

The Use of Story in Spiritual Direction

by

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Introduction

Story is one of the primary ways in which Christianity has been transmitted through the generations. Formation leaders, spiritual directors, and clergy frequently stress the importance of telling stories as a means of sharing our faith. Understanding our personal stories of faith in the context of the wider Christian narrative is key to our spiritual growth. Yet, when asked to tell the story of our faith journey, many of us may become uncomfortable, unable, or even unwilling to share it with others. How can a spiritual director then help directees learn to tell their very personal stories of faith in the process of spiritual direction? How do the overarching stories of faith in Scripture help a spiritual director work with directees to integrate their personal stories into the wider Christian narrative?

Before venturing too far into the discussion of how to use story, it will be helpful to clarify two terms. Most people use the terms “storytelling” and “telling a story” interchangeably. However, there are important nuances that differentiate one from the other. Storytelling is a performance, retelling the text to an audience for entertainment or instruction. Telling a story is sharing a personal story to build interpersonal relationships and derive a greater understanding of one’s own life. When we talk about storytelling in most church settings, especially in the Episcopal Church, people think of the performance of story. This paper will focus primarily on the telling of personal stories.

The full impact of story on our lives as Christians continues to be explored and reexamined. For too long the study of the Bible in Western Christianity has been done through the lens of historical criticism and a focus on sources. In the twentieth century the rediscovery of the importance of stories in the Bible gave rise to the discipline of narrative theology. In fact, narrative has become a theoretical framework in many disciplines including psychology and business. As a result, the use of story has become a popular topic outside of academic settings. The use of story, particularly in business, has had some interesting ramifications as churches try to reintegrate story into their understanding of Christianity, as will be seen in Chapter 2.

Within the Christian context, a movement grounded in the teaching methods of Maria Montessori sought to bring theology and Scripture to children in ways they could learn and understand. This generated two similar methods of sharing the Christian story with children—the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd and Godly Play. Godly Play had an especially profound influence on Christian formation in the Episcopal Church, as well as several other Protestant denominations. Its influence extended to the way the churches looked at children's formation and education, and at that of adults as well. The invitation to share the biblical stories is a part of Godly Play that allows people, young and old, to look at the biblical stories and to see that their own stories do, in fact, relate to what is happening in Scripture.

At the same time that these movements were taking place, there was also a growing interest in spiritual direction, a practice that had previously been actively participated in primarily in the Roman Catholic Church. More and more laypeople, and more and more non-Catholics were rediscovering this ancient practice of working with a soul friend/spiritual guide to explore their spirituality and their relationship with God, the religious institutions, and their religious culture/tradition, in other words, their stories.

In this paper I will look at the importance of storytelling in Scripture and some of the gaps in our Christian education/formation practices as they relate to Christians' ability to tell and share stories. I will then look at the theological and formation theories that have led to the reclaiming of the importance of storytelling in the Bible and Christianity, including narrative theology and Godly Play. I will lay out some of the elements of storytelling that are especially important for individuals being asked to share their own stories and at some of the critical reading skills needed to look more deeply into the biblical text of those less prominent stories that may speak more closely to individuals' lives than the "big-name" stories. Finally, I will look at the ways a spiritual director can teach and use these reading and telling skills with directees.

Chapter 1

Story in the Bible

The fact that the Bible contains stories should surprise no one. Christian parents have been teaching their children stories like Noah and the Flood, David and Goliath, Jesus in the Temple for centuries. Scholars from most schools of biblical theory and criticism agree that the origins of both the Old and New Testaments are the oral transmission of stories amongst the Jews and early Christians. Among the earliest plays presented in Europe were the medieval mystery or miracle plays based on stories from the Bible. Stories were also told visually through the pictures in the stained-glass windows of churches across Europe and the large standing stone crosses throughout Ireland. Artists through the centuries have depicted scenes from the Bible. Although the academic study and criticism over the last four or more centuries has given us much information about the Bible, stories remain the way in which most Christians learn, understand, and connect with the text that is at the heart of their faith.

Although the oral tradition did not cease and transcribing the Bible on paper and in local languages began long before the current canon was established, it was not until Gutenberg's invention of a printing press with moveable type in the 15th century that the Bible began to reach large audiences. The Reformation introduced the radical idea that Christians could read, and even interpret, the Bible for themselves and leaders of the new churches further spread the ability to read and study Scripture in their

own languages. However, in the process of removing the dependence of the congregation on the priest to read and interpret the Bible, some reformers extended their zeal to root out Roman idolatry to the destruction of statues, stained-glass windows and other forms of art. While the motive was the belief that all could read the Bible for themselves, these acts actually removed from the people ways in which they connected with the stories of the Bible. This alienation of people from the biblical stories continued as the Enlightenment swept across Europe and the Americas. Scholars engaged in rational/logical examination of everything around them, including the Bible, which was looked at in terms of its transmission and reception history, the culture that created it, the various language and translation issues, and more.

As Hans Frei taught us decades ago, historical criticism has used biblical narratives to reconstruct events that may have taken place behind the texts, leaving the reference that matters in the distant past. Historical criticism replaces the integrity of the narrative as it has come down to us with another narrative, the narrative of the past that the critic reconstructs.¹

For most of the last three centuries biblical scholars have operated from this understanding of the Bible as a product and presentation of history with some additional types of literature assimilated from the surrounding cultures of the Near East. In their view

the ancient writers meant their work to be taken as history. The history they wrote might be selective, inaccurate, or otherwise flawed, but it was nevertheless

¹ Philip Ruge-Jones, "Taking Luke's Gospel to Heart: Creating a Community of Mercy and Compassion through Biblical Storytelling," *Journal of the NABPR* 42, no. 1 (2015): 73

history. That an ancient writer may *not* have intended for his work to be viewed as historical—by which most people mean “true”—does not seem to have entered the discussion until much more recently.²

A major challenge to the Bible-as-solely-history argument came in 1917 with Hermann Gunkel’s *Das Märchen im Alten Testament (The Folktale in The Old Testament)*. *Das Märchen* looked at various genres of folktales, fables, and fairytales that appear in the Bible. Although he recognized that the terms “folktale” and “fairytales” evoked images of the Brothers Grimm and the Arabian Nights, Gunkel also recognized that, even though they evolved into nursery tales, these were the kind of stories that were ingrained into the human cultural/literary world view. The literary themes articulated in these tales showed up “even in the most highly sophisticated writings.”³ However, biblical studies continue to be plagued by a perhaps unintended consequence of Gunkel’s work. His treatment of biblical narrative in the category of folktales (Märchen) also places them in the context of the literature of children and less developed cultures.⁴

It would not be until the emergence of narrative theology, some 50 or so years later, that historical critical scholars began looking seriously at the Bible in terms of story.⁵ At least one major interpretive school claims

² Adele Berlin, “The Book of Esther and Ancient Storytelling.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 120, no. 1 (2001): 4.

