal or communal exercise. There are a number of resources on this, particularly for those interested in writing the screenplays for movies. One of the most popular ones started as an exercise for use in improvisational theater. Participants would fill in the blanks of this story outline:

Once upon a time there was \_\_\_\_\_. Every day, \_\_\_\_\_. One day \_\_\_\_\_. Because of that, \_\_\_\_\_.  
Because of that, \_\_\_\_\_. Until finally \_\_\_\_\_. And ever since then, \_\_\_\_\_.

For years, the story spine was associated with Pixar films though writers and researchers online could not trace the origin. Finally, Aerogramme Writers' Studio gave credit for its origin to Kenn Adams and allowed him to talk about how the spine worked.<sup>51</sup> Adams considers this spine to be a very simple tool that allows people to add all kinds of complexities and nuances. The simplicity of the tool frees people up to tell complicate stories in a way that matches how our minds work. For the makers of movies, the spine lets them travel to other universes, while maintaining the integrity of narratives. As an exercise in formation, the spine lets people delve into their own complicated stories while giving them simple prompts to deal with difficult truths.

This basic framework for personal stories also shows up in Alan Jones' *Soul Making: The Desert Way of Spirituality*. Jones walks readers through the ways ancient spirituality reflects the learnings of psychology. In a chapter on "The Three Conversions" he posits that the desert fathers and mothers often had to walk through a few seasons of transformation: a conversion of

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<sup>50</sup> Dawn Latta Kirby and Dan Kirby, *New Directions in Teaching Memoir: A Studio Workshop Approach* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2007), 35.

<sup>51</sup> Kenn Adams, "Back to the Story Spine" *Aerogramme Writers' Studio* (blog), June 5, 2013, <https://www.aerogrammestudio.com/2013/06/05/back-to-the-story-spine/>.



knowledge, a crisis of falling apart, and a way of letting go.<sup>52</sup> This language is very useful in walking people through what it means to have faith and to walk with God. It also happens to mirror the wisdom that comes from studying basic mythology and the way of narratives. It is a story scheme that gives people a chance to reflect on what they thought they knew about God, or about the world, how they lost it, and how they may have recovered it over time.

This same journey shows up in Walter Brueggemann's typology of the Psalms as a movement through orientation, disorientation, and reorientation.<sup>53</sup> There is a way people understand God at the beginning of their faith-filled lives, that shifts as they move through doubt or crises, and becomes something new and renewed. This simple arch, in the context of a conversation about spiritual formation can become a way for people to frame their own lives. They can see the shape this has taken and use this language as a way to talk about the events and struggles of their faith. It becomes their way of adding to the choir in the "great congregation" that gets its start in the Psalms themselves. Brueggemann's work on this topic is also in conversation with Paul Ricoeur and his ideas on the way language can be reinterpreted. He proposes that the work of hermeneutics must include a separation of meaning and a reimagining.<sup>54</sup> When we examine our words carefully, we also end up rebuilding our lives. This is the work of those who first prayed the Psalms and those of us who turn to them now.

In 1983, Amos Wilder published a forward-thinking essay also appealing to Ricoeur and to the way narratives can alter our orientation in the world. He argues that narrative helps us to place ourselves in time and has evolved to be as important to our survival as lighting fire or

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<sup>52</sup> Alan W. Jones, *Soul Making: The Desert Way of Spirituality* (New York: HarperOne, 1989).

<sup>53</sup> Walter Brueggemann, "The Psalms and the Life of Faith," in *Soundings in the Theology of Psalms: Perspectives and Methods in Contemporary Scholarship*, ed. Rolf Jacobson (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 6-8.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

hunting. Wilder argues that without stories, whether they are real or imagined, we would experience a type of “dislocation,” an ongoing sense of disorientation without meaning.<sup>55</sup>

Narratives, he says are where we work at more than just our current reality but reality as we hope it to be someday, calling to mind Buechner’s description of the Gospel as fairy tale. Wilder believes we ought to test the veracity of stories but argues that the right stories “transcribe not only the true texture of living but its transcendent horizons and promise.”<sup>56</sup>

Memoirs from spiritual thinkers and leaders model what it looks like to tell our stories in a search for the character and behavior of God. Thomas Merton’s *The Seven Storey Mountain* reads like a travel log, detailing the well-worn trail he carved in the world during the first part of his life, as well as the internal processing he did while going from a wandering life to a monastic one. He offers an accounting of how spiritual practices took him from passion to peace.<sup>57</sup> He gives a description of his internal experience of conversion, inviting others to connect or to look for parallels to their own conversions. In the classic motif of a journey story, he describes the process of returning to old haunts in the world and feeling like a changed person: “I was passing through all this and did not desire it, and wanted no part in it, and did not seek to grasp or hold any of it, that I could exult in it, and it all cried out to me: God! God!”<sup>58</sup> He tells how his restlessness went from an external reality to an internal one, summed up in the most famous line of the book: “How far have I to go to find You in whom I have already arrived.” Merton even testifies to the importance of other people’s stories that helped him make sense of his own, often

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>56</sup> Amos Wilder, “Story and Story-World,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 37, no. 4 (October 1, 1983): 353-364.

<sup>57</sup> Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, 1948), 293.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 349.

referencing other biographies that provided a map for him.<sup>59</sup> We see in his story how writing it led to his own discoveries but also how our stories can become guideposts for others.

Memoirs are also a means for the telling and listening of stories that may not live at the center of the life of the church. Not unlike the history of women uncovered by Anna Carter Florence, storytelling is still a way for people in the margins of society, and the church, to describe what life and faith feels like for them. And gives others the opportunity to listen in. In *I'm Still Here*, Austin Channing Brown tells her story of serving in the non-profit sector as a black woman. She describes the complexities of trying to move between worlds: “The role of a bridge builder sounds appealing until it becomes clear how often that bridge is your broken back.”<sup>60</sup> She recounts her stories of her education, what it was like to sit under the authority of people who did not understand her own experience and what it was like when she became an authority figure who still had to fight to be heard. She is able to write a tribute to her blackness and to the people in the world who have loved and taught her well. Most importantly for the life of the church, she addresses the popular idea of “racial reconciliation” and is able to articulate from her own life why it may be too small of an idea, calling the church and society to deeper confession and action. The application of her story to the life of the church is particular and important but it also magnifies the more general need for more people telling what life is like for them.

These readings informed the rationale behind this project, along with the actual content of the workshop. As I tried various formats along the way, these authors also gave me language for

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 434.

<sup>60</sup> Austin Channing Brown, *I'm Still Here: Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness* (New York: Convergent Books, 2018), 69.

what I saw happening in front of me. They gave me philosophical frameworks for why something as simple as telling stories around tables could tap into such deep wells of meaning for people. Though these books are just a glimpse at the large volume of words about words, they provided enough fuel for a working thesis that story could transform the way churches communicate internally and externally.

## **The Project**

### The Invitation and the Execution

When it came time to host a storytelling workshop at SouthBrook, I knew I wanted the principles of narrative and authority to show up in the introduction of the idea. I wanted to issue an invitation that made it clear that stories were important, and to start communicating right away that the stories living in the seats of the church are as valuable as the stories being told from the stage. I offered the invitation to the workshop in the middle of a sermon on Mark 1.16-20, the calling of the disciples to drop their nets and follow Jesus. The message emphasized that the call to these men was both physical and urgent. It was a call to follow Jesus with their feet and change the way they moved around the world. There was an urgency to the mission of Jesus in the world that left no time for them to properly stow away their nets. I noted that we often read these passages and create distance between their call and ours. We downplay the urgency and physicality of the call on our own lives to follow and embody our faith. Armed with the research on the state of the church and the importance of a connection between our minds and the rest of our bodies, I wanted to make it clear from the invitation that this workshop had an agenda: To equip more people to recognize the work of God in their lives and to tell about it. As a part of the invitation, I also mentioned the looming research on how fewer people are willing to come to rooms in churches to talk about faith so more people will need to be know how to talk about God around coffee tables and happy hours.

I hosted the workshop at the church the following Sunday night in a room filled with roundtables and an ample supply of coffee and snacks to sustain people for a three-hour session. I did have some apprehension about the length of the workshop, especially later in the evening,

after a weekend and right before people have to wake up on Monday to start a new week. But the building is used to its capacity for much of the week and this night was the only window of availability. In addition to the official research questions of the project, I had lingering concerns over whether this experience would adequately represent the wealth of possibility in sharing stories around a table. I was worried about holding a crowd's attention for three hours when they have been so conditioned to show up to the church building for a crafted 55-minute production. Not only does this experience test their endurance, it asks them to be vulnerable in a space where they have been accustomed to anonymity.

It turns out the one thing I did not need to worry about was whether or not people would show up. The church uses an online registration site for people to sign up for classes and to manage the logistics of hosting events like this. When I checked in with them days before the event, there was sixty or so registered. My ideal crowd size was fifty to sixty, enough for there to be an energy and excitement in the room, and enough for me to be able to listen in on some of the conversations around the tables. However, almost ninety people showed up for the workshop. I spent the last few moments before the workshop copying and collating more copies of the simple workbook so that everyone could have a place to write and process. I was thrilled that more people showed up than I expected but it also meant having to spend more energy managing the mechanics of the night.

The larger crowd also forced me to make slight adjustments to the way I gathered feedback and data. I had planned to invite a handful of people to a focus group immediately following the workshop but I knew that might be difficult with a crowd this size. There was the possibility of more people staying than would be helpful, and it would limit my ability to be present and talk to the crowd that had showed up. I also planned to invite some people to share

their story out loud at the end of the workshop and I was no longer sure that we would have time for that or that it would make the best use of everyone's time. In a smaller group, people are usually willing to share by the end of the workshop but this size of a crowd might intimidate some. I decided to eliminate the large group share out at the end and invite people to spend more time listening to the final versions of the stories around their table. People would also be encouraged to share the final form of their story with me through email, if they were willing. I also decided to shift from a focus group to a series of interviews in the days following the workshop.

