

Create Sacred Space With Stories

STORYTELLING AS A FORMATION TOOL AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

BY CELESTE DESCHRYVER MUELLER, D.Min.

“When the Sisters arrived in the U.S. carrying only their ...” Many formation programs for health care ministry leaders begin by retelling the stories of the founders, then inviting participants to tell the stories of their own connections to Catholic health care. This is because we are familiar with the power of story to inspire, to create meaning, to deepen identity, purpose and belonging, and to connect us to realities richer and deeper than our own. We understand that we can anchor and sustain ministry commitments by staying rooted in the stories of Jesus’ ministry and the stories of the faithful in every generation who heard and responded to the Divine call.

Further, when we share our own stories, the personal narrative process creates a space of deep listening and attention; it promotes respect and reverence that recognizes the dignity of the individual. It cultivates community, and even an experience of communion, as individuals recognize the deep connections they have with others across great diversity.

In my work in ministry formation over the last 12 years, I have refined a particular approach to storytelling — a disciplined process of writing and sharing narratives of personal experience — that has proven remarkably effective for personal formation and spiritual growth. The process is neither difficult nor time-consuming, and it can be

adapted to a wider variety of settings. Most importantly, participants universally report being surprised, inspired and moved to action by the insights and benefits they discover in the process.

ACCESSING EXPERIENCE: REMEMBERING

“Are [ministry formation programs] functioning more like checklists ... another version of tasks to be accomplished over a period of time ... or are they designed to help participants identify the personal compass that guides their work each day and influences their decisions?”¹

This question is pertinent whether formation focuses one’s inner life² or one’s behaviors.³ In either perspective, establishing a habitual rhythm of experience,

reflection, action helps formation participants to develop that internal compass with which we can advance the mission. Surprisingly, the most daunting movement in that rhythm can be accessing our personal experience. We are hampered in our ability to pay attention to experience in

at least three ways:

- The pace of our lives means that we are into the next experience even before we register that we have had the previous experience

- The culture of most organizations places a premium on quick analysis, problem solving and action plans, which tend to short-circuit an exploration of our experience

- In some quarters, experience is dismissed as subjectivity or mere opinion, or because it comes with emotional content that we find uncomfortable

Theologian Dorothee Soelle notes a wider cultural tendency to *trivialize* all experience in systematically destruc-

REMEMBER

[1888]

WHEN

city 68,000
Harrison's plurality in election
35,000

The above telegraph has just
just received from Washington

The former Blue Ribbon award, Syracuse, N.Y.,
assures a distinguished Standard the ad from rank,
return to the Standard to your dealer, and let's make
it a reality.

NOTE



tive ways.⁴ She writes about what is at stake when we do not attend to our own experience:

It is so easy to douse the inner light of a human being. And we busily assist in doing just that as we learn to make the world's efficiency our own. We cut ourselves off from our own experiences by looking at them as irrelevant and not worth talking about or, what is no less cynical, not communicable at all. We are losing dreams, those of the night and those of the day, and increasingly we are losing the visions of our life.⁵

The personal narrative storytelling process enables participants to access experience through a structure that momentarily pauses our fast pace, that places a premium on experience without analysis, judgment or conclusions, and that honors each person's experience — and the inner light it reveals — by giving it full voice and attention.

When I lead the process, I begin by asking the group members simply to

Participants regularly report being startled by the memories that come to them.

quiet themselves and recall an experience of their own: a single event, even a single moment. I ask them to trust that their minds will notice some moment worth exploring. The parameters of recollection can be adapted to fit the occasion: *A moment in the last week* might be the right choice for a routine staff meeting; *a moment of patient care* for a day of reflection with clinicians; *an exchange of words with a direct report* for a reflection for managers. A mission retreat might invite members of the group to recall *an event in which participants saw clearly the connection between their own efforts and the mission of the organization*.

Many memories may come to mind. I remind participants to choose one that they are willing to share. I invite them to spend a minute in quiet, bring-

ing as many details of the moment to mind as they are able: what their senses experienced *in that moment*, what they were feeling, what they were thinking. Participants regularly report being startled by the memories that come to them. Experiences that seemed insignificant at the time demand a second look; familiar moments offer new insights; events long forgotten appear in vivid detail and reveal new layers of meaning.

WRITING NON-JUDGMENTAL NARRATIVES

The next steps seem oddly and rigidly structured, but they have proven to streamline the process, making it eminently usable, and to facilitate gaining maximum benefit, especially for those who are new to this sort of reflection. I invite participants to write out their narrative in a non-judgmental fashion. I encourage the use of pen and paper rather than a computer. Writing allows the participants to encounter the experience again, using different pathways in the brain than using the mind alone. The “experience” of the experience is deepened.