³ Hermann Gunkel, *The Folktale in The Old Testament*, trans. Michael D. Rutter (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1987), 29-32.

⁴ John W. Rogerson, “Introduction” in *The Folktale in The Old Testament* by Hermann Gunkel (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1987): 16.

⁵ Most theologians and scholars trace the seeds of narrative theology to the second chapter of H. Richard Niebuhr’s 1941 book *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941) entitled “The Story of Our Life.” However, it did not begin

that at its most basic, narrative theology is “reflection on religious claims embedded in stories.”⁶ This encompasses a wide variety of approaches to the Bible and its component parts, whether they are treated as sub narratives, complete stories in and of themselves, or merely chapters in a great, overarching narrative. An analysis of all the elements and variations of narrative theology is beyond the scope of this paper.⁷ However, two strands of narrative theology have had important influences on how many Christians relate to the Bible as story and so connect with the goal of this paper.

1. The first of these strands focuses on the Bible as a single narrative telling the Christian story⁸ beginning with creation and ending with salvation. Northrop Frye, who began his career as a literary theorist and began applying literary criticism to the Bible, was a proponent of this view. His best-known articulation of this thinking is found in his book *The Great Code* (1982). For Frye, it was important to acknowledge that the Bible had been read as a single narrative for centuries. And it was as a story, as literature that the Bible had impacted culture and religious

to develop into a fuller theology until the 1970s. See Comstock (1987), L. G. Jones (1993), and Mieth (2005) for more on this topic.

⁶ Gary L. Comstock, “Two Types of Narrative Theology,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55 no. 4 (1987): 687.

⁷ For further discussions of this see Clark (1993), Comstock (1987), L. G. Jones (1993), and Mieth (2005).

⁸ While it is understood that the Hebrew Scriptures stand alone in their integrity, the majority of Christians view them as part of the salvation history of Christianity.

morality. Studying the biblical text as literature is where he believed this could be seen most clearly.⁹

A challenge for some, once the Bible is treated as one, overarching narrative, is to make the message of that overarching narrative more understandable to modern people. In 1820 Thomas Jefferson attempted this on a smaller scale. His *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* was designed to be a chronological narrative derived from the four Gospels that spoke to the morals that Jesus taught. He accomplished this by eliminating from his document anything that could be thought of as miraculous or supernatural. This approach aligned with his Enlightenment outlook. A more recent attempt, on a broader scale, is *The Story*, published in 2005. Subtitled “The Bible as One Continuing Story of God and His People,” this abridged version of the biblical narrative is intended to make the Bible read chronologically and more like a modern novel. This was accomplished by omitting chapter and verse numbers, editing poetic sections to read as prose, and eliminating or harmonizing passages that told the same story in different ways, such as the two creation stories. These types of harmonization not only violate the integrity of the Bible, they have a tendency to treat the reader as not being able to understand Scripture as presented.

Martha Downey questions whether the understanding of the Bible as an overarching narrative is possible or even needed. She goes on to say

⁹ Wegener, Mark Wegener. “Literary Criticism and Biblical Religious Language: Insights from Northrop Frye.” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 12 no 2 (Apr 1985): p 101-102.

that the problem with this sort of universal/single narrative understanding of the Bible is that it can lead to a single, exclusionary story that

leaves no room for diversity, multiplicity and individuality, all of which are highly valued in postmodernity. Theology's attempt to portray an overarching story fails at the point where it undermines the creative nature of the God we see in Genesis, a being who delights in variety and dissimilarity. It also falls short where it underplays the vulnerable and earthy humanity of Jesus and inflates his special status as the favoured Son of God.¹⁰

Ultimately Downey favors a both/and way of reading the biblical narrative—both appreciating the overarching narrative and the shorter stories that help individuals connect with the larger story.¹¹

2. The second strand of narrative theology that deals with telling stories is suggested by what Downey refers to as the “particular story.”¹² This approach, which sees the Bible as a collection or series of stories is prevalent in many mainline churches today. For many of those who hold this view, L. Gregory Jones contends that the terms “narrative” and “story” are interchangeable. They view religion and story as a way to evaluate the world, look at people's subjective views of the world, and give meaning to life. “From this perspective, both religion and story provide a counter-balance to modernity's excessive preoccupation with objectivity and scientific fact.”¹³

¹⁰ Downey, “A Perspective,” 299.

¹¹ Downey, “A Perspective,” 306-307.

¹² Downey, “A Perspective,” 298-299.

¹³ Gregory L. Jones, “Narrative Theology,” in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought*, ed. Alister E. McGrath, 395-398. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993): 397.

It is this way of understanding story in the Bible that seems to have influenced Jerome Berryman and Sonja Stewart, among others, whose work has been primarily with children. While both Berryman and Stewart promote the use of story with adults as well as children, the fact that their work has been primarily with children in Christian education settings has further advanced the idea that Bible stories are for children. However, Berryman and Stewart are very aware that for too many years Christian education programs for children have focused on learning Bible stories without really helping the children to connect with them.¹⁴ As a result, many adults still view these stories much the way Gunkel did, i.e., as folktales and fairytales, and so dismiss them without seeking a deeper understanding of how those literary forms function within the context of the Bible and connect with their own lives.

Tom Steffen and James Terry document the recognition of this lack of connection by missionaries working with the indigenous people of the Philippines in the mid-1970s. They spoke of members of the Palawanos “who professed to follow Christ but seemed to base their eternal salvation on praying, singing, faithful church attendance, destroying certain objects, and so forth.”¹⁵

[Trevor] McIlwain later spoke to the Philippine field at their annual conference in January, 1981, emphasizing the need to convey the panoramic story of

¹⁴ Stewart’s *Young Children and Worship* (written with Berryman) and *Following Jesus* and Berryman’s *Godly Play* all promote helping children to connect with the biblical stories. We will discuss this in greater depth in Chapter 2/3.

¹⁵ Tom A. Steffen and James O. Terry, Jr., “The Sweeping Story of Scripture Taught Through Time.” *Missiology: An International Review* 35, no. 3 (2007): 316.