Since SouthBrook is a larger church, there were only a handful of people in the crowd whose names and stories I already knew. There was another group of people whose faces were familiar to me if not their stories. The room was filled with people of all ages from teenagers to senior citizens. More than half, roughly 55 out of 90, participants were women. I allowed the crowd to self-select where they sat and who they joined around the tables. There were a couple of tables that seemed to be people who knew each other from volunteering together or who had some connection with each other prior to the workshop. Most of the tables, however, were people who were connecting for the first time. The chemistry of the people around the tables can often determine the outcome of workshops like this. My hope is always that there is enough structure to guide the table interaction and enough room for solitary processing that it can still be a meaningful experience even if the chemistry does not line up for a given group around a table together.

One aspect of large church ministry that I have observed before, and was a factor on this night also, is that there is often a segment of the church population who are longing for connection but are not quite sure how to navigate the church system. Events like this offer them

the opportunity to show up and try to make connections with the pastoral staff, or the faces they have seen on the stage of the church. There was a couple who showed up for the workshop with their two young children in tow. As the night progressed, I had a chance to talk with the woman in the couple and learned they were brand new to the church and in a season of crisis. They had showed up to the church that night looking for help. They ended up at a table with a woman I know from the church, Jolene. Jolene graciously used the interactive moments of the workshop to talk with them and gauge how the church might serve them. I also got the chance during one of the interactive periods to sit down with them and pass along the names and groups that were available to serve them in a more sustainable way.

As the workshop got started, it felt particularly important to communicate expectations of how the night would go and to clearly state the “rules” or hopes for the time together. I explained the rhythm of the night, how I would present material and outline how to construct a story and then give them time to work on their story, piece by piece. The workshop is also designed to honor the needs of both introverts and extroverts so every “working” period would include quiet time for people to write in their workbooks, followed by time to process their story out loud around the table. I encouraged people to practice a few basic rules of listening: To be curious, to be compassionate and to practice confidentiality.

After an initial interaction allowing them to introduce themselves and to warm up to each other, I began the workshop with the importance of the narratives in scripture, how the story of God gets passed along through the stories of people’s lives. I also introduced the overall structure of the story we would be crafting. It is a simplified story spine, influenced from the work of Alan Jones on the three stages of conversion: Knowledge, Falling Apart, and Letting Go. I also include a visual with this to help people understand the process: The first stage of conversions



feel like climbing a mountain and gaining heights. The second stage feels like falling off the mountain, and the third stage is like having the abyss open up to become an ocean. We talk about how this pattern is also reflected in the Psalms, using Brueggemann's categories of Orientation, Disorientation, and Reorientation. Of course the pattern is also reflected in the Paschal mystery of Jesus as well: A story of life, death, and resurrection. We also discuss how this very basic story outline is reflected in popular stories we all love and absorb all the time. It is the basic movement of characters through books and movies and television shows. I introduce them to the outline of a story that we will use to build their story, an adaptation of the story spine made famous by Pixar:

Every day, \_\_\_\_\_.  
Until one day, \_\_\_\_\_.  
And now, \_\_\_\_\_.

They fill in the blanks with a personal story of their own choosing. During the first part of the workshop, I lead them through a prayer/meditation exercise that walks them through the stories of their lives. They are invited to remember the details of their early years, the stages of development as they became adults and learned more about the way the world works, the losses and victories that come to their mind when they get quiet. The meditation gives them time to consider what story of their life they need to spend time with. I tell them directly that they may want to tell a story of their faith, about a defining time when something about God became clearer to them, but they are not limited to those stories. It is most important for them to choose the stories that loom large in their memories and catalyzed change in their lives. After some quiet processing and some time sharing around the tables what stories they might tell, we start to fill in the blanks of the story spine one at a time.

In order to fill in each blank, I present some best practices for storytelling then offer them time to work quietly on their own, followed by time to discuss their progress around the table.

They fill in the first blank with a description of themselves at the beginning of the story they want to tell. They are encouraged to make a list of as many details of their life as they can remember. The importance of this work is to be honest about the starting point for the story, so that as they go through the story, they are more likely to see a change, or to see the movement of God. In the language of story, this is a place to describe the stakes of the story. What do they desire? What were the dangers? What did it feel like every day to wake up as yourself during the season of their life when this story starts?

During the second part of the story, they are describing a moment when something changed, when God or life, held their full attention and invited them to change. This could be something beautiful or heartbreaking. During this section of the workshop, I encourage them again to write down as many possible descriptions of this time as they can remember, knowing that every detail may include meaning for them, even if they edit some of those out when they share the story with other people.

During the final section, they fill in the third blank, describing what they learned as they went through this story in their life. What do they know now that they didn't know at the beginning of the story? They are encouraged here to look for threads, or themes. Are there any words or ideas that hold the story together? The important point during this section is how complicated this might be. The ending of the story does not need to be complete resolution or the tying up of all the loose ends. This is different from the way we might think of the last five minutes of a movie or the last pages of a book. There is room here for them to be unsure at the end of the story, as long as they articulate how they are different from the beginning. Is there some added nuance to their understanding of themselves, or others, or God, that they would not know without going through this story?

The interactive nature of the workshop afforded me the chance to watch as the room went through this process. I got to see the people around the table warm up to each other, to observe the silence as they all worked on writing in their workbooks, to note the changes in their faces as they nodded along to each other's stories, and as they went from being strangers to being known. Since the room was larger and fuller than I expected, I could really only observe these changes from a distance and wait to see how the people offering interviews and feedback would describe the experience. As the clock got closer to nine in the evening and the time when I had promised we would be done, I wanted to honor people's time by offering some closing words and giving them the chance to stay and talk longer or to thank the people around the table and head home. After a brief closing on the way words become entities in the kingdom of God and an admonition to share the stories they hold with the world, I waited to see whether they were done with the experience or had more to say to each other. Almost all of the tables stayed a while after the official clock on our time together ran out. Notably, one of the tables was still there thirty minutes after the workshop ended and eventually moved away from the table so that they could sit closer to each other, to hold hands and pray over a woman from the table. I was on the other side of the room, in another conversation, torn over whether to insert myself into their conversation or not. The primary questions of the project internalized in me as I pondered over whether I was responsible to participate in their conversation as the professional pastor in the room or whether to trust my own tenets—that God is active and working through all of us and we are all capable of spiritually caring for each other. I waited around a while longer to see if anyone from the table wanted to talk as they left but they left more concerned with the conversation they were having with each other than needing to talk any more with me. At least in this instance, anecdotally, from a distance, the workshop facilitated a moment when the people

of the church served and loved each other without the authority of the paid church staff showing up and it started with the sharing of their stories.

## **Feedback and Findings**

### Conversations about Conversations

As people were leaving, I was able to invite some people to participate in follow-up interviews about the workshop. I chose five people. They range in age from early twenties to late forties. Two of them have some experience with writing workshops so I trusted their feedback on the effectiveness of the content and the interaction. Three of them have little experience with the format and seemed like good people to speak to whether the workshop increased their confidence in writing and telling stories. They all gave permission for their stories and feedback to be used in the project. All of them sat at different tables during the experience so they could also offer varying feedback on how the project worked around the room. I used four questions as starting points in the conversations:

1. Describe what the experience of going through this workshop was like for you.
2. Did you learn anything new about yourself as you worked on your life story?
3. Can you imagine sharing this story somewhere outside of this workshop?
4. Did this time show you anything new about how God might be present around us?

My hope with each of these questions was that they would operate much like the story prompts, opening up the opportunity for people to talk about the experience and their reactions to it. The first question was designed as an open-ended question in hopes that they would answer with whatever part of the workshop was most meaningful to them. They could focus on their own internal experience or the logistics of the night. They could address social interactions. In most cases, these questions were merely the beginning of longer, tangled, rich conversations about their stories and how God moves. The follow-up questions were designed to draw out the more specific hopes of the project. Since some of the participants and interviewees already have some exposure to writing workshops, for the second question, I was looking for any original

learnings or growth they experienced through this particular experience. The fourth question had a similar objective. I was hoping the process of revisiting their own life would give them the chance, or challenge, to see or talk about the ways God might be at work around them. The third question, on whether they could imagine sharing their story was a direct question to draw out whether there would be any lasting effect to the workshop. I truly wanted to challenge them to think about their story as being of use to someone else. The short answer to the question of whether storytelling devices can equip people to have spiritual conversations is “Yes.” But like stories, there are layers to the feedback that are surprising and challenging.

Abbie is a 23-year old who has attended SouthBrook for three years and is active in the worship arts community. She focused on the story of her first couple years of her marriage and the challenge of dealing with her husband’s alcoholism. She came to the workshop with her mother, who already knew many of the details of her story but they sat around a table with people they did not know. When I asked her to tell the story of going through the workshop, she focused on the social part of being around the table with other people. She noted that she felt like everyone was starting at different levels of “willingness to share and intensity.” She believed the structure of the story spine helped them to communicate and meet in some middle space. Eventually, she believes everyone around her table got to a place where they were willing to tell the difficult stories of their lives. She reported that two people ended up crafting stories about the death of their fathers. Her own mom talked about her recent divorce. One woman at their table told her story of going bankrupt and Abbie remembered her saying she had been “looking for a place to pour this out.” She sensed this was how a lot of people around the table, and around the room felt. By the end of our conversation, she was asking questions about whether we could do this again, saying she felt like people would come back to go through the experience to work on

various stories. She also remarked that she felt like the church was lacking space like this, where people could feel heard. Even as someone who is well-connected in the church and in a leadership role, she mentioned feeling isolated, as if her story could not or should not be shared. This felt like an important learning for churches like SouthBrook whose stated values include “Authenticity.” It felt like a reminder that it is one thing to value something and another thing to make intentional room for it to happen. When I asked her if she learned anything new about her story as she worked on it, she said she saw deeper threads than she had noticed when she thought about the story prior to the workshop. In her words, she learned that “more than one item of goodness came from something.” She mentioned that the search for threads in this story took her to reflection on other stories and seasons of her life when she felt like God provided or showed up in her life with provision. Abbie remarked a couple of times that filling in the structure of a story was a useful process to her. She felt like this was particularly true because her story contained so much “heaviness.” The structure of the story freed her up to enter the pain of her husband’s struggles, their temporary separation, and the decision they both made to re-commit to their marriage. These are difficult things to talk about around any table but she felt like the frame of the story allowed for it and permitted her to talk about it. When I asked her the question of whether she has imagined telling the story in other places, she says she has not thought about it that way yet. I encouraged her to think about the ways her story might be useful to her friends who also navigating new marriages. She said, “That feels like a challenge—to make those friendships where you can do that.” She is right. Whether inside or outside of a faith community, telling these stories as a way of connection and encouragement seems vital. Abbie did have some thoughts on how the workshop could change if we offered it again: she wondered if there was some value in controlling how people ended up at the tables, inviting people to separate into

tables by different identifiers or interests. She also mentioned that she had lingering question as the workshop ended and she thought more about her story about whether or not our stories should define us. She found it difficult to hold up the value of our stories without also thinking of our stories as our defining characteristics. She mentioned the example of her mother going through a divorce and the delicacy of having a story become your defining trait. She was thinking of her own story also and how just because she had gone through this one difficult season, it was not the whole story of her life, or even her marriage. Perhaps this is also why it was appealing to her to think of coming back for another round. She saw the truth that we are a collection of stories.

