

STORY, FORMATION AND BELONGING TO SOMETHING BIGGER

I reluctantly attended a live performance of the Disney musical, *The Little Mermaid*. “This will be a waste of time,” I thought to myself as I drove to the theater. “I will be surrounded by a lot of little kids who will talk incessantly during the show and need to go to the bathroom every 15 minutes.”



BRIAN SMITH

By intermission, my heart had softened. I was humming the melodies from the first act and talking to the little girl dressed as Ariel who was sitting behind me. I was a kid again.

After the show, my friends and I discussed our favorite Disney movies and the timeless messages they impart. My earliest Disney lessons came from Jiminy Cricket telling Pinocchio, “Always let your conscience be your guide,” followed by Thumper recalling to Bambi his father’s sage advice, “If you can’t say something nice, don’t say nothing at all.”

One of my friends recalled Mary Poppins telling the Banks children, “Open different doors, you may find a ‘you’ here that you never knew was yours. Anything can happen.” Another much younger friend, who grew up knowing Disney only on DVDs, remembered her favorite saying coming from *Beauty and the Beast*: “Do not be deceived by appearance, for beauty is found within.”

There is a point to recalling these Disney movies and the moral to their story lines, a point I sometimes forget until I re-encounter it. Stories have staying power. We never forget a good story.

Why is that? Sociologists tell us it is because stories connect us to something bigger than ourselves, something that we want to live on through us and into others. Whether it is retelling the stories of our immigrant great-grandparents who came to the United States with just the clothes on their backs, or the accounts of our religious founders who started our ministries with only an invitation to serve and trust in Divine Providence, we remember these stories because we want to

be like those heroes and heroines. We want to be part of a greater narrative and pass the story on to others by our words and actions. There is a moral message we want to live out. That is what makes a good story get retold.

EDUCATION AND FORMATION

This issue of *Health Progress* is focused on health care and education. I want to focus specifically on the role of mission leaders and others who lead education and formation in their organizations. I hope to open a conversation about how we in Catholic health care teach and form in a way that engages the heart and soul, as well as the mind.

During these times of diminishing reimbursement, now is the time to expand — not reduce — our formation, learning and development programs. Education and formation are both necessary for all those who work within our ministries.

There is a distinction between the two. Education is devoted to teaching content and skills to individuals so they will be effective in their roles. There is a knowledge-based component, taught by an effective educator.

Formation involves transference of knowledge, but it has spiritual and emotional components, as well. Formation engages us at multiple levels, and that leads to personal transformation, which results in behavior consistent with our mission and values.

Both education and formation must be delivered by competent individuals using adult learning theory and follow-up to ensure that participants are integrating their experiences into their work.

In a ministry where I once worked, the mission department was responsible for teaching new nurses a one-hour course on Catholic health care ethics. Because of time constraints, we had to

focus on the essentials of what a nurse in a Catholic health care facility should know. We realized if the class was nothing more than a list of do's and don'ts, the participants would be bored and forget what we taught.

We decided to model the class on *Jeopardy!*, the television quiz show. We created categories and questions, split the nurses into competing teams and encouraged team members to collaborate on answers to case-based questions. The game-show format made the experience fun and memorable, and the nurses went back to work discussing what they learned and how to apply the ethical principles to their specific units.

One of the most effective formation experiences I have the privilege of witnessing happens during the *Foundations for Catholic Health Care Leadership* program CHA has delivered for five years at Mercy Health in Cincinnati.

One of the modules is entitled “*One Leader’s Story*,” in which we ask a senior leader to share how formation in Catholic health care has impacted him or her personally. Michael Bezney, Mercy Health’s chief legal officer and general counsel, gives a powerful talk about the effect formation and the people within his ministry have had on his spirituality and how he leads.

Then Bezney tells the group they are going to watch a short video, and he asks everyone to write down all the leadership qualities they can detect in the person featured. With that, he plays the scene from the movie *Sister Act* in which actress and comedian Whoopi Goldberg, as “Sr. Mary Clarence,” debuts the choir’s new approach to music by leading them in the hymn, *Hail Holy Queen*, sung first in traditional four-part harmony, followed by a gospel/rock version with hand-clapping and dance moves.