God to convey a comprehensive Christianity built on a strong Old Testament foundation. He argued convincingly that God's message for long-term, cross-cultural church planting is best understood when told as it was delivered, i.e., a progressive, unfolding, panoramic story.¹⁶

While recognizing the importance of the overarching narrative of the Bible, the education program developed by the New Tribes Mission of the Philippines used particular stories to deliver that message. One of the things Steffen found he had to face was his own bias that stories were the realm of children and not suitable for teaching theology with precision. Immersion in the teaching work using stories "change[d] my appreciation for a storied sweep of the sacred Scriptures forever."¹⁷

Since the rise of narrative theology, that "storied sweep" has been studied by looking at the ways biblical stories function in the context of the Bible. Antony Campbell proposed the theory that some of the stories in the Bible might actually be outlines for storytellers. It was Campbell's argument that the 10-40 verse versions extant in the Bible appear too short to be actual transcriptions of oral stories which are traditionally quite elaborate. In his article he looks specifically at the Pentateuch and the histories presented by the Deuteronomistic and Chronicles writers. Some of his examples include the fall of Jericho in Joshua 6:3-20, which he believes "is more appropriately treated as a base story that has been annotated with liturgical options and the like instead of an unconvincing

¹⁶ Steffen and Terry, "The Sweeping Story," 316.

¹⁷ Steffen and Terry, "The Sweeping Story," 316

weaving of incomplete traditions,”¹⁸ and the story of David and Bathsheba, where a storyteller has the option of filling in gaps and perhaps resolving some of the issues omitted by the text.¹⁹

Such a record of what a story is about is an abbreviation of the telling of a story; it is shorter than the performance. Such a record offers a base for future storytelling, or for whatever use may be made of story tradition. Such a record, the independent story units, can be termed a “reported story.” It is the report of what a story is; it is not the telling of a story. For telling of a story, the storyteller is required; reported story and storyteller go hand in hand.²⁰

This notion of reported story and storyteller finds further expression in the work done by the Network of Biblical Storytellers, Int’l (NBS, Int’l). According to their website (as of February 2019, <http://www.nbsint.org/aboutus>), this organization believes that “the oral telling of the Holy Scriptures is of critical importance as the church grows and changes. We have dedicated ourselves to the study, internalization and performance of the ancient oral tradition of the Scripture.” In contrast to Campbell’s view that the biblical texts may be only outlines for a story, NBS, Int’l works toward telling the stories as they appear in the Bible. Their members aim for 75% verbal accuracy in reciting the written text and 95% accuracy of the content of the story. At the same time, they stress the notion that there is importance of the connections between the story,

¹⁸ Antony F. Campbell, “The Storyteller’s Role: Reported Story and Biblical Text.” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 64 (2002): 438.

¹⁹ Campbell, “The Storyteller’s Role,” 439.

²⁰ Campbell, “The Storyteller’s Role,” 429.

the storyteller, and the audience and the ability of these stories to transform the lives of all involved.

The NBS, Int'l also focuses on teaching people how to tell or to relearn the art of telling the biblical stories. And their storytelling encourages conversation about the stories. But they do not work as much with teaching people how to tell their own stories. And this next step in storytelling, which is one of the ways people can make those connections with the biblical stories and engage in the transformation of lives, is an important piece of the mission of the church. The next chapter looks at the ways in which churches teach, or do not teach people how to tell their own stories to make that engagement.

Chapter 2

The Lack of Teaching on Forming and Articulating Our Stories

Jerome Berryman tells us that stories not only connect us with each other, but also they are “where we integrate the experiences of our life into powerful acts of recognition, celebration and meaning as we make our way through time and space... Sharing stories and fully entering into the stories we share is also one way we learn to be genuinely mature.”²¹ As Christians, stories also bind us in a community with history and traditions. It is in this community that we hear and learn about God’s story and how to live faithfully into that story.²² As Christian churches and have rediscovered the prominence of story in the Bible, they have worked to spread that knowledge to their members. Various denominational institutions have developed programs using stories and storytelling. Some of these programs, like Young Children and Worship, Godly Play, and Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, focus primarily on children and the educators and formation leaders who work with them. As a result, these excellent programs tend to reinforce the belief that stories, especially telling them, are the realm of children. Programs designed for adults tend to focus more on listening to information about stories instead of helping participants learn how to prepare their own stories for sharing with others,

²¹ Jerome W. Berryman, *The Complete Guide to Godly Play*, Vol. 1. (Jerome Berryman, 2006): 28.

²² Benjamin D. Espinoza, “Transforming Lives Through the Transforming Story: Exploring the Power of Narrative Teaching in Families and Congregations,” *Journal of Family and Community Ministries* 27 (2014): 103.

thereby connecting personal stories with stories in the Bible, with individual Christians, and with the larger Christian community(ies).

And yet, people, young and old, tell stories all the time. It is a natural part of everyday conversations. It is how we relate to the world. Why is it that, as soon as we are asked to share our stories in more formal ways, especially in a theological or spiritual context, many of us freeze up and become inarticulate? “Authorship from our own life experience suddenly forces the questions about what role the story will have in our lives, right now, or in the future.”²³ Having the ability to process, create, and shape our stories is important. This is where the vast majority of denominational and congregational education programs fail. Imagination is at the heart of storytelling and this is where, too often, Christian education falls short. I contend that part of the reason these programs don’t take hold in the imagination of our membership is that we don’t teach this part. As an example, I will focus on the Episcopal Church, where a number of programs focused on stories, biblical and personal, have been created and promoted briefly only to disappear.

For nearly a decade I worked in the Children’s Ministries and Christian Education office at the Episcopal Church Center, the denominational headquarters of the Episcopal Church, ending my time there as the Officer for Children’s Ministries. I became very familiar with curricula being used across the Episcopal Church and other

²³ Joe Lambert and Brooke Hessler. *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Communities*. 5th edition. (New York: Routledge, 2018),143.

denominations. One of the resources frequently offered and used was *In Dialogue with Scripture*, the fourth edition of which was already five years old when I joined the Center (and is still available on the Episcopal Church's web site at this writing). The denomination staff, and many formation leaders across the church, considered it a foundational document for Christian formation in the Episcopal Church. While *In Dialogue with Scripture* is primarily intended to be a resource for Bible study, it does have some things to say about Christians as storytellers and about how important stories are to our faith.²⁴ Yet even this foundational document does not really speak to how we teach people to tell their stories.

The Children's Ministries Office, working with the Episcopal Council for Christian Education, put together a conference in 2003 titled "Will Our Faith Have Children." The foundation for the conference's work was a video of people telling their stories. The team organizing the video used a process based on narrative theology and worked with children and adults in five cities across the country. The process included "asking a question, listening to one's story in the context of salvation history, and allowing for natural theological reflection."²⁵ The recorded stories were shared during several important points throughout the

²⁴ Linda L. Grenz, ed., *In Dialogue with Scripture: An Episcopal Guide to Studying the Bible*. 4th ed. (New York: Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church, 1997), iii.