Allie is 42 years old and has spent 15 of those years involved in SouthBrook. Allie often shows up to midsize events like this and is regularly searching for resources to grow and expand her understanding of her faith. When I interviewed her, she was short on words, and remarked often how glad she was to be able to write out her story instead of telling it out loud. She admitted to being insecure about talking but loved being able to write. When I asked her to tell me her story of going through the workshop, it is the aftermath of writing on her own that draws the most enthusiasm from her. She said her time in the workshop had some anxiety attached to it because she was not sure what to expect. She remarked that she would probably enjoy it more going through it a second time without the anxiety factor. She did say that she felt affirmed by the people around her table as she worked on her story and verbally processed parts of it that night. Allie worked on a story about what it was like as she and her husband tried to have their first child under the scrutiny of family expectations, and more importantly, her own preconceived ideas about what her life should be like. As Allie talked about the process of telling her story, she said, “The words kept coming at me.” The word that resonated with her most



deeply during the process was “Control.” She mentioned in her story and in her our interview how exploring this season of her life showed her the thread of how often she tried to control outcomes that were not hers to manage. She continued in the days following the workshop to see new connections and to uncover new ways this issue of control affected her life. Allie described writing her story as the peeling of an onion and says she was “obsessed” with her story for a few days afterward. When I asked her if she saw God working in her story, she said she sees God as central to all of her stories, though she did have a difficult time articulating what the ending of her story should be. She felt some anxiety about saying for certain what she understands now in her life, like the story is still in process and God is still at work. She felt convicted to continue to look for a takeaway or an action to take at the end of this particular story to demonstrate a change. She said she plans on going through the process again with other stories as a private practice to see where they lead her. When I asked her if she thinks she would ever share the stories she writes, she says there are some she would be ready to share and some she is not. As a side note, she did mention that she saw the value of having other stories to talk about. In the days immediately following the workshop, she had a conversation come up at work that related directly to a story she heard someone tell at the workshop and was able to offer that up as wisdom. A few days after our interview, Allie was still reflecting on the workshop. As an important qualifier to the project, she is someone who found the personal writing to be more valuable than the shared conversation: “The process of writing out my story elicited a more honest, or deeper confession/truthfulness out me that doesn’t happen if I were to tell my story in a conversation without having written it out. I don’t know if the writing part is as much of a focus as the storytelling in general but that’s a big difference for me.” Allie’s response is a strong support to Pennebaker and Smyth’s research on writing and emotional health. Even if

storytelling is a useful tool for community building, there are those people who need it to be a private exercise before it is a public one.

Jade is a young woman from SouthBrook who is interested in entering ministry as a profession. She has also participated in writing workshops before so she had some expectations going into the night. She said the experience was more emotional than she had expected and where she thought she would come out with a polished story, she found herself in a more introspective place. Jade came by herself but ended up at a table of all women who also expressed a desire to serve in different areas of ministry. Though they all mentioned having some purpose in mind for the workshop, she felt like they also landed in a more personal space as the time went on. Everyone ended up telling a story of a specific struggle in their life, even if the story also connected to their ministry or vocation. She cited one woman's story of having an abortion and how that affected her work in women's healthcare. Though her table started as strangers, she believed they all walked away from the night feeling like they knew each other and that they had all been heard. She said the night began with small talk but once they got into filling in the outline of their stories, the intensity and intimacy increased quickly. For her own story, I asked Jade if she worked on a new story or one she had done before. She said it was a new story that tied together several significant events in her life. When I asked her if she saw any new connections or threads in the story, she called back to the main theme of her story, which is that she spent most of her life afraid of touch and only recently was beginning to see that she could bless the world through touch, and through her own hands and life. Working on the story allowed her to see how far back this struggle and story went in her life and how much work God had done in her to help her make these connections. When I asked her to say more about how she sees God at work and how she knows God is part of her story, she spent some time talking about

a new understanding she has about God showing up in the physical presence of our relationships. She is learning that we need wise counsel and people who can help us discern the voice of God. Writing her own story helped her see how this truth was already operative in her own life. Jade has some experience speaking publically and doing live poetry events so she did think about how she might present this story to other people. She could see sharing it in different venues with different people but appreciated being able to work on a version that could encompass all the details without thinking about a specific audience. Since Jade is relatively new to the church and interested in ministry, we spent some time talking about the experience itself in the context of a church. She appreciated the more organic environment of a roundtable workshop. She is involved in the women's ministry of the church and the young adult group, both of which offer some opportunities to connect this way. She still feels like those groups offer a little too much structure and are often bound by time constraints that can limit vulnerability. She wondered just how many boundaries and guidelines need to be in place for people to engage meaningfully with the material and with each other. We talk about how often people are showing up to church driven by pains that they cover up once they arrive.

John is a 35-year old who has been a part of SouthBrook in various roles for more than 10 years. John ended up at a table with people who started off talking about how unsure they felt about the night. He felt like he spent some portion of the night helping them to understand the value of the workshop but by the time they dug into their life stories, the conversations went deep. He was particularly interested in one man's story of being kicked out of a German Baptist congregation and how that pivotal moment changed his view on religion. John's own story revolved around a giant moment in his own life. Five years ago, an accident left him paralyzed from the waist down. He knows that he has a story to tell but has wrestled with how and where to

tell it. The framework of the story spine helped John to find a flow in trying to communicate such an intense, transformative story. He had some training in giving public speeches but found the idea of telling a story to be more compelling. He felt like the structure offered by the workshop was something he could use the next time he was offered an opportunity to come talk about his life after his accident. A part of John's own story is how he grew up picturing himself as someone who could only serve the world through his body, but not his mind. He has wrestled with this insecurity in his life post-accident, wanting to speak about what he knows, but not sure what to say. He has already done a lot of work to process the emotional and spiritual implications of his accident in counseling and conversation but the storytelling framework helped him to categorize what he has learned and communicate it with other people. When I asked him if there was anything new or unique to learn about God as he thought about his story, he talked about how grateful he is that his faith in God existed before the accident. He is not sure if he could see it as redemptive without the framework of faith. He said he notices the way God felt present to him in his darkest moments and provided purpose for him as he tried to imagine a life for himself after the accident. Telling his story has helped him to become more appreciate of the "before" of his story, where most people are grateful for the conclusions. John is also someone who expressed a desire for more learning environments at church where people are able to interact and hear from more than one person. He often wonders if he is a minority in that opinion and finds that feeling to be an occasional cause for isolation in the church.

Furaha is a woman in her 40s whose full-time work is teaching English and writing at a community college. She is also a working poet and storyteller who has led and participated in multiple writing workshops. She also buried her 22-year old son just a few weeks prior to attending the Sacred Story Workshop. She admits that she had several fears about participating

in the workshop in such a vulnerable state. She has found herself in multiple conversations where people do not quite know how to respond to her when they find out her young son has died, as if death might be contagious. She said when she came into the workshop, she intentionally chose a table filled with ladies with gray hair. She admitted that she found their age comforting, as if they might know something about the world and would be all right if she ended up crying during the evening. Her trust in their age and wisdom proved true over the course of the night as she says they all shared difficult stories and were patient and gracious to her as she shared hers. She did not come into the workshop planning to write about her son but as we got into the prayer and meditation she realized that was all she could think about. Telling stories is not a new craft for Furaha but she said the new thing for her about this experience was feeling heard by the people around the table. She felt like they were equipped to handle her pain and able to connect to share their own stories as well. She mentioned how often her story derails conversation but how something about this experience and the other women allowed her to speak freely and connect. Furaha also paid attention to the other tables around her and felt like the closeness of the roundtables was comforting. She heard the buzz of other conversations and occasional bits of other people's stories breaking through. One helpful moment of eavesdropping let her hear a woman at another table telling a story about her child being near death and surviving. Just knowing that other people in the room were being vulnerable gave her strength to dig deeper into her own emotions. She and the other women at the table were also grateful for the chance to process their thoughts on their own in the workbooks before they shared them with each other and she found that to be helpful in navigating a conversation with strangers. It gave them time to be thoughtful with their own stories and their words to each other. She said no one ended up telling a completely structured story, but they did all share during each portion of the workshop.