WHAT PEOPLE SAY

Humans are storytelling animals: Our brains are wired to hear stories and to create stories that can make sense of our experience of the world. Telling and hearing stories taps deeply into our human nature. Comments from participants illuminate its potential impact as a formation tool and spiritual practice.

■ How vivid the memory was, no matter how shut away it had been. I haven't thought of that moment in 30 years. I could see and feel everything so clearly. The intensity was amazing. And it has so much to do with why I am where I am today.

■ I realized that my story, while unique, was connected to everybody else's, and when I heard their stories, other moments in my life came to me.

■ Even though I felt a little naked and was scared, I appreciated how we were able to be vulnerable with each other. There was such authenticity.

■ Opinions can set us against each other, but when we share experience, we stand on common ground. I might still disagree with you, but if I have heard your story, I am more disposed to listen to you.

■ I could see so much more of the person when I heard their story.

■ I can't believe how deep our sharing and conversation was; we didn't even know each other's names two hours ago!

■ It seemed that what we were doing here was really holy.

■ The whole process helped me to slow down and to see things I've missed.

■ I could see my actions so much more clearly than when this was first happening; they were not compassionate actions, and I want to be a person of compassion.

■ Remembering and telling my story reconnected me with a part of myself I thought I had lost; it was very healing.

■ In the end, it wasn't even so much the stories that moved me, although they were powerful; it was the structure that allowed us to listen so well to each other and to hear ourselves.

■ It was really like a ritual.

■ There was so much in that one little story — I keep finding more.

To that end, I ask participants to write the experience out in full, rather than summarizing or creating a bulleted list of ideas. The guidelines for non-judgmental narration, familiar to those whose work involves verbatim, help participants to avoid the cultural temptation to analyze, explain and draw conclusions. I say:

- Tell the event — what happened — with as much detail as you can
- Describe what you saw, heard, smelled, felt,
BUT
- Do not explain why it is important to you, or what it means to you
- Do not evaluate it in any way — no “should have, could have, ought”
- Do not draw any conclusions about it, just tell the story
- When you have finished writing, remain in silence until everyone has finished

The point is to relate the experience, not to explain or justify the events or even to convince hearers of the significance of the story. Writing non-judgmentally can be a challenge for participants, and sometimes they need encouragement to edit out analyses that creep into the story. Depending on the occasion for the use of this process, the time taken for writing can be anywhere from five to 20 minutes.

Maintaining an atmosphere of quiet and, at certain points in the process, holding silence enables participants to focus without distraction and highlights the fruitfulness of silence in a world of noise. Frequently participants report a struggle to remain in silence, and, for some, this silence is the most they have experienced in a long time.

SHARING AND LISTENING

The guidelines for sharing stories surprise participants. I invite them to *read*, rather than *tell*, their stories to one another, and I suggest that readers do not even need to make eye contact with their listeners. Although that would seem to break all rules of effective communication, there is a rationale for the instruction.

First, reading the story allows the reader to be a *listener* as well. The reader can listen more deeply because concern about “what to say next” and the temptation to edit in mid-story based on the reactions on the faces of the group are eliminated. The “thinking brain” is quieted a bit and another brain pathway — hearing — is engaged to help facilitate the encounter with one’s own experience.

Second, not making eye contact can reduce the anxiety of sharing one’s experience. I urge listeners to offer kind attention, and assure readers that they can count on a friendly and receptive hearing.

In our sincere desire to connect with people who share stories with us, we can also inadvertently “steal” the moment of experience by adding our own comments.

Another caution that I have discovered groups need, and one that routinely provokes chuckles of self-recognition, is a warning to avoid offering disclaimers. I demonstrate: “Don’t begin by saying, ‘Well, I don’t know if I did this right, but here goes,’ or end by dropping your story unceremoniously to the table and saying, ‘Well, that’s all I’ve got.’” Amid the humor, participants recognize how quickly we can dismiss or undermine the significance of our own experiences, walking right into the trap of trivialization that Soelle describes.

In our sincere desire to connect with people who share stories with us, we can also inadvertently “steal” the moment of experience by adding our own comments. The most obvious experience thieves are: “Oh, that same thing happened to me,” or “I know just how you feel.”

Listeners in this process are instructed to honor the experiences that are shared with *silence* rather than comments. Silence allows the story to stand on its own and allows readers time to drink in what they have heard themselves say. In this minor discipline of silence, many participants recognize how often they interrupt others and how strong the impulse to talk over someone’s story can be. The power of the silence speaks volumes to them.