²⁵ This was taken from the Christian Education, *Theological Overview of the Video "Will Our Faith Have Children?"* for the 2002 conference. Archives of Sharon Pearson.

conference. In addition, keynote speakers were encouraged to respond to the stories as they developed their presentations. Seminar tracks used the same framework of reflection.²⁶ Over 500 representatives from virtually every diocese in the Episcopal Church participated in the conference, which generated some excitement around the church's work with children and interest in using the process developed for the video as part of that work. However, the initiatives quickly lost momentum as the Church turned to focus on other priorities, primarily for youth and young adults. Once again, storytelling was left with the children.

An ambitious, adult-focused program, using Marshall Ganz's Public Narrative model, was implemented for the Episcopal Church's 76th General Convention in 2009. Ganz's work has been focused on issues of social change and the role story plays in creating those changes. Public Narrative was used during Barak Obama's 2008 presidential campaign to train leadership teams.²⁷ For the General Convention program, three 90-minute sessions were held in which participants learned Public Narrative skills in using stories to share values. It was hoped that a great deal of enthusiasm would be generated and taken back to the individual dioceses, but the program received a mixed response. While many participants were enthusiastic about the process and its potential for discussing and furthering the church's mission, some participants were unsure of how

²⁶ Episcopal Council, *Theological Overview*.

²⁷ "Interview with Marshall Ganz on 'Public Narrative,'" November 26, 2014. <https://workingnarratives.org/interview-with-marshall-ganz-on-public-narrative/>, accessed April 10, 2019.

Public Narrative could be implemented back in their home dioceses and parishes.²⁸ Ultimately, without ongoing support from denominational leadership, the program did not take root and accomplish the goals the leadership had set out. Some 10 years later, looking at “A Public Narrative Learner’s Guide” developed for the Diocese of California, one of the few places where Public Narrative continued to be used by formation leaders, and was based on the General Convention material,²⁹ it is clear that the program focused on shaping personal story as a leadership skill rather than as in-depth personal reflection. This was story in the business or political model rather than the spiritual/religious one. Only a handful of Episcopal formation leaders are still using Public Narrative in their work today.³⁰

In 2014, the Young Adult and Campus Ministry Office of the Episcopal Church Center launched “Storytelling Project: Stories of Transformation” to encourage young adults in the Episcopal Church to tell their stories and give them opportunities to do so at events across the church. These events would be recorded and shared through the Office of Young Adult and Campus Ministries website and social media. The best

²⁸ Mary Frances Schjonberg, “Public narrative offers Episcopalians leadership training, call to mission,” July 16, 2009, <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/article/public-narrative-offers-episcopalians-leadership-training-call-mission>, accessed February 25, 2019.

²⁹ Diocese of California. *A Public Narrative: Learner’s Guide for the Diocese of California*. 2009. http://diocal.org/sites/default/files/media/PDF%20Docs/diocal_publicnarrative_learners_guide.pdf, accessed November 16, 2018.

³⁰ Julia McCray Goldsmith, e-mail message to the author, February 25, 2019.

of these stories would then be shared at General Convention 2015.³¹

Although there are guidelines provided on how to submit a proposal, nowhere were there any resources for helping people learn how to tell their stories. There is currently no reference on the website to the stories that were collected and shared. There is a link to a “Storytelling” page on the top menu of The Episcopal Church web pages where there is a large collection of videos. However, few, if any, of the nearly 70 web pages of videos are personal stories of individual Episcopalians. There is also an archive of “Sermons that Work” that contains various articles on a variety of sermon topics, along with an extensive image gallery, but there, too, one can find no resources for learning how to tell stories.

Even the most recent programs miss the point. The new initiative from General Convention, *The Way of Love*, is about sharing our thoughts and feelings but not really our stories. Another example is the Church’s Beloved Community Racial Reconciliation Evangelism Initiative, which provides a *Beloved Community StorySharing Guidebook*. StorySharing is defined as what happens when “we tell our own stories and welcome other’s stories of what matters most... [Y]ou will articulate the many ways you have experienced God’s presence... your own life, your racial and cultural identity, and the difference God has planted throughout

³¹ Angell, Mike. “Storytelling Project: Stories of Transformation,” October 21, 2014. <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/posts/youngadult/storytelling-project-stories-transformation>, accessed November 21, 2018.

creation.”³² They define stories as “narrative events from the teller’s personal experience... Stories help us to ask questions and see eternal truths.”³³ The authors of the guidebook promote “StorySharing” over “Storytelling” because “Storytelling is used to persuade, to convince, to shape understanding. Storytelling is generally one-way and thus can be transactional. StorySharing is relational. It is about engagement and creating connections.”³⁴

The authors tread a fine line in their distinction, a line that may be more appearance than reality. Storytelling has, indeed, been used to persuade, convince, and shape understanding. Those applications of storytelling have been part of the spread of the Christian “good news” for centuries. But Christianity is a community endeavor and relationship is at the heart of that community. So, while persuasion has become a business practice and one that is used to harm as well as to help, storytelling should not be limited in its potential as a spiritual/religious practice as a result. Is it not the very nature and purpose of our Gospels to persuade, convince, and shape understanding? But they accomplish this by engaging and connecting with those who read or hear their story of the life and ministry of Jesus. In their effort to distinguish from others their particular method of communicating and connecting, the guidebook authors have essentially

³² H. Mallette Stephens, Day Smith Pritchatt, Stephanie Spellers, Jerusalem Greer, and Courtney Cowart. *Beloved Community StorySharing Guidebook* (New York: The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church, 2018), 5.

³³ Stephens, Pritchatt, Stephanie Spellers, Greer, and Cowart. *Beloved Community*, 8.

³⁴ Stephens, Pritchatt, Stephanie Spellers, Greer, and Cowart. *Beloved Community*, 8.

taken an important aspect of storytelling—engaging and connecting—and called it by another name. And, regardless of the name given to the practice, the guidebook, like the efforts that preceded it, fails to meet the need for people to be taught to tell their stories in order to share them.

Over and over again, church leadership and those responsible for Christian formation talk about Christians as a people of story. And yet, these leaders continually fail to help individual Christians learn how to be a people who are able to shape and share their own stories and to understand how those stories fit into the two important larger stories: our Scripture and our Tradition. However, not all programs being used in the Episcopal Church are failures. Godly Play, discussed previously, and Education for Ministry (EfM) are two programs that seek to teach participants to tell/share stories. As noted above, Godly Play (like similar programs such as Stewart’s Young Children and Worship or Cavalletti’s Catechesis of the Good Shepherd) is primarily aimed at helping children to engage the biblical story in a variety of ways. Berryman also acknowledges the importance of story and of engaging with one another across generations in community, and Godly Play has been used successfully with adults in hospitals and nursing homes. Despite this, the church continues to focus these programs on children which only reinforces the perception that the realm of story is for children and not adults.