They also struggle to articulate clear endings to their stories, though in Furaha’s case, she did make connections in her story that led to an epiphany of sorts. She told me her story in the interview, filling in the blanks of the story spine. When she thought about the “Every day…” section of her story, she remembered how much time she spent worrying about whether she was a perfect mother. She says she spent most of her son’s life concerned that any sign of weakness or imperfection in him was a reflection on her ability to be a parent. When she went to work on the moment of change, filling in the blank after “Until one day,” she was reminded of one of her last moments with her son. She remembered looking at him and thinking, “He’s so beautiful. He’s so perfect.” She had been thinking about that moment but had not known what to make of it. As she filled in the story, she connected the threads together. She struggled to fill in the final blank of what she knows now. But she is sure that this moment offered her a remedy to her struggle with perfectionism. As if, for just one moment, she saw her son and herself for who they really were. Furaha is understandably not sure how to talk about the role that God might play in her story. She is concerned with treating God as a primary actor in the story. She wants to resist thinking that God took her son in order to teach her a lesson. Our conversation highlights a struggle that people often feel when they are wrestling with the sovereignty of God. If we credit or blame God with all the outcomes, we feel forced to draw lessons out of every story. Our conversation draws up my own uncertainties about how to talk about this. My tendency is to draw out how God might be present in the moment, rather than talking about how God is in control of the moment. We talk about her unfinished ending and how that might be the part that she and God can work on together. She has already experienced changes in her story, however she might attribute them. She talked about how she feels very little fear on this side of her son’s death. She talked about the things that have been bringing her joy even during this time of grief.

She said she loves music and dancing even more now. A number of her son's friends have told her stories of their own since his death: stories she did not know about how kind he was or how much he loved other people and what he meant to them. Some of this starts to feel like a crucial part of the story, an answer to the question of what she holds now and how God might be active. But this is her story to tell and to finish. She already had some invitations to tell her story and was thankful for the story outline to help her tell the parts she is ready to tell.

The interviews offered several confirmations of the hopes of this project. Overall, the interviewees did talk about new things they learned along the way and seemed to leave the workshop experience with new words they might be able to speak about God at work in their life. They answered positively to the questions of whether they learned new things. In the telling of the story of the workshop, they affirmed its value and expressed an appreciation for the content and the experience. The storytelling prompts did offer people the space and impetus to look for meaning in their own stories. They engaged meaningfully with their own stories and with the stories of the other people around the table. The interviews gave me an opportunity to listen in not only on the experience of the people I interviewed but the people within earshot of them. People articulated the different ways they felt heard and supported. The story sharing moved them to ask questions about the movement of God in their life and the ways they wanted to move in the world. I was surprised by how important the writing element was for people and how many of them considered the work after the workshop to be as rich as the time with each other. Though everyone found value in working on the stories with others, there was an emphasis I did not expect on the quiet time, or the extra time after the workshop, to help people build up their confidence to share all the parts of their story. In fact, as more of the stories poured into my inbox, I wished I had a way to quantify or distinguish what people shared around the table with

what they wrote in the stories they sent me. I had anecdotal evidence from the interviews that people shared the difficult parts of their lives and it was helpful. But I also found that many people considered the writing afterward to be a part of the process.

### Stories Told and Written

While the interviews offered me an up-close look at how it felt for a select group to go through the workshop, the collected stories gave me data to look for patterns, or threads, among the stories told. Twenty-three people sent their stories to me in the week following the workshop. This is significantly fewer than attended the workshop but I did emphasize that sending me their story was an option, not a requirement. I know from the interviews that some of the stories told in the room may have been too delicate for people to send in an email to me. Or perhaps they had come largely for the experience itself and had already gotten what they needed from it. For as many people as there were who enjoyed putting the time in to write out their story, I am sure that there was also a group of people who considered that a hindrance, or a burden on their time. I am not sure what to make of the absence of any of the stories but I do believe there is much to learn from the stories I did receive. When I invited people to send their story, I also made sure they understood that portions of their stories could be written about and shared as a part of this project. Their names are omitted here for confidentiality and they are sorted by the identifiers they provided: gender, age, and years involved at the church.

It also seems important to include that I received one story two months after the workshop in the form of a handwritten letter dropped off at the church building. The story was a dramatic one from a woman whose starting point in her story was an addiction to heroin that led her to prostitution and kept her and her three children in an abusive home. The turning point in her story was her decision to leave her home. She reports that she is currently clean and seeking



God with the help of the church community. It felt telling that writing her story and getting it to me was important enough to her to share it months later, as if the exercise was still on her mind and operative in her life.

A number of people offered informal feedback along with sending me their story. The overall response was one of gratitude for the chance to spend time with their own story. Admittedly, the people who found the workshop frustrating or less than satisfying may not have felt free to send that feedback, even though I asked for that as a part of the request to send stories. One person mentioned finding someone at her table whose experience mirrored her own, adding: “Our stories definitely connected us, and the theme in many of our stories at my table had to do with ‘not being enough.’” A couple of people mentioned that they had been wanting to work on their story and saw the workshop as the right occasion for it. One person voiced what others may have felt: “A little painful reliving the events but such a beautiful place that I landed once it was over.” There was also confirmation of what I hoped would happen as one woman mentioned her appreciation for the time around the table, describing her fellow participants as “sidewalk prophets... a bunch of beloved and adored scoundrels and misfits at the table for a greater purpose.”

The actual stories submitted by people represented a broad range of effort and engagement. There was a young man who submitted just a few lines, filling in the blanks of the story with a few words. There were a handful of people who filled multiple pages to tell their story. The subject matter and themes covered a wide breadth of human experience. Some told stories of their families of origin and others focused on the families they created as adults. Some used their careers as a focus. There were some who focused on internal narratives that were only tangentially related to outside circumstances. There were two stories, told from people of

different ages, sitting at different tables, that were near identical in their structure and details:

Two women who found themselves in marriages with men struggling with alcoholism who both went through temporary separations that ended in reconciliation. But for the most part, the stories represent the wealth of experience and wisdom that people in the church are carrying.

It was only when I made a chart of the three different parts of the story spine that patterns and learnings started to emerge.<sup>61</sup> Since people were very faithful to telling their stories through the given structure, it was a helpful way to see the different starting points people chose, what kind of events acted as catalysts for change, and where they felt like their stories led them. More than half of the stories were about marriage and family issues. There were a handful of stories where people were dealing with health issues. A few people told stories about substance abuse, either their own abuse or the abuse of someone whose struggle affected their own story. There was overlap in actual stories, but also in the movement from one part of a story to another. There were revelations with the way people saw their own lives and with how they saw God working. There seemed to be patterns about what kind of stories people decided to tell. I made a simple chart summing up how each person talked about the beginning of their story, the moment that something changed, and the thing they believed they had at the end of the story that was new. In addition to the descriptions, I also paid some attention to tone, if they talked about the events of their lives as tragedies, or comedies, to use Buechner's phrases. For instance, for the people who told stories of divorce, did they see the projection of that story as a move towards a dark ending or a revelation of light? As a burden or a gift? I looked for their interpretation of their story: when they got to the ending, what did they think the story was about? I hoped that in the simple

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<sup>61</sup> See Appendix 8.

description of their stories, a more complicated picture of what stories exist in the church and what God is doing in people could be told.

### *Every Day*

The most interesting discrepancy in the way people started their stories is that half of them begin in tragedy and half of them begin with a description of life as “perfect.” The content of the workshop encouraged both possibilities, or some mix of both. The surprising part is how many people actually used the word “perfect.” It is possible they felt like this contrasted well with the rest of the story, as if perfection is the only place from which people can fall. But it may be even more telling if this really was their goal or aspiration. Some were very direct about the way this attitude shaped their life, describing the journey that started with illusions of control. There are some stories that begin when people are children and focus on their families of origin. It was telling that people chose those early childhood stories. A 71-year old man wrote about how much it affected him when his dad got a new job in a new city. Another woman wrote about how her father’s change in status, from ministry to struggling with a mental illness, meant a change in place and identity for her. A 58-year old man wrote about his lifelong struggle with his dad that began in his childhood and continued until his dad’s death, affecting him years later. Some focused on the families they formed, either stories about their marriages or relationships with children. One young woman told the story of growing up with a brother whose mental illness caused him to physically abuse her. A particularly poignant story began with a woman whose struggle was nearly all internalized: She begins with a sense that she was always the “bad kid” but does not describe why she has this feeling. As she moves through the rest of the narrative, it becomes clear that she was wrestling with her sexuality. She goes from this internal shame, through a marriage that fails and arrives at a sense of peace with her sexuality and at

peace with God. Her story is one of many in which the ending of the story is a clear resolution to the beginning of the story.

### *Until One Day*

When we talked in the workshop about the moments that catch our attention and catalyze change, I made sure to mention that they might be tragic or beautiful. They are simply invitations to change. I did use Jones' language of a conversion that can be described as "falling apart." This may explain why nearly all of the segments of the story that complete the sentence, "Until one day, \_\_\_\_" are tragic. This may also be a true reflection of how life works. We do not register the changes brought about by good things in our life as transformative as the difficult things. Or it reveals some greater truth about the nature of suffering and the role it plays in our lives. There are only three stories that count a positive moment as the one that changes them; two people describe therapy as the moment that changes their life. One woman, caught in addiction and abuse, cites her own decision as the moment when the story changed.

For some people, the moment that catches their attention is a physical struggle: accidents, miscarriages, mental illness. For one younger woman, illness is the starting point of her story and the alienation she feels because of the illness becomes the impetus to change. Four stories turn at least in part on alcoholism, either their own or someone else's. Three people describe the death of someone important to them as a critical part of their story. There are a number of stories that turn on the divorce of their parents or the consideration of divorce in their own marriage. There are a couple of stories that describe a series of troubling events, instead of just one. There are twists and turns that made the storytellers think all was well, only to have them foiled. Some people saw several connected moments that unraveled the life they thought they knew. There are moments they think everything is resolved only to have them fall apart again. These stories were

a useful reminder that life is sometimes more like this. The segments of the stories can last years instead of hours.

Since so many of the stories begin with the illusion of perfection, many describe this turn in the story as the loss of that illusion. The catalyzing moment brings them to a realization of their own limits or the imperfection that was present all along. Many people talk about these developments as alienating them from the people around them. Some seem to see them as part of the natural order of life, describing what they believe is a typical pattern of struggle, or suffering. This may arise from the content of the workshop or the normal conversations humans have about why life is not perfect. The moment of intense suffering is an inevitable part of their suffering even though it causes them to feel special or alone as they make their way through it.