AS A FORMATION TOOL AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

As a formation tool, the personal narrative process helps to create the personal compass that is critical for the lasting impact of formation.⁶ In my experience, the process inevitably reveals multiple layers of meaning and significance — I can see my behaviors and my impact on others more clearly. Explicitly paying attention to my experience and actions also opens a window to my interior world of dispositions, operative values and motivations. Those are the frequently unrecognized and unquestioned drivers of action.

All ministry formation programs strive to achieve alignment between leaders’ or associates’ behaviors and the identity, mission and values of the organization. Achieving alignment is simply not possible if we cannot really see and “experience” our experiences.

The personal narrative process also fosters several commitments named in CHA’s *Shared Statement of Catholic Identity*, such as recognizing the dignity of the individual and creating a sense of communion that echoes the call to promote the common good.

By attending to sense experience, thoughts, emotions, motivations and actions, the process subtly supports care for the whole person. By inviting participants to meet one another in the vulnerable place of sharing personal experience, the process can sharpen our attentiveness to both the vulnerable persons in our care and unseen vulnerabilities among associates that call for care.

Many hold that the primary func-

tion of formation programs is to create a space for God's transforming presence and work. Even non-believers, however, have commented on the holiness of the interaction and the sacred space created among participants, and they have discovered in their own experiences connections to the identity and mission of Catholic health care.

From the perspective of Judeo-Christian faith, God is present and active in human experience, and "remembering" and "storytelling" are time-honored practices through which the community has encountered God. These practices echo the heart of Catholic sacramental rites as well as religious practices of other traditions. The symbolic nature of ritual draws participants into the reality represented by the ritual as it evokes memories, emotions, thoughts and even dreams. The ritual-like structure of the narrative process is similarly evocative, and it imprints in participants' imaginations a pattern for prayerful reflection that may bear fruit in other settings. As a spiritual practice,

the process of writing and sharing narratives of experience creates occasions in which we can recognize the traces of the Spirit in our past experiences and can meet the living presence of God among us, empowering us to carry out the healing ministry of Jesus.

HERE'S WHAT HAPPENS

I have never seen this process fail to produce a powerful effect in a group. I have watched groups establish bonds of community very quickly. I have been privileged to hear the insights and awakenings that have emerged from their sharing. I have been personally moved by both the stories shared and by what I observe while watching groups share their stories.

The way the sharing of stories looks and sounds is strikingly similar across very diverse groups. Whether there are 30 or 300 gathered, the room becomes hushed; someone in each small group begins to read, and heads turn in attention. Quiet pauses punctuate the murmur of voices. The air is filled with the

details of the speakers' stories. No matter how ordinary or extraordinary the story is, the quality of the silence deepens and the level of attentiveness to the speaker increases. Hearers lean in.

When the last story is finished and all the voices are still, the silence that comes over the room is profound. In one group, a participant commented, "The pause of silence in between the stories caused us to be able to listen deeply, and once [the speaker] was done, to continue listening inside ourselves."

In another group, when all the stories had finished, a man spoke into the silence: "The word of the Lord."

Spiritual, even mystical, awareness is more available to us than we might imagine even on our busiest days. Like mystics through the centuries, when we give our ordinary experiences our full attention, we can hear the voice of God in our midst.

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BUT WE ARE SO BUSY HERE ...

The process seems so long and formal; can I really use this in a busy workplace? Yes! I have facilitated this process successfully in a variety of health care and business settings, in large groups and small, among people who knew each other well and groups of complete strangers, with those who were already comfortable with reflection and with those who were quite uncomfortable with the idea of reflection.

Here are some suggestions for when or how to use storytelling:

- Before a potentially contentious debate or challenging decision. Storytelling is a way to put people in touch with what may be at the root of their convictions, assertions or possible resistance.
- As a brief but regular exercise for a team to build a habit of self-reflection
- To help in planning or assessment as part of the "Appreciative Inquiry" management strategy
- As a tool for leadership development or coaching conversations
- As a component of ethical discernment
- As a tool to provide opportunities for ongoing formation

Adapt the process according to what the group needs. Be sure to incorporate the core elements — the process is quite simple, and if the core elements are present, the benefits will quite naturally follow. Remind participants to:

- Attend to unadorned experiences
- Remember, write and share
- Honor one another with deep listening and silence
- Observe what happens in me and in the group

NOTES

1. Brian Yanofchick, "Leadership Formation: Choosing Between the Compass and the Checklist," *Health Progress* (January-February 2008): 8-9.
2. Dennis Winschel, "Formation Path in the Workplace: How Does It Work?" *Health Progress* (March-April 2008): 20-22.
3. Brian O'Toole, "The Hallmark of Catholic Identity," *Health Progress* (May-June 2008): 46-51.
4. Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 13.
5. Soelle, 14.
6. Yanofchick.

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