EfM is a four-year, adult theological education program, facilitated in small groups, administered by Sewanee. An important component at the beginning of the program year is the sharing of spiritual autobiographies by all participants in the group. The autobiographies are developed with a particular shape—a different shape each year.³⁵ Participants are given tools for writing about their life, looking at what they are and are not willing to share with the group. They are given permission not to share certain things, but the permission is not very helpful for those who are unsure of how much to share or uncertain of how comfortable they are with sharing. Each participant must share at least some of their story because this sharing is important to the life of the group.

In the end, the absence of real storytelling support in the Episcopal Church, as well as other churches, is not so much the lack of resources, it is that the resources are developed all too quickly. There appears to be a need to create a bright, shiny package based on the latest trends without looking at what programs have been done in the past. The problem is made worse by an ongoing focus on sharing stories with little or no preparation in how to shape and articulate them. In spite of the lack of resources for this kind of training in churches, there is material out there that can be used by Spiritual Directors to help directees shape, share, and

³⁵ An example of this process can be found in the Education for Ministry *Reading and Reflection Guide Volume B, 2018–2019: Living Faithfully in a Multicultural World*. (Sewanee: University of the South, 2018): 29-31.

connect with their stories. These will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Resources for Integrating Story in Spiritual Direction

There are three main elements to using story in spiritual direction as a means to encourage spiritual growth. The first is getting the directee to articulate their story. The second is getting them to connect their story to the biblical stories. The third is connecting with the tradition and the Christian community. While these three aims are intertwined, my initial focus will be on examining some of the ways spiritual directors can encourage and help directees to tell their stories, beginning within the context of spiritual direction and ultimately in other contexts, within other church (and non-church/faith) settings.

Sometimes getting a directee to open up and articulate their story takes nothing more than saying “tell me a story about...” However, it is not always that easy. While formation leaders, spiritual directors, and clergy emphasize the importance of sharing personal stories, learning to articulate and share these stories of faith often requires assistance. However, as shown in the previous chapter, despite the church’s emphasis on telling and sharing stories in many different capacities and settings, there is frequently a lack of training/assistance to support people in telling their stories. That does not mean, however, that the necessary resources are totally absent.

Education for Ministry (EfM), which was mentioned in the previous chapter, is one program that is familiar to at least some

Episcopalians. The spiritual autobiography process used in EfM deserves a more in-depth look to see how it might help a spiritual director to work with a directee to shape and share their personal story.³⁶ This process takes place in every year of the program, so, over the course of their time in EfM, participants formally share their stories four times. Sharing is “not optional. Everyone, participant and mentor alike, participates in this exercise.”³⁷ The prompts for thinking about and writing the spiritual autobiography change each year, offering participants different ways of approaching their story. This is important because people come to their stories from different perspectives, seeing their lives through various lenses as time passes. What might have seemed important the previous year while working through the spiritual autobiography might not feel as significant this year; new memories might be revealed, or old ones seen in a new light. Using the EfM spiritual autobiography process could enable the directee to speak of their religion and faith. A person’s understanding of their faith will also change. Given the nature of spiritual autobiography, religion and faith will be part of the story, just as well as more mundane aspects of a person’s life.³⁸ Speaking of religion and faith, however, is not the same as connecting with the biblical stories and the larger tradition. That will come later as the director and directee work together.

³⁶ The current year’s version of the *Reading and Reflection Guide* is always posted on the resources page of the EfM website. <http://efm.sewanee.edu/resources/resources> as of March 12, 2019.

³⁷ Richard E. Brewer, Angela Hock Brewer, and Karen M. Meredith, *Reading and Reflection Guide Volume B, 2018–2019: Living Faithfully in a Multicultural World*. (Sewanee: University of the South, 2018): 21

³⁸ Brewer, Brewer and Meredith, *Reading*, 22.

Some directees are familiar with the idea of spiritual autobiography. For others it may be a new concept. There are several books available that can walk someone through the process of writing—or at least thinking about—their spiritual autobiography. Richard Morgan’s *Remembering Your Story* offers a reminder that “Any age is a good age to reflect on the story of your life.”³⁹ Morgan provides a “Four Ages Questionnaire” with 100 questions broken down into what he identifies as the four ages of life (he breaks the first age into two parts—Childhood and Teen Years).⁴⁰ These questions provide an excellent starting point for a directee with little idea of where to begin.

Richard Patterson’s *Writing Your Spiritual Autobiography* begins with a look at family from the perspective of “Spiritual Genealogy.”⁴¹ Patterson’s book is laid out in a series of short readings, each followed by a reflection prompt. The topics of the reflections cover a wide spectrum of human experience, from “Mysticism” and “The Sandwich Generation” to “Sex and Sexuality” and “Addiction. In working with Patterson, as with Morgan, a director needs to emphasize to the directee that a spiritual autobiography is a deeply personal story, and the directees are being asked to share only what they are comfortable with at the time.

³⁹ Richard L Morgan, *Remembering Your Story: Creating Your Own Spiritual Autobiography*. Revised Edition (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2002): 16.

⁴⁰ Morgan, *Remembering*, 162-166.

⁴¹ Richard B. Patterson, *Writing Your Spiritual Autobiography* (Allen: Thomas More Publishing, 2002) 15-18.

Richard Peace's *Spiritual Autobiography* is a guide for group study. While all the readings and reflections could be used by an individual, the book's more helpful sections are in the second half. "The Role of Spiritual Autobiography" gives a brief history of the genre and the ways in which a person might use their spiritual autobiography.⁴² In addition to three sections on how to prepare and write a spiritual autobiography, Peace concludes with a section titled "The Spiritual Discipline of Noticing." There he says, "We learn to notice God's presence throughout our lives... The aim... is to move the spiritual from the edges of our lives to the center."⁴³ While his observations about the ways of "noticing" are helpful in spiritual direction, they do not focus on or offer specific support for the use of story in spiritual direction. Again, it is up to the director to discern what might be most helpful to the directee at a particular stage in the journey. Sometimes it can be important to learn to notice things before talking about them.

Another process designed primarily for groups but useful for individuals is *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community* by Joe Lambert and Angela Hessler. Especially helpful are their chapters "Seven Steps of Digital Storytelling," "The Story Circle," and "Approaches to the Scripting Process."⁴⁴ While Lambert and Hessler

⁴² Richard Peace, *Spiritual Autobiography: Discovering and Sharing Your Spiritual Story*. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1998): 57-63.

⁴³ Peace, *Spiritual*, 89.