#### *And Now*

The endings of the submitted stories confirm what people talked about in the interviews: people felt challenged in their search for a satisfying end to their story. They wanted to articulate what they gained from the story but did not want to paint a picture of complete resolution. In the same way that “perfection” was often a theme for the beginning of the stories, “peace” emerged as the most-used word for what people believe they possess by the end of the story. Three people used the word, while several others describe some state resembling peace. Several make a point of acknowledging that they feel like the story is still ongoing. Those who saw their story as a struggle over control admit that it is an ongoing process to surrender this sense. A young man whose story starts with his tendency towards anger and “clingy” behavior in relationships confesses that he still feels caught up in this battle. A woman whose son died before she had a chance to reconcile with him talks about the peace she feels, even while she longs to ask him questions about his life. Some people make very direct connections between the struggle of their

story and the current purpose of their lives. John, the man whose accident paralyzed him, felt a renewed sense of purpose in the world and his unfinished ending is about the work and story still left to tell. A woman whose early illness lead her through seasons of isolation and loneliness now works as a professional counselor, specializing in trauma. Nearly all of the endings were descriptions of internal realities rather than external circumstances. People describe a sense of “belonging” or “security.” Three people cite their discovery of SouthBrook as a part of their life now that feels hopeful. In the stories that centered on relationships, some centered on actual reconciliation, but more centered on the internal work they needed to do to appreciate the current state of their relationships. There is a wisdom to the ending of these stories, a resistance to tidy endings. But there is also a restlessness, a resolution to the unfinished state of life. It is difficult to discern whether this loss of control and supposed perfection leaves people feeling stronger, weaker, or in an intermediate place where failure and grace meet.

One of the most surprising outcomes of evaluating the stories was how rarely people cited an actual conversion to faith, or an experience with God as the hinge of the story. Far more often they described God as a piece of the concluding part of the story. Their story led them to a place where they experienced the presence of God. Only one man’s story, Randy, included a mention of God as a part of the middle section of his story. He tells the story of waiting for his father, with whom he had a contentious relationship, to pass away. He felt sure that he heard the voice of God telling him his father was going to die soon. His response to this was to conclude that God was cruel. Rather than a comforting presence through death, he felt like this voice aligned God with loss. It is only after the passing of years, and a connection with the story of Job in the Bible, that the storyteller arrives at a place of peace:

I still struggle with the truth of Scripture and Christ’s story. However, these struggles are now more at the margins than at the center. Time has taught me to discern the good in

what I once saw as a cruel trick. I don't think God took my father to teach me this lesson, but I do think He used my dad's death as a "teachable moment." I now see that His lesson has blessed my relationships with my wife and my children, who regularly hear that I love them very much.

Randy articulates a prominent struggle in talking about God at work. Do we see God as the author of every event, as the mover of life and death? Or do we see God as present and only partially active? How do we know when God is acting or not acting? If God offers us comfort, is that compensation for God not acting to change the outcomes? These are questions covered endlessly in volumes of theological work, but they are also the questions of people trying to understand their own stories. Here's another "ending" to a story, from someone battling with where their control, and God's control, begins and ends:

I don't trust a whole lot in the illusion of control. I interact with people more carefully – aware that a smile or an embrace may provide a huge light in a dark world. And I seek God's presence, remember His faithfulness, and desire to share my assurance of his acceptance, provision, and closeness with others.

When trying to describe God at work in their stories, almost all of the storytellers saw God as a place to land in the story, rather than a protagonist, or even antagonist.

Their conclusions were often an expression of knowing God had been present with them through the changes of their lives. In fact, some even mentioned believing their lack of faith in the midst of crisis was a part of what made their stories difficult. This is from Abbie, one of the women whose husband was battling alcoholism:

I kind of forgot that God was there. But He nudged my heart to remind me that he's ready to step in and help me. So I prayed like I had never prayed before. Hot tears of fear washed away any make up I'd attempt to put on for weeks. It was a constant "on my knees" type of experience. My prayers slowly turned from, "Jesus, please save Tim," to, "Jesus I need you to remind me and keep me in your hands no matter what the outcome is." I knew that Jesus wanted Tim sober and safe but I had abandoned taking care of myself and needed God to first help my heart and soul.

Allie, whose story was about loss of control through the grief of miscarrying, also talks about seeing God only in retrospect: "God's examining, piercing, waiting method has been a trend for

the last 15 years. I've learned how he works and I'm thankful for these trials... but only eventually."

Any evaluation of people's theology or theodicy based solely on these stories would be indirect and incomplete. But it does raise questions about why so many people see God as a conclusion and not a catalyst. It infers that people may only call on God retroactively, to help them interpret the meaning of life events, as opposed to active and present in the midst of the events. If the storytelling workshop or tools were to be used as an ongoing exercise in spiritual formation, it might be useful to encourage people to consider God as an active character in their story and to teach more directly on how God may or may not show up in their story. It may also be useful to draw that out of them in the first two segments of the story spine, to make sure they clearly articulate their spiritual understanding all along the way, even if it is muddled or unsure. Since one of the stated goals of the project is also to help people see God as active in the stories people are currently living, it would also help to be more explicit about this tendency to only see God at the end of the stories we are authoring and passing along to each other.



## **Final Evaluations**

There is a principle in journalism that simple questions often lead to complex answers and complex questions lead to simple, unhelpful answers. This project was an exercise in simple questions: Could framing our lives as a story help people talk about spiritual realities? The feedback confirms that there is value in using a story frame to guide conversations around tables. The simple tool of a story spine led people to new perspectives on old stories. It does not feel like a revelation or discovery to say that telling their story across tables helped people to feel less alone and more empowered.

What does feel timely about this project is the reminder that people who attend church are carrying both tremendous burdens and the wisdom gained from this carrying. The stories gathered from this project confirm that people are in need of teaching and ministry that make room for the difficult realities of life as a human. In the same way that the holy scriptures contain unholy descriptions of the turns humans can take, churches need to contain words for what it means to live through divorce, addiction, death, mental illness, relational conflict, and social isolation. People also need space to give voice to their experiences, to connect their stories with the stories of others. They need room to work out how God might be operative in the world. They need pastors who can help them confirm what they know about the world. They need help looking for the presence of God and the source of their worth. Storytelling might be a way to keep people from talking about the activity of God in the world without formulaic answers or false equations. Our stories force us to reckon with our talking points about what God is like and how God may or may not move in and around us.

For churches like SouthBrook, and maybe even for all churches, there could be simple ways to draw on the power of narrative outside of a workshop like this. For instance, I could imagine preachers and teachers inviting more people to actively engage their imagination during their public offerings. They could invite people to recount their own stories in their mind, or in conversations. It might be as simple as leaving a few minutes during a sermon for people to tell quick stories to each other, modeling the principle that the Great Assembly of the church is filled with moments and occasions where God might be living and active. It might be in more developed efforts. It could be training those who lead small groups to value and draw out the stories of people meeting in groups. It may be effective to offer a version of a workshop that works for their church. In many attractional churches, they have drawn on testimony as a way to fill out the church service, including more interviews in the service or filming people telling their stories. While these efforts draw on the power of narrative and can be a way to amplify other voices, they are still experienced passively by a large percentage of the church population. The important part of using narratives for spiritual formation would be teaching story in a way that equips people to engage their own story. The workshop also affirmed the need for large churches to find ways to filter people into smaller rooms for the purpose of connection and formation.

I went into this project somewhat fearful that the story framework might lead people to false resolution in their life stories about how God work but instead I found that people were hesitant to neatly tie up their stories. Their stories do not lead them to easy answers but to complex realities of how God might be present, but in ways they cannot yet articulate. They may be in need of a language that allows God to be in their story from beginning to end.

Outside of the need for these spaces in the church, there is also a need in the world for the people in the church to tell their stories. People everywhere go through seasons of disorientation.

And like many of the storytellers in the workshop, that might be the moment that leads them to a reorientation of faith. If there is a tendency for tragedy and trial to lead us to an understanding of the presence of God, then it becomes crucial for people of faith to learn how to tell their stories so they might lead other people to share in this type of resolution. It is not just in the great assembly of faith that these stories need to be told, but in the smaller assemblies of people around coffee tables, hospital beds, and living rooms.

The social learning from this night is also a reminder of a simple truth: In a world where people are feeling feel more isolated because of differences, the church ought to host more space for people to find what they share. It is easy to dispute worldviews and policy positions; It is harder to fight someone's story. Stories are an effective way for us to describe what life is like for us in the world. As language and our lives become more diverse and separated, it will be critical for us to find the threads of the larger narrative of humanity. As we struggle to not only start conversations but to remain in them, the simplicity of a storytelling device might be the thing that keeps us at tables.

It is important to note that the simplicity of storytelling can also lead to complications. Storytelling can draw out painful stories for people. A workshop like the one I offered might be better served with some awareness to issues of trauma and mental illness. As people revisit their stories, there is a good chance that they will encounter memories that draw out painful events in their lives. There is a danger to drawing those out without being able to address them in the immediate context. In my own future plans to offer the workshop, I have been working with a trauma specialist to pay more attention to this.

The workshop may also yield different results in churches that approach theology more systematically. People may feel compelled to articulate the action of God in a way that matches

the teaching of the church. SouthBrook is a unique environment because people are encouraged to be curious about their faith and honest about their doubt. This kind of freedom may not be experienced in every church and may alter the kinds of stories people would tell. The workshop is also dependent on the chemistry of the people around the table. In a church, or community with more diversity of race, or religion, or thought, there might need to be more guidance offered for how participants could offer feedback without creating conflict.

In an ironic twist, this project that was designed to ask delicate questions about church authority, relied on my own role in the church to draw out participants. Many of the people who showed up on this particular Sunday night did so because they wanted to spend time with a pastor. They wanted to learn. In short, I saw myself as giving authority away but the only reason that worked is because I had worked up some authority. Through the interviews and the informal feedback of emails and conversations, I learned that many people came to the workshop hoping to learn something from me. The delicate part of any discipleship model is that it relies on an established trust. Even dispersed authority has to start with some authority. I found myself wondering whether a church plant, or a more informal community, could draw on the value of the workshop in the same way SouthBrook did. I can speculate that this would work because storytelling has taken on so many forms in culture but I did wonder: Does there have to be some central source that supplies the right meaning to the activity of God and the crowd's interpretation of that activity?