Bezney’s surprise sparks a lot of laughter at first, but then people start feverishly writing. When the video is over, Bezney asks the group what leadership qualities they observed.

“Creativity!” “Using the old in a new way.” “Encouraging younger members to discover their gifts.” “The importance of teamwork.” “Have fun at work!” The group comes up with more than 40 different leadership qualities packed into one short movie clip.

More importantly, the room full of leaders experience an easy, fun and replicable method of formation they can take back to their units and share with their staff. I always smile at the feedback we receive for this program — and Michael Bezney’s presentation always receives the highest score. His is the proof that formation not only teaches, but it can engage the heart and the spirit in a memorable way.

FORMATION PRESERVES THE STORY

These are two simple examples of education and formation that have an impact. There are hundreds of other examples of how education and formation are being delivered throughout the Catholic health ministry. Through the healing stories of the Gospel, the foundational stories of the religious who started many of our organizations,

Good formation always inspires and transforms individuals. They get caught up in the story that is bigger than they are — the healing ministry of Jesus — and they want to be a part of this moral story line we call Catholic health care.

the stories of how the poor, suffering and marginalized receive care with respect and dignity each day in our facilities, we continue the great healing narrative and invite others to join the story.

Formation is the mechanism by which we preserve our distinct culture and Catholic identity. Good formation always inspires and transforms individuals. They get caught up in the story that is bigger than they are — the healing ministry of Jesus — and they want to be a part of this moral story line we call Catholic health care.

We should be proud of how formation has grown over the past 20 years and become integral to our organizations. Other ministries of the church come to the Catholic Health Association and its members to learn how we offer formation so they can replicate best practices for their associates, who also are taking over ministries previously led by priests and religious.

Formation, which began with senior leaders in Catholic health care, is now being offered to middle managers, physicians and board members in many of our organizations. Some systems have begun to offer formation experiences for front-line associates, so everyone in the organization is inspired and invited to participate in the great healing story.

Although formation needs to continue to grow, we must acknowledge that health care in the United States is undergoing radical change, with great uncertainty around reimbursement and insurance coverage for poor and vulnerable populations. CHA has seen some members answer the challenge by growing their education and formation departments, while others have decided to cut these programs as they make other reductions. There are no easy answers. Our ministries face different scenarios that they alone can discern.

A reminder, however: In the past, when our ministry was led by religious and priests, challenges and uncertainty always were met with prayer, discernment and trust that God's work would somehow get done. Formation reminds us of that chapter in our common story. Formation is not something we offer only when our operating margins are strong. We need it even more when times get tough. Formation ensures that we remember that the healing ministry belongs to God. It always has. It always will.

NEW COMPETENCIES

CHA's Ministry Leadership Formation Advisory Committee has been developing a new model of formation leader competencies and, after gathering input and feedback from across the ministry,

will be ready to share details by the end of 2017. The new model builds on CHA's *Mission Leader Competency* model and also adds two new competencies specific to those leading formation: "Presentation" and "Facilitation."

Related to the new formation leader competency model, CHA is looking at ways to recruit and form the next generation of formation leaders. Some of these new leaders will be mission leaders, but not all. We have come to realize that not all mission leaders possess the ability to lead formation. Similarly, some formation leaders may not have some of the competencies a mission leader needs to integrate theology and ethics with operations and strategy.

A new task force has begun to gather the wisdom and practices of members and Catholic academic centers relative to formation leader preparation. We will continue to update members on the work of this task force.

I began this article sharing the story of how a Disney musical brought me back to my childhood and the power of timeless moral story lines. I will end with my new favorite Disney quote — one I learned the night I was dragged to the *Little Mermaid* and met Ariel in the person of a wide-eyed little girl who sat behind me. It summarizes the dynamics of story, formation and belonging to something bigger than ourselves: "I don't know when, I don't know how, but I know something's starting right now. Watch and you'll see, someday I'll be part of your world."

BRIAN SMITH, MS, MA, MDiv, is senior director, mission integration and leadership formation, the Catholic Health Association, St. Louis.

JOURNAL OF THE CATHOLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION OF THE UNITED STATES

www.chausa.org

HEALTH PROGRESS®

Reprinted from *Health Progress*, September - October 2017
Copyright © 2017 by The Catholic Health Association of the United States