⁴⁴ Joe Lambert and Brooke Hessler. *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Communities*. 5th edition. (New York: Routledge, 2018): 53-70, 71-85, and 95-102.

focus on telling stories in a digital format, their work with people in preparing for digital storytelling can be useful in the context of spiritual direction. Their seven steps (Owning Your Insights, Owning Your Emotions, Finding the Moment, Seeing Your Story, Hearing Your Story, Assembling Your Story, and Sharing Your Story) are meant to provide “a framework for the discussion of the aesthetic quality of this particular form,” but they “were never meant as a prescribed ‘catechism’ of storytelling.”⁴⁵ However, the facilitation process used in the first part of their Story Circle workshops sounds much like what spiritual directors do in their sessions.

The art of facilitation is in listening for the storyteller’s conscious and unconscious vulnerabilities—to delicately probe the borders to the extent their ego can withstand critique. Over time, erring on the side of caution yields a safer and consistently more successful process, while pushing a storyteller at precisely the right moment with the right suggestion can yield a transformative breakthrough for the story and the storyteller.⁴⁶

Lambert and Hessler and the EfM process of spiritual autobiography both focus on working with small groups, and while the EfM process emphasizes the private nature of spiritual autobiography, spiritual direction is a much more intimate setting—especially as trust grows between the directee and the director, which is also one of reasons for spiritual autobiography. “Martin Buber, twentieth-century philosopher and Jewish theologian is reputed to have said that he could never hold a

⁴⁵ Lambert and Hessler, *Digital Storytelling*, 53.

⁴⁶ Lambert and Hessler, *Digital Storytelling*, 74.

significant conversation with another person until he had heard the other's life story."⁴⁷ This thought raises an important point. During the early stages of working with a directee, the director also needs to share appropriate parts of his or her own story.

How much a director shares or does not share with a directee is a fine line that the director needs to be aware of constantly. Margaret Guenther addresses this fine line in *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction*. Telling a story is not done in a vacuum, and even though spiritual directors spend most of their time listening, they make comments and ask questions. However, there are times when a little self-revelation can be helpful in providing the directees with affirmation that what they are feeling and expressing is not strange or unusual. As Guenther points out, "Directees tend to set extremely high standards for themselves and expect in their new state of self-awareness, that they will not become impatient or succumb to petty maliciousness. A director's shared humanity can be a valuable corrective."⁴⁸

However I join in the storytelling, whether by invitation or my own intuition, our sense of solidarity is increased. We are united in our sinfulness, our baptism, and the commonalities of our journeys. I need not say much, just a few words to help make the connections.⁴⁹

I would suggest that the director's sharing of their own story can be more than a corrective or an aid to making connections. This sharing

⁴⁷ Brewer, et. al., *Reading*, 22.

⁴⁸ Guenther, *Holy Listening*, 35.

⁴⁹ Guenther, *Holy Listening*, 36.

can also serve as a model for the directee. As part of the modeling process, directors should point out that one's personal story can be, and has been, shaped and reshaped many times over the years. Further, how one crafts a story will vary from person to person, and each person's story is different from every other person's story.

Once a directee can successfully articulate his or her story—no matter how imperfect that may be (and imperfection is part of the process)—the process of learning how to make more deliberate connections with biblical stories can begin. Even at this early point, however, a director needs to exercise caution. Liz Hoare writes, “While directors may desire to connect a directee's experience with the Christian Story, it is important not to go too fast and impose religious imagery and language on another's articulated experience.”⁵⁰

One reason Hoare urges caution in terms of introducing a biblical framework on a directee's experiences is that she also is concerned with the general lack of biblical grounding in Christian spiritual direction. “Few of the standard textbooks on spiritual direction refer explicitly to the place of Scriptures in the ministry of direction. This is potentially a serious problem in today's spiritually confused climate.”⁵¹ She points to Henri Nouwen's book *Spiritual Direction*, put together after his death by two of his followers, as one that clearly names the Bible as a critical part of the

⁵⁰ Liz Hoare, *Using the Bible in Spiritual Direction* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2016): 16

⁵¹ Hoare, *Using*, 27.

direction practice.⁵² She also highlights Margaret Guenther's book as one with grounding in biblical imagery. The Bible is important to Hoare, who sees it as "the basic tool of spiritual directors," and believes "it is vital that we use it regularly ourselves and are confident in handling it. We need to be open to hearing God speak to us through its words before we can facilitate others in listening."⁵³

Hoare has a very specific vision of the Bible. She is clear in her vision that the Bible is a unified story, from Genesis to Revelation, with Jesus at the center.

It is only as we grasp this and learn to live in this story that we will find not only the meaning of the world but the meaning of our own lives as well. This is not easy to hear in a postmodern world that claims to have rejected all overarching stories. But the Bible has to be taken on its own terms if it is to shape the lives of those who come to it seeking the way to live.⁵⁴

She critiques the view of the Bible, which she believes is held by the majority of people, as a "disconnected set of writings they have encountered in different ways."⁵⁵ This perspective is not only dismissive of how many people, including clergy and biblical scholars, interact with the Bible; it disregards the reality of the Bible as a collection of writings that focus on individual relationships with God. Hoare is uncomfortable with these individual stories in the Bible because she believes "we tend to place them on pedestals that tower over our heads. Using Bible characters

⁵² Hoare, *Using*, 28.

⁵³ Hoare, *Using*, 30.

⁵⁴ Hoare, *Using*, 33.

⁵⁵ Hoare, *Using*, 33.

whom we have turned into super-saints to beat ourselves up with is not a helpful way into reflecting on their relationships with God and what they may teach us.”⁵⁶ She would much more prefer that we use the Bible as a guidebook for living as Christians.⁵⁷

Other writers, like Gareth Brandt, disagree with Hoare. “How odd then that we so often turn to the Bible as little more than an instruction manual for communal and personal life.”⁵⁸ It is true that Christians are taught, directly and indirectly, even in the most liberal denominations, that the Bible is both the source of our salvation and a way to order our Christian lives.⁵⁹ The problem with using the Bible as a guidebook is that it focuses on the rules of how to live rightly and ignores the many stories of people who succeeded despite not following the rules. Brandt encourages us to look at the Bible not as a finished product but rather “as an unfolding script in which we have been invited to play a continuing role, following the lead of the main actors whose names and lines are recorded in it.”⁶⁰ Brandt wants us to look at the characters in the Bible as real people with whom we can develop relationships. “When we see the

⁵⁶ Hoare, *Using*, 44.

⁵⁷ Hoare, *Using*, 37.

⁵⁸ Gareth Brandt, “Men and women of the Bible as spiritual companions.” *Vision* 11, no. 2 (2010): 72.

⁵⁹ A look at the ordination services in denominations’ worship books reveals phrases such as “the rule of Christian faith and practice (United Church of Christ), “all things necessary for salvation” (Episcopal Church), and “preach and teach in accordance with the Holy Scriptures” (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America).