The church, and in particular, churches like SouthBrook, that have relied on drawing people into a temple experience, may need to reverse the lesson of Psalm 107. Rather than singing the songs of arrival to worship, they will need to find ways to go into the world and sing songs in the desert, at sea, in prison, in hospitals. Churches will need to find ways to amplify the

voices of people whose stories have not been told. Even if the dominant voice on the microphone is an ordained leader, leaders must find ways to pass the microphone and listen. They need rooms where they listen to what has brought people to the temple before they speak in the temple. The church may very well be in an “Until One Day” moment, when everything we thought we knew is changing. This crisis of language and belief could lead us into the next chapter of our story. We are on a clock. Time is moving. The hope is that our story can land us in a place where we are certain of the presence of God and well-versed in how to give voice to the faithfulness of God through our Every Day.

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## Appendix 1

### Workshop Script: Sacred Story Workshop

#### Set-up

Room of round tables with seats for 6-8 people. easel with drawing pad. Worksheets on the table with pens. Snacks and drinks provided.

#### Welcome and Warm-up

This workshop will be highly interactive. Most of the work will be done at your tables. To give you a feel for the rhythm: I'll introduce ideas, you'll have time to think about them quietly, and then to share around the table. Let's spend a few minutes warming up our storytelling muscles and getting to know each other. Introduce yourselves around the table and tell the story of why you're here tonight, what brought you here, what you hope the night is about.

(Space for introductions around the table.)

#### Opening

One of my favorite Psalms is Psalm 107. It's a moment in the Psalms that gives us some insight about the people who gathered in the temple and sang these prayers. Several stories are represented in the Psalm: the crowd who came from wandering in deserts, the ones who had been in literal and metaphorical chains, the sailors who came by water, the people who had been physically ill before arrival. All the stories share a pattern: People who were struggling cried out to God, experienced a rescue, and felt compelled to praise God. When they sang together, each of their life stories was represented in the song. They were able to give voice to what God was up to in their lives and to hear the ways God had showed up in the lives of others.

In Psalm 40, the writer notes the importance of praising God before the great assembly. Telling of the good works God has done precedes the praise of God. Storytelling is how people know what to praise God for and how they mark the faithfulness of God.

Many of us are shaped by the stories we believe we are living as individuals, as well as the larger narratives of our families, our cultures, our faiths.

Stories connect us to ourselves, to each other and to crowds.

Story is how we order our world: We want there to be a beginning, a frame, a destination, a plot. There's some science behind the writing and telling of our own stories and how it can connect us to our own hearts better and help us to live whole lives. In their research on expressive writing: James Pennebaker and Smythe invited groups of people to write about different things in their lives. One group wrote lists and another group wrote a story. The people who wrote out stories showed greater signs of physical and emotional health.



Stories connect us to each other. It's why we tell stories on first dates, and fiftieth dates. It's why we tell stories at weddings and why we gather in the kitchen to tell stories before we write the eulogies.

In a world where everyone disagrees, it's hard to disagree with a story.

Stories connect us to crowds. There's research on the chemical oxytocin, the one that connects mothers to newborns, spouses, friends. It's also a part of generosity. The researchers found increased oxytocin when people heard a story about a cause rather than just an invitation to give to a cause.

Here's a Story about Story:

RadioLab story: 23 weeks, 6 days

You may know the phrase “line of viability”—it's a phrase doctors use with parents of premature infants or infants in danger of being born too soon. It's the line when they believe they can offer heroic measures to save children. On the early side of the line, they make different decisions than they do after the line has passed. This line determines treatment, laws, and parental mental peace. A young couple had a daughter born just short of the line, one day before the 24 weeks. The young girl was having trouble breathing, her blood wasn't flowing right, her skin wasn't strongly connected to her bones. But she was so close to the line of viability, they decided to try and help her grow and thrive. Her parents felt helpless while they waited on her health to improve. Her father didn't know what to do with his time so he started reading the Harry Potter series out loud to his too young daughter. As he read, her lungs started breathing with more rhythm, her skin started to form, come together, her bones strengthened, and all her numbers improved. She survived and her dad said he could just imagine her holding on for one more day, one more flip of the page, to hear about the fate of Harry, Ron, and Hermione. When the story went public, they got all kinds of free stuff from J.K. Rowling and the little girl is now healthy and thriving.

This is one of those hints to how the world works: We are wired for story and holding on for what's next is a key component in our survival and our search for meaning.

We carry a catalog of stories in us—about who we are, who WE all are.

We all have stories that could contribute to the life of people around us, keep us all going, and keep the story of God working alive in the world.

As I started researching and thinking about story in the world, I kept finding the same pattern over and over again.

In a book on desert spirituality and the first monks and nuns in the church, Alan Jones found that most people who were trying to live out their faith to the fullest went through three different conversions:

Their first conversion was a conversion of Knowledge. They learned new things about God, the Bible, a daily life of faith. It was a period of growth, like climbing up a mountain and seeing more and more of the view.

But everyone on this climb eventually reached some moment that caused everything they knew to Fall Apart and this Falling Apart moment is their second conversion. It's like falling off of a cliff into an abyss. The ground beneath you is not as sure as you assumed and your answers become questions. The catalyst to this conversion might be something really beautiful or something tragic, or something ordinary, but it causes you to question what you think you know. It might be a conversation, or a diagnosis. It could be anything that gets your attention and that takes you to somewhere new.

As dark as this Fall might feel, it does not have to be the end of the story. Jones says there is a third conversion that he called "Letting Go." All of a sudden, the deep well of darkness and loss becomes a wave that carries you out to an ocean. Some of what you gained during the Knowledge phase might return to you. Some of it may take on a new form or a new meaning. Walter Brueggemann also talks about this same process in his work on the Psalms: He categorizes these songs of faith into prayers of Orientation, Disorientation, and Reorientation, an overlap of the pattern Jones found in desert spirituality.

There are Psalms where the people of faith express a growing love and trust in a God who is a rock and a refuge. There are Psalms with the certainty that comes from climbing up a mountain. But there are also Psalms that might be sung or prayed during the Fall from the peak of a mountain, asking after the presence of God and wondering whether all that assurance is warranted. But nearly all of the Psalms return to a moment of Reorientation, where faith is deeper because it's been tested. They know God will rescue them because God has done it before.

This same pattern also shows up in the study of popular narratives. There is a story spine that can be traced back to the world of improvisational comedy and has been adapted into the basic beginnings of popular screen plays, including from the folks at Pixar, makers of some of our favorite stories. This is a simplified version, but essentially, the story begins with introducing us to a character and his or her daily life. They introduce us to the person's desires, struggles, patterns.

They establish what ordinary life is like for the character. And then they shake up the character's life in some way. Something happens that changes the direction of the story and forces the character to change their pattern.

Sometimes there is a series of responses and struggles, or one grand epic, but eventually, the story ends with the character refined. They have landed somewhere new, or returned to the same place with a new understanding.

In short, storytellers are filling in the blanks of this story spine:

Every day, \_\_\_\_\_.

Until one day, \_\_\_\_\_.

And now, \_\_\_\_\_.

This pattern also shows up in the life of Jesus, death of Jesus and life again. Every day, Jesus teaches and heals people. He is with his disciples, breaking and rewriting rules. Until one day, his way of being in the world distresses the authorities so much that they punish him to the point of death. But now we know the rest of the story that death wasn't a sufficient enemy for him and he found a way out of the grave and into the greater sphere of the world, filling the space we're in even right now.

We could also use this pattern to retell the stories of people in Scripture:

In the very first story, we see the first people go from a moment when everything is blissful and new, through a fall towards shame, and another chance at purpose.

In the epic story of David, we see him grow up and learn about victory, make scandalous mistakes, and confess them.

There are colorful stories like Rahab's: A woman whose daily life includes running a brothel, until the spies sent from God call her to a greater purpose, and her story becomes one of redemption and rescue.

We see this pattern in the stories of the disciples. A man like Simon Peter goes from a life of fishing in boats and holding nets, to a call from Jesus, and a whole other kind of fishing.

Mary Magdalene's daily life may be full of struggle but it is her every day, until Jesus heals her, and she spends her life beloved.

The whole Bible is a collection of people whose lives are altered. And it seems to be a part of God's big plan for these stories to go on, to be repeated and relived.

Right now, the world is going through a shift. In the Psalms, people showed up to the temple and told stories about God at work. For a lot of the history that we've lived and known, these kinds of stories were kept and told in the community of faith. But right now, fewer people are showing up to the Great Assembly. But that doesn't mean they do not need or desire these stories. We can keep the story of God going in a world that is hesitant to show up for public worship.

All of Scripture is based on the idea that stories can show the world who God is.

So we have a couple of purposes for our time together: To mine our own story, to know it for ourselves, and to think about how we might tell it to the world.

We want to see God at work in our own life, to see this pattern of knowledge, falling apart and letting go.

Right now, I want to walk us through a meditative prayer, a moment to go through the database in our minds and think about the stories we all carry.

As we go through this, pay attention to the stories that come up that make you feel something, maybe they are stories you've told before. There may be painful memories that come up. You should know as we go into this that you get to decide what you share or don't share. You may use a safer story to talk about during this workshop and then go back through a more personal story later.

But as we go through this meditation, listen for a story that you need to spend time with.

### Meditation

A few deep breaths in...and out...

Picture for a minute the street you grew up in. or a place you called home.

Think about your elementary school self. Who are the people around you when you were young?

Can you remember a moment when you learned something new. Something went from unclear to clear.

Can you think of a time when you were afraid? Did you move towards the fear or away?

Is there somewhere as a child where you felt completely safe?

Think about your middle school self, maybe your high school self.

Is there a moment when you failed?

Can you remember a story where you felt responsible for something for the first time?

Imagine your young adult years. Any firsts that you remember? A first home? A first job? A first love?