⁶⁰ Brandt, “Men and Women,” 30.

Bible as story, we begin to embrace its characters as *companions* who are like us rather than as *models* we should emulate or learn lessons from.”⁶¹

In his article Brandt uses the Joseph story—one of the “great characters” with his own, lengthy story—to prove his point. He makes two critical mistakes. The first is focusing on the “major characters.” The second is believing that men can only identify with male characters. While his article was based on work he did with a group of men, I believe he shortchanges the richness of the biblical stories and the fact that men may find that they identify with women in the Bible, and vice versa. Some of the most interesting characters, both men and women, are the minor ones.

It is likely that directees will initially choose one of the major characters to work with in telling their story because those are the people with whom they are most familiar. Most Christians remember the stories taught in Sunday School or retold in popular literature, almost all of which involved major characters and themes. Only a few of the shorter stories with minor characters are frequently taught (Rahab and Levi come to mind). As a directees become more adept at connecting with biblical story, they can be nudged toward looking at less popular/familiar stories and identifying minor characters with whom to engage.

A classic example of engaging with and connecting to a biblical story is Henri Nouwen’s *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. While it is a familiar story, the parable of the prodigal son is neither long (only 21

⁶¹ Brandt, “Men and women,” 7 (*italics mine*).

verses) nor part of one of the larger narratives. Nouwen shows how much depth one can find in even a few verses of Scripture. The book is based on studying Rembrandt's painting depicting the story, so Nouwen's engagement with the written story is through the visual as well as the verbal.⁶² He writes about how he identified, even if only in a small way, with each character in the painting. He shows how studying the characters affected how he viewed his own life, how it reshaped some of his own story. While Nouwen did this exploration on his own without the guidance of a spiritual director, the practices he lays out, along with his personal reflections, can serve as a guide for work done in spiritual direction.

There are other examples of large roles played by minor characters. Guenther uses the example of Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives from Exodus:

hardly household names! These two brave, intensely practical women are hidden in the rich narrative of Exodus, meriting only a few lines of text over against the exhaustive account of Moses' leadership of Israel. We are told little besides their names, but where would the story be without these midwives, tenacious and crafty guardians of new life?⁶³

Sometimes it is the stories or parts of stories of the characters that are not actually present in the text that can engage us. Cecil B. DeMille demonstrated this when he filmed *The Ten Commandments*. For instance, the Bible says little or nothing about Pharaoh's daughter after she adopts

⁶² Visual engagement can be very effective with directees but is outside the purview of this paper.

⁶³ Guenther, *Holy Listening*, 82.

Moses, although there are stories about her in midrash (a Jewish practice of engaging with Scripture that will be discussed further). DeMille participates in this continuing midrash by depicting Pharaoh's daughter accompanying her adopted son and leaving Egypt with the Israelites. DeMille also creates vignettes of other unidentified characters in the scenes of the Israelites leaving Egypt and passing through the waters of the Red Sea. The old woman in her bed on top of a cart. The child herding poultry. The woman looking back over her shoulder at the advancing Egyptians. DeMille knew the power of these individual moments to engage our interest and help us make connections. Working with directees to identify moments like these in the biblical stories that capture their attention can help them with begin the process of making connections with the stories.

Midrash is one of several tools that can be used to work with a directee to make these connections. Rabbi Sandy Sasso's small volume *God's Echo* is a good introduction to the practice.⁶⁴ She begins by wondering what it would look like to "read the Bible by allowing it to help us tell the stories of our lives? What if we read our joys, our fears, and our doubts into the biblical narrative?"⁶⁵ Sasso's book is about connecting human stories with the biblical stories. She walks the reader through

⁶⁴ It should be noted that there is an ongoing debate among both Jews and Christians about the appropriateness of Christians engaging in midrash. Sasso does not see this as a problem, as she has included in her book an afterword by Sister Joan Chittister, a respected Roman Catholic writer.

⁶⁵ Sandy Sasso, *God's Echo: Exploring Scripture with Midrash* (Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2007): 3.

examples of midrash to see what writers in the past have had to say about stories relating to passages from the Bible. Each section looks at responses written by different teachers responding to each other's midrash. Sasso includes her own short reflections and then asks the reader "Where do you see yourself in the story?" To do these exercises, Sasso lays out a fourfold method of midrash: looking at the plain meaning of the text (*peshat*), references and connections to other texts (*remez*), delving deeper into the text to develop meaning from it—sometimes "by reading into the text what may not be immediately apparent."⁶⁶ (*drash*), and the secret or mystical understanding of the text (*sod*).⁶⁷ Sasso hopes the reader will use midrash to engage with the rabbis from the past.

Sasso makes an important observation

I have always been amazed at how at one point in my life a particular midrash seems interesting simply as a piece of classical rabbinic literature, while at another it appears to speak out to the ages directly to me. Life changes you, and what at one time is someone else's narrative becomes your own, one you were meant to retell.⁶⁸

This is why we continually revisit our stories and allow the biblical stories to reinterpret our stories, integrate new insights and changes, and shape our story in new ways before repeating the cycle.

In her book *The Burning Word: A Christian Encounter with Jewish Midrash*, Judith Kunst writes about her evolving relationship with the

⁶⁶ Sasso, *God's Echo*, 29-30.

⁶⁷ Sasso, *God's Echo*, 31.

⁶⁸ Sasso, *God's Echo*, p. 35.

Bible. She asks what it means to “experiment with, add to, a text that is divinely sanctioned, set apart as holy?”⁶⁹ She speaks about her religious tradition where any practice that played with the text of the Bible came dangerously close to being viewed as sacrilege.⁷⁰ They were “taught to believe that the Bible is our bedrock, the solid ground we build our lives upon. We are much safer putting our energies into guarding that word than pulling it apart and playing around with it.”⁷¹ Using the apostle Peter’s effort to walk on the waves as an example, Kunst concludes that “this is what imaginative reading requires: a willingness to step completely out of the boat and dive into the waters with a God who has declared from the beginning that we will not drown... to bring our whole selves... to the Word who, when called to, says, ‘Come.’”⁷²

In every chapter of her book Kunst includes one or more “Toward A Personal Practice” exercises and reflections on how she encounters midrash as a Christian. She encourages her readers to use these exercises to start their own conversation with Scripture.⁷³ Kunst’s work might prove more accessible for some Christians than Sasso’s or other Jewish sources. Both books show ways in which directees can learn to play with the Bible texts and their own stories and see how the two interact with and reflect each other.

⁶⁹ Judith M. Kunst, *The Burning Word: A Christian Encounter with Jewish Midrash* (Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2006): 82.

⁷⁰ For another perspective on the dangers of “playing” with the biblical text see Richard L. Schultz’s *Out of Context* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012).

⁷¹ Kunst, *Burning*, 82

⁷² Kunst, *Burning*, 86.

⁷³ Kunst, *Burning*, ix.

Another practice for learning to connect personal stories with biblical stories is theological reflection. There are a variety of resources available for exploring theological reflection, but the ones I have found most useful come from EfM, which are now available online.

The EfM program suggests that theological reflection occurs at the juncture of our personal experience and the world we encounter. Both are enveloped by the divine milieu which we encounter in liturgy and spiritual points in our lives. Reflection occurs when we stand in the juncture [of the Individual/Personal and the World/Cosmic].⁷⁴

EfM's four-source model approaches theological reflection using “*Action*... that which we do and experience... *Position*... our attitudes, opinions, beliefs, and convictions... *Culture*... encompasses almost all the objective content available to us... all the aspects of life we do not think of as part of our Christian Tradition... *Tradition*... the content of the Christian heritage.”⁷⁵

The program provides several methods of theological reflection that can be used with a group or individually.⁷⁶ Two that would best serve as a starting place for a directee are the Microscope Method and Beginning with Scripture. The Microscope Method begins with an incident, or personal experience—the directee's story—and examines the thoughts and feelings that arose at a particular point of time in the story. A

⁷⁴ Education for Ministry, “Common Lesson Two: Methods of Theological Reflection” (Sewanee: The School of Theology Programs Center, 2005): 2-10-1.

⁷⁵ EfM, “Common Lesson,” 2-10-1 – 2-10-2 (italics mine).

⁷⁶ In the more recent versions of the program there has been an increased emphasis on individual theological reflection, but the methods are not significantly different when used by an individual instead of a group.

metaphor is then created from the examination of the story by listing images that come to mind and choosing one.⁷⁷ and explored using the categories of Creation, Sin, Judgment, Repentance, and Redemption. From there, an element from Christian tradition—usually a passage from the Bible or a verse of a hymn—is chosen based on its similarity or challenge to the metaphor explored. The examination process is repeated, and the results are then compared and contrasted to the original situation, to the culture around a person, and to their own personal positions. The end of the process identifies any insights the participant(s) have, based on their working through this method.⁷⁸ The first step of Beginning with Scripture is choosing a biblical text and then examining it in a variety of ways, including the categories of Creation, Sin, Judgment, Repentance, and Redemption. Using the results of that examination, the process then moves on to personal experience, culture, position, and insights.⁷⁹

The tools discussed in this chapter are only a handful of the many available. However, they offer useful resources that can help spiritual directors to introduce directees to the art of telling their stories and more deeply engaging with the biblical stories. As the work of connecting personal stories with biblical stories continues, a directee will also begin to make connections with both the church communities' stories and the stories of the larger Christian tradition. These connections help the

⁷⁷ EfM, "Common Lesson," 2-1-7. The resource includes further explanation of this process on page 2-11-4.

⁷⁸ EfM, "Common Lesson," 2-1-1 – 2-1-15.

⁷⁹ EfM, "Common Lesson," 2-2-(1)-5 – 2-2-(2)-7.

directees deepen their spiritual lives and begin to see the ways in which they can live a more God-centered life.

Conclusion

Our culture and our society have been rediscovering that stories are not just the realm of children's tales. Telling and using stories has become a practice in business, psychology, medicine, and a number of other fields. Articles talking about the importance of storytelling appear frequently in professional and popular journals. Scientific research has explored how telling stories affects our brain activity.⁸⁰ Yet it has taken time for the rediscovery of the importance of the stories in the Bible to find its way out of academia and into our churches, in spite of the fact that stories have been a major method of transmitting the faith from one generation to another for most of Christianity's history. If, as Jerome Berryman tells us, stories are the way in which we find our identity and build community, confront the ills of the world, and integrate "the experiences of our life into powerful acts of recognition, celebration, and meaning,"⁸¹ then we must learn how to articulate our stories to others both individually and in group settings. Despite the emphasis by churches on the importance of people sharing their individual stories, there is very little teaching about how to do this offered in church settings. As we have seen in the Episcopal Church, programs that involve the telling and sharing of stories often assume either that articulating a story is an innate human skill, or that participants have learned elsewhere how to tell their stories. Instead these programs often focus on listening skills, which is only one third of

⁸⁰ Lambert, *Digital Storytelling*, 6-7.

⁸¹ Berryman, *The Complete Guide*, 28.

the equation. Equal attention should be paid to how to form and articulate stories.

When people come to a spiritual director without the skills to articulate their own stories and share them with another individual in a very personal setting, it becomes difficult to do the work of spiritual direction. Of course, directees can simply talk about their experiences with the director, and the director can help them tease out questions and insights. However, to dive deeply into these experiences, a more formal story structure can provide the framework that will guide the directee to make stronger connections and deeper insights. This where the spiritual director can assist the directee by providing the necessary tools to learn to articulate the stories and to make these connections and insights.

Once a directee can tell their story and see its importance, the making of connections to the biblical stories can begin. This step is not an easy one because, as Sonja Stewart reminds us, not only are we working with ancient stories but most of us have also read and studied them from the historical critical perspective. This historical critical approach is fascinating, and on many levels, it is good to know because it helps us to understand the Bible's roots and contexts. "Yet people of the Bible often remained 'characters,' from long ago and far away."⁸² Because they are so distant from our own experience, we often have only limited interactions with them. By leaving them in the context of ancient history, we miss the

⁸² Stewart, *Following Jesus*, 21.

opportunities for these people's stories to have a much deeper impact on our lives.

Another factor that directors need to keep in mind derives from the desire for involvement in churches and in other faith communities today by people who are new to the faith. It is not uncommon for people to become part of a church without knowing the stories that ground the Christian faith. Some of these people may come to spiritual direction before they have learned much about the biblical stories. As a result, the spiritual director may need to introduce a directee to biblical stories before connections to their personal story can be developed. It may also be necessary for the director to enter the role of teacher to guide the directee through the ways to look at Bible stories and make those connections.

What tools does a spiritual director need to engage directees in stories, both their own and the biblical ones? While a study of narrative theology isn't necessary, a familiarity with it can be helpful both in creating a definition of what story is and how stories function in the Bible. Beyond that, a spiritual director needs a good grounding in Scripture, including its history and the contexts from which it arose. Spiritual directors must be able to articulate their own stories before they can teach others how to articulate their stories. They must be able not only to demonstrate engagement with the biblical stories but also to understand how to guide others through the process as well. The resources discussed

in Chapter 3 are not exhaustive but are a starting place for the director to provide ways of working with story in spiritual direction.

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