When you think about the self you are right now, what do your hands hold?

What does your heart know?

Where have your feet been?

What does your skin know?

Has there been a moment in your life when God, or the universe, or someone you love has had your full attention?

Has there been a time in your life when everything you thought you knew shifted or changed?

Is there a story in your life that you try to tell? That you need to tell?

### Exercise and Discussion

Choose a story to tell.

What story do you have to tell? What's a story in your life that you want to spend time with today?

Here's how we'll do this each time: Start with some time in silence. For the introverts in the room, or the people who need to process before they talk out loud, we'll spend some time just thinking about what you thought of during the exercise. Use your notebook to write down possible stories to work with over the next few hours. You may know the story right away, or you may have a few in mind. Usually, it will become clearer as we go along. After some time in quiet, share possibilities around the table. As we talk together, there are a few things to keep in mind: It's just as important for us to listen to each other as it is for us to work on our own stories. As we listen, we want to be Curious, compassionate, and confidential. We may ask each other to tell us more about the stories. Be sensitive to cues. Some people may want to tell more and some may want to tell less. We want to be compassionate. This is not a place for us to cast our opinions or advice on other people's lives. And this is a confidential space. These stories will stay around these tables until the teller decides they need to go any farther.

(Break for contemplation and conversation.)

Confess the True Before.

When you think of the story you're going to tell, who are you at the beginning of the story?

What is your pain? Or your desire? What does your every day life look like?

What's at stake? Great stories tell us what the character wants and what would be lost if they don't get that.

One of my favorite writers, Colum McCann, says when he starts to write a story, he tries to know everything he can about the characters, including what they have for breakfast.

For the first part of our story, think about who you were at the beginning of this story. Be as honest as you can. Our favorite characters in stories have flaws. Use this to be honest about what your life felt like.

In script writing, they call this "character throwing": We're introduced to the main character, we get to know what their life is like, what they want.

If you're telling a faith story, or the story of you and God, what did you think you knew about the world at the beginning of the story?

Take some time to answer this question on your own in writing and then talk around your tables.

How would you finish the sentence that starts with "Every day, \_\_\_\_."

(Break for contemplation and conversation.)

Describe the Important Pauses:

Every story turns on a moment. It might be an invitation, external or internal. A challenge. conflict. It might be painful or beautiful.

Frederick Buechner once wrote that we should all pay attention to what makes us cry or laugh. What has stirred you?

When have you had a moment, or a season, that formed you?

For people of faith, this might be the moment when God gets your attention, when someone else's faith became yours. It might be small or giant. The important thing is to try and put some words or pictures to it.

When I tell my own story, I often go back to the days of high school: I knew I was really in this thing when I felt like God was with me at school, when I didn't limit my life with God to a building. My school was a violent place. I often felt socially isolated. Something changed as I realized that God felt present with me in places where I didn't feel safe.

Set the scene here. As you work on this, think about the details that are really important to you, but also the details that might help another person understand your story.

There's a beautiful rule in narratives from James Joyce: "In the particular is contained the universal." As you think about your story, every single detail likely matters to you. But as you think about telling your story across a coffee table or a crowded room, a few important details will usually draw in a listener and help them connect to your story.

The delicate thing is that too many details can distract. Ever sit through a long story with a string of detours—and you're not sure which ones are vital to the story?

When we teach storytelling for public purposes, we encourage people to put these moments through a "why" filter. It's the question we're all asking when someone tells us a story: Does this part matter? Why should I care about this? But if we've sorted through this before we tell a story, we can help listeners hear the parts that matter.

Think about the five senses and how you might engage them in the retelling. What did the world smell like, taste like, feel like, sound like, when God, or your circumstances got your attention?

Write all the details down for yourself and look for the ones that help paint the picture.

Consider time. E.M. Forster says the best stories are on a clock. Place the story in time. Are there moments that led up to the moment? What else was going on in your life when this moment happened?

Think of this as a chance to filter, edit, explore your own life. When you think of the critical moments, why do they matter? Why are they important? What details paint that picture?

Exercise: Think of the moments when your story has turned. Describe the scene.

(Break for contemplation and conversation.)

### Celebrate the Right Now

For the end of the story, we want to finish the sentence, “And now, \_\_\_\_\_”

What do you know now? Where have you seen some victory, some taste of redemption?

An important disclaimer: This does not have to be a tidy conclusion like the end of a movie where all the loose ends are tied up. In fact, many times we have to relearn the things we learned for the rest of our life. But maybe we have some glimpse that we can hold onto for the next time.

This becomes our own treasure. It also serves the people we love when we tell it. If we learned it, maybe they can too.

Sometimes this is a restoration, a return home with a new perspective and sometimes we land in wildly different places than where we started.

What do you know on the other side of this pause?

This is also a chance to go back to the beginning of your story and look for threads, look for the themes, the repeated ideas, or phrases that are a part of your story. Is there something in the beginning that looks different at the end.

If I was going to tell you the story of my dad and I, I might build it on the threads of “Be careful”: How often he said that to me on my way out the door, as a child, a college student, an adult, how often I turn around and say it back to him these days.

In the movies we love on screens and in pages, the threads are sometimes subtle. They are the undercurrents that carry the characters from one place to another. Sometimes they are the big booming repeated chords in a musical.

In your own story, this may be a chance to see a connection for the first time, or to recognize the loud ones that have been there all along.

For this next exercise, finish your story. Spend some time crafting and polishing it from the beginning to the end. After some quiet, tell your stories to each other.

(Last break to work on story.)



In the kingdom of God, words become worlds. God makes the whole world with words. When the cosmos are in chaos, God uses words to put a frame around the universe so that the lights are now on a schedule.

In the Hebrew scriptures, the prophets give words to what a just world should look like.

In the Psalms, the prayers hidden deep in the hearts of people become public words.

When Jesus arrives on the scene, he is described as a “Word made flesh.” He uses words and stories to describe a whole new way of being a person.

His words create a community filled with people who have stories to tell around tables, lakes, temples, street corners.

Your story, our stories, keep the story of God alive and at work in the world.

**Appendix 2**  
Worksheets: Sacred Story Workshop

Psalm 40:9-10:

I have told the glad news of deliverance  
in the great congregation;  
see, I have not restrained my lips,  
as you know, O LORD.

I have not hidden your saving help within my heart,  
I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation;  
I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness  
from the great congregation.

Story Notes:

Every day, \_\_\_\_\_.

Until one day, \_\_\_\_\_.

And now, \_\_\_\_\_.

“Every day, \_\_\_\_\_”: Confess your starting character.

“Until one day, \_\_\_\_\_”: Describe the turning events.

“And now, \_\_\_\_\_.”: Celebrate the transformation.

### Appendix 3

#### Interview Notes: Abbie Hyland

Story of doing workshop: “different levels of willingness” and “intensity”—she saw as strength—tools helped them communicate—“threads”—learned: confronted?  
“more than one item of goodness came from something”—deeper threads were there  
“How has God provided or shown up”—helpful question  
see anything new?—learning how to put it in a form where I could easily see thought process was super helpful—wanted to talk about but wasn’t sure how because of “heaviness”  
about God?—thought of other stories to work on—saw themes that connect to this story—same emotion, same longing for God and relationship—themes of this story show up other places in her life.

Table—were you game to tell with strangers?

Open to talking about it—being with her mom helped her—someone who could support her—doesn’t want her story to isolate her—felt like everyone else was game to tell their hard stories—two people talked about dad’s death—her mom talked about divorce, another woman talked about bankruptcy: “I’m looking for a place to pour this out and I finally found out”—sensed this was how people felt.

She noticed group that stayed after—heard talk of alcoholism—physically moved from table to be in a closer circle

Next time: give tables an identity—some starter connection—conversations where people are strangers—attending this church is the only thing they have in common

Tagged on question: could this be useful to you long-term—moving through life as a story—looking for that—language for life—

Compares to Huddle language—looking for common forms and themes—easy tool to also pass along—I compare it to the learning circle—

She suggests doing it more regularly—people love having other people listen to their stories—“therapeutic”—“like a weight has been lifted”—“I can now tell that story and include that one detail”—I ask if she felt that way—“because I lead worship, I get anxious sharing with people—I don’t know if it’s ok to share this information”—worried about husband and her reputation—Says she had to get over it at the beginning—

“southbrook is missing the shepherding of Apest”—creating spaces where people feel like they have been heard

where could she imagine telling the story of her and tim?—“I don’t know if I’ve thought about it that way.”—not sure where it would be invited or encouraged—I encourage her to think about helping friends who might need to hear her story—friends who are in marital conflict—“that feels like a challenge—to make those friendships where you can do that.”

One last thought—on identity—your story does not define you-

Tells story of her mom going on a date—“that’s my story—that’s me”—we are not limited to our experiences—going through hard times—doesn’t define you—conversations with her mom—“You are not your divorce”—my answer—your story is something you have to give away—you have wisdom about something—need to look for change—can’t cheat on the first part—describing who you are—remembered the detail about choosing the right details—to help someone else.

## Appendix 4

### Interview Notes: Allie Fischer

Story of going through workshop:

“I loved it—I was impressed by the whole process.” Loved questions. Wasn’t sure what to expect. It would be easier the second time.

Found her own words easily enough—words kept coming at me.

Wasn’t sure what story to tell—just had random words.

Realized story as they were all sharing—felt supported by people around the table—affirmed that it sounded like something she needed to “unpack”

“got a little obsessed with it” kept writing and uncovering connections—“that has to do with this”—became overwhelming—

“control”—the word that kept coming up for her—and “Expectations”—feeling like she’s coming up short

God: anything you saw?—“I can’t tell any story without thinking about that.”—especially this story

Table experience: they were all great—another girls’ story ended up helping her in a conversation a few days later—

Would you do it again?—yes—insecure about speaking—feels better writing them—sees this as helpful to her to write—knows she needs and wants to—but not sure —“this gave her a place to start”—

“one story I’m not ready to share and one story I am ready to share” —ready to do some onion-peeling. Sees using as a private practice—that she might get ready to share eventually church—empowering other people—how did it feel?

Likes things I do—like the book club thing—to be a participant—finds things like that to be valuable.

Women’s bible study—liked doing one night thing. —felt a little like that.

Some things missing when she wrote it—had to really think about “where am I now” question—wondered about action, next step, takeaway—felt convicted to come up with something like that.

from facebook message: Hi Laura, Another thing I thought about that I don’t think I mentioned when we met... the process of writing out my story also elicited a more honest, or deeper confession/truthfulness out of me that doesn’t happen if I were to tell my story in a conversation without having written it out. I don’t know if the writing part is as much of a focus as the story telling in general but that’s a big difference for me. You can use that if it adds anything to your project.

## Appendix 5

### Interview Notes: Jade

Story form feedback:

More emotional than expected—done writing workshops before—expected polished outcome—more introspective

Table—everyone walked away feeling heard—felt like they knew each other

Pushing people to the core of a specific struggle—drew a line into a more personal space

Church setting—people had ministries they were trying to share—

One woman at table—works at women’s healthcare—working through an abortion story

High level of intensity—most people had some ministry in mind

Table full of women—eased into it by sharing outlines

Felt like table had Older, wiser women

Some small talk, but once they had themes for stories—table dove right in

Chose a central theme—not a story she worked with before

Wanted to tie together some significant events—thought about what she would want people to take away from it if she every told it anywhere or wrote it

New connections?—yes—“Jade blesses what she touches”—a new thing—didn’t realize how far back that went in her life—how much work God has done in her heart to help her make that connection—not sure how she would see it without working on the story

God?: as a community, we can’t always physically see or touch God—we need people to represent God for us—idea of wise counsel—physical presence—God loves us in a way—hardwired for connection—saw new aspect of the blessing of relationships—beyond sitting in a pew or showing up for a bible study—new level of how God’s love can show up in other people

Working at home different from workshop?—outline, then free writing, editing—felt happier having more time to think about the final form—attributes to her type-a-ness

everyone shared their main points if not a final product—no cliffhangers

Possibility of sharing in the future? – has background in poetry—writing –understands what it means to think about audience—thought of it as a speech but not specific audience—wondered if she would share all the details of her story in a larger audience

(she asked if I saw places stories could be used—maybe asking for her own sake—I wish I had thought of places for her to tell her story—I mostly answered for the whole crowd--)

she did use some Ted Talk format as her frame—imagining that as she structured her piece—we talk about how stories have an advantage over talking points—facebook fights—how much emotion lives behind our strong opinions—she notes we are unaware of some of the stories behind the fights

southbrook—comparison to womens ministry?—young adult ministry—likes organic environments—some balance of prompts—free time—leads a table—leaves room for people to talk more afterward—because of time constraints—people are used to super structured –less room for vulnerability—looking for the right boundaries to engage with material and each other people showing up to a church are often trying to cover over the painful parts of their lives even though their pain is partly driving them there.

Grew up in a church that emphasized community and getting to know each other—harder to make those connections through sporadic events

## Appendix 6

### Interview Notes: Johnny

Experience? Mountain imagery—felt like a new framework for his story—gave him some flow

Table: people who were there without clear expectations—came just to show up—not prepared to dig in—he pulled on some of the people—repeated content—he helped them understand—Amazing—we went real deep real fast—one man talked about being German Baptist—got kicked out of church—experience with religion—felt like this night showed him how that moment affected him—was pivotal—

Did you know you would tell your big giant story?—all his stories tie back to accident—because he was so young—

Did this framework make the story look any different?—told him his answer could be no—used to go back to speech basics—“Tell them what you’re going to tell them, tell them, and tell them what you told them”—liked story approach—got out of speech mentality—kept going back to visual

Felt more like this helped him with storytelling.

Any new understandings—has already hashed out so much through counseling and conversation, processed a lot—like being able to categorize thoughts—

God? Always thinks about redemptive piece of his story—happy that he already had connection to Christ before accident—imagines different scenario for his story—

Even in darkest moments—felt like there was a North star—felt like there was a purpose—there was hope—leaving the hospital—not sure where the ground was—“strong back and a weak mind”—has had to go back and rebuild his own understanding of his “before” story—sees gratitude there—

Already has imagined telling his story—gets invited to tell his story sometimes—could this help? Definitely gives me more confidence—notes how much having a visual helps him—helps him—this is the somber part—I’m falling—don’t know where the bottom is.

Going to talk to spinal cord injury lab students—

Roundtables at Southbrook—allowed you to hear from other people—more human stories—you’re not just being taught by one person—more interpersonal—more connection—felt like more than a learning environment.

Feels like a minority in the church—of wanting more moments like that.  
Liked the simplicity of the sheets—not step by step—gave people room

## Appendix 7

### Interview Notes: Furaha

Story? (Homework fear?)

Group: awesome—felt lucky—sought out gray hair—they'll be ok with me if I cry...and they might know something. All 3 had different stories –feels like a “Scary ghost, leper” when she tells people her son died—people worried death might be contagious.

Spent a lot of time writing ideas first—more introverted took advantage of time to do that—that worked out well—gave them time—especially since they didn't know each other.-

Didn't tell story from beginning to end—just did portions. last segment—talked about how they might end—not sure about the conclusion—had epiphanies—but didn't tell structured endings.

Because of where she is—“unusually hard”—usually telling stories and talking to other people comes easy to her—came in to talk about something other than evan—but then realized that's all she can think about/write about.

It was hard. Harder than I thought it would be. Wasn't writing or thinking anything new—the new thing was talking to people who could hear her—they handled it and they were able to delve into their own story—didn't feel like she was derailing them—which she does in other conversations sometimes.

What made this work—distinct from other writing environments?—missed some of the beginning—why are you here question—they were there because they like me.

Being in the round felt really comfortable—could only sort of hear other stories—overheard someone at another table—a woman talking about a child being sick and close to death and living—made it hard for her—felt like the timing worked—felt like I set laidback tone.

Epiphanies?—(long silence)

Spent a lot of time trying to make sure that she was a perfect mother—trying to get things right—evan was human and not perfect—felt like she needed to make him better—remembered a moment a few weeks before his death—

“every day”\_trying to be perfect

“until one day”—answering that question reminded her of last moment she spent with him—remembered looking at him—“he's so beautiful. He's so perfect.”—remembered moment but

story helped her connect it to the struggle of perfectionism in parenting—had been thinking about that moment but hadn't known what to make of it. If I tell this story, I have to keep that.

Hadn't really talked about it yet. “threads”—triggered that.

“and now”—

God? Not sure how to articulate it—frustrated not to have the words—“I feel so mad about that”—this sounds terrible—I get mad—God, tehre's some other way I could have learned this lesson about perfectionism. Goes back to evan's birth—regret that she spent years losing that sense of thinking evan was perfect—this is why she's not sure how to conclude story yet—“why did I have to learn this lesson this way?” not sure how to answer this question

I tell her I tread lightly—I don't think God wrecked Evan's car—losing providence—taking God out of doing bad things, removes credit from the good things—trying to describe that God is present—if any good comes out of this, it will be God.



“God tries to bring the best ending—even when humans are involved.”—there’s order but it’s still hard to say what is God’s hand and what isn’t.

“I don’t feel afraid anymore”—talking about job, safety.

Feels like world is enhanced, sun is brighter—joy of dancing—music

A friend of Evan’s told her a story—Evan said he was really happy—said “the time of love is coming.” To a friend whose mom was dying—Evan’s words helped.

Doesn’t know what to do with God right now—surprised by the things that feel better—at the same time that things are hard.

(I tell about my own sister—being mad that cancer brought us together)

endings—not “the Moth” perfect ending—just trying to break pattern of only talking about first two parts—do I know anything because I’ve been through this?—what do I carry?

language of “carrying”—she’s been working on a poem—where do I carry these griefs?

Connection to physical

Sharing story? I’m supposed to share a story in a couple weeks—had agreed to do it months ago—decided to make herself do it anyway—after cancelling a bunch of other things.

Might use as a jumping off point—to a crowd of moms—who like her and will want to know how she is.

Struggling with breaking into tears—being vulnerable in brand new ways—tells story about being at an event where someone told a story depicting a “poor woman whose son died in a car crash”—

## Appendix 8

### The Written Stories

Identifier (if available)	“Every day...”	“Until One Day...”	“And now...”
64yo woman	Abused as child Ambition, success	Left home, rebellion Wreck-near death	Faith, grace Presence of God
29yo man	Career success	Laid off	New job
59yo woman	Family happiness	Parents divorce	Belonging
62yo woman	Felt like “bad kid”	Bad marriage	Peace w/sexuality
23yo woman	New “good” marriage	Alcoholism, separation	Restoration
	Illness during youth	Alienation-young adulthood	Purpose as health care worker
	Kid at camp-peace	Loss of dad’s job, place	Peace—SouthBrook as new place
66yo woman	Struggles with son before his death	Grief, comfort	Still has questions for son
18yo man	Angry, and clingy in relationships	Therapy	Still struggles
35yo man	“strong back, weak mind”	Accident-paralyzed	Still has work to do
	“perfect” family	Fight w/daughter	Reconciliation
	Type “A” search for perfection	Miscarriages	Humility, peace w/lack of control
	Happy family	Dad’s death, unexpected pregnancy, abortion	SouthBrook, another pregnancy, serving in crisis center
	Happy family	Husband’s infidelity	Reliance on God
58yo man	Tough relationship w/Dad	Dad’s death/warning that his dad would die soon-Is God cruel?	Reliance, and peace with God
	Sense of control	Diagnosis of BPD Battle with son-in law	Presence of God Understanding
	Abuse from mentally ill brother	Therapy	Touch as healing
	Boring life	Dad’s job change-move	Security
	Abused by mentally ill brother	Therapy for family	Touch can be healing
	Life w/daughter	Death of daughter’s friend	Healing
	Happy life as newlyweds	Alcoholism of husband, separation	Reconciliation
	Meth addiction, Prostitution, abusive relationship	Left w/3 kids, sought treatment	Clean, seeking God

