

# THE STORY: A PRIMARY SPIRITUAL TOOL

*Stories Can Be a Healing Power in the Dying Process*

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Christ was a master storyteller. Using parables, images and symbols, he taught powerful spiritual truths. As the Emmaus passage (Lk 24:13-27) indicates, he was also a *listener*, encouraging his disciples to share the whole gamut of feelings relative to their recent loss.

Similarly, as care givers called to follow in the footsteps of our master teacher and healer, we can evoke the stories of our patients and their families and participate in the stories' healing power.

## A THERAPEUTIC AND DIAGNOSTIC TOOL

Recounting the events of one's life is therapeutic, particularly if the storyteller has the opportunity to share feelings, as well as factual content. Thus when a care giver asks, "What was that like for you?" or "Where is God in all of this?" a patient may experience an emotional and spiritual catharsis through his or her response.

In addition, listening attentively can help a care giver make a spiritual assessment (i.e., ascertain connections and disconnections in a

patient's relationships to self, others, and God). An apt example is that of Jim, a 52-year-old patient who was depressed after learning that nothing could be done to cure his cancer. One might have assumed that his downheartedness was related to the imminence of his death, but his story revealed that his depression was in fact anger turned inward regarding choices made in his life. The story provided the springboard for subsequent discussion and spiritual direction that helped to increase Jim's awareness that, although some decisions were irrevocable because they happened in the past, others were not, such as regret over never having married his girlfriend of 19 years.

In time, Jim was able to let go of misgivings about the past and make life-giving decisions with respect to the present, which included getting married.

## A SOURCE OF HEALING

Inherent in each person's story is the key to healing. For example, I encouraged a Sister of Mercy, who was reluctant to discuss her dying, to instead share things that had been meaningful

**Summary** Recounting the events of one's life is therapeutic, particularly if the storyteller has the opportunity to share feelings, as well as factual content. Inherent in each person's story is the key to healing.

Sensitive listening and dialogue can help dying persons discover connections between their own stories and those in the Scripture.

In addition, when a person is in denial regarding a life-threatening illness, dreams can often provide a means to unlocking the unconscious.

As Jesus used images from nature and symbols from everyday life, so, too, can care givers use

analogies to get to the heart of the matter.

Another source of healing is the original story, which can help a patient and family see their situation in a new light.

Humor, used appropriately, can be a redemptive gift.

Finally, when unfinished business has been completed and issues of forgiveness resolved, there is little left but to celebrate the life of the dying person.

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in her life. Brightening, she spoke with pride of an award she had received for writing a children's story about a child who was afraid of the school principal. One day the girl's teacher asked her to bring to the principal's office a drawing she had done of a summer vacation. "With feet like bricks" and pounding heart, the child walked down the long, dark, scary corridor to the principal's office, and knocked on the door. It swung open slowly. To the child's surprise, there sat a smiling woman who admired her work of art and gave her candy as a reward.

Encouraged to enter into the story as her own, the patient came to a sense of hope that at the end of that long, dark, scary corridor, which was her death, there awaited a smiling lady, Our Lady of Mercy, longing to say to her, "Janet, what a wonderful painting you've created with your life!"

#### BIBLICAL STORIES

Sensitive listening and dialogue can help dying persons discover connections between their own stories and those in the Scriptures. One example concerns a terminally ill woman who was plagued by low self-esteem. Although she was intelligent and musically inclined, her poor self-image was formed early as the result of taunts from childhood classmates. Counseling to improve her self-image culminated in a ritual that included an adaptation of a biblical passage (Is 62:2-5):

You shall be called  
by a new name  
which the Lord himself will give.  
No more shall  
you be called  
"Forsaken" or "Abandoned"  
but you shall be named  
God's Delight  
for the Lord  
delights in you.

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A second example of a connection between a life story and a Bible story involves an exhausted care giver who had been meditating on the story of the marriage feast of Cana (Jn 2:1-11). Encouraged to identify with someone in that account, she found her primary identification was with the water jugs—the *empty* water jugs. But the experience led her to pen this healing prayer:

Lord, when I have no more wine,  
when the zest in my life,  
my celebrative spirit  
the sense of being gifted,  
and the power to share that gift,  
all have run out,  
When all that is left  
in the stone jar of my life  
is the water of my own  
weakness,  
inadequacy  
and discouragement,  
help me to place before you  
all that I am, and could be,  
and wait,  
in patience  
and faith  
for your transforming touch,  
knowing that you've saved  
the best wine  
until now.

#### STORIES REVEALED IN DREAMS

When a person is in denial regarding a life-threatening illness, dreams can often provide a means to unlocking the unconscious. One person, for example, had a dream of being pursued by a large, dark car. A voice in the dream urged her to turn and face the pursuer rather than flee. Finally, she did so. At that moment, a light from above illuminated the car, transforming it into a colorful Volkswagen filled with young people having a good time. Exploration of the dream helped this woman learn

that to face one's fear is not only to diminish it, but also to discover freedom and light.

Another patient had a recurrent dream in which she, her husband, and her daughter were in a boat that overturned. Having to choose which of the two to save, she invariably selected her husband. In discussing the dream with her, I learned of the patient's regret that she had always put her husband first, often ignoring her daughter's needs. The sharing of this awareness led to a poignant reconciliation and mutual forgiveness.

### IMAGES AND SYMBOLS

As Jesus used images from nature and symbols from everyday life, so, too, can care givers use analogies to get to the heart of the matter.

One man, for example, reluctant to talk about his cancer, described in detail his military service under Gen. George S. Patton. Cringing at the recollection of hand-to-hand combat, the man spoke about the "ball of fear" in the pit of his stomach during the war. He acknowledged that the ball of fear had returned, adding, "But now the enemy is cancer, and the weapons of radiation and chemotherapy are useless. . . . I'm without defense!" Having explored at length the apprehensions of the dying man, who was well-versed in the Bible, a pastoral care giver concluded the discussion with excerpts from a Psalm:

Because you have made the Lord  
your refuge,  
The Most High your defense  
and place of safety,  
no evil shall befall you.  
For he shall give his angels charge  
of you  
to guard you in all your ways.  
(Ps 91:9-11)

A second example of the use of images derived from a story involved a Norwegian patient with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease who was enrolled in our hospice home care program. One day the man fell and was seemingly unconscious. Through a miscommunication, the rescue squad was called. They arrived with the police and tried to take the man to the emergency room, where he surely would have been resuscitated and put on a respirator, contrary to his wishes. His wife, a tiny Scandinavian, stood her ground against police pressure, guarding her husband until the hospice nurse

arrived to explain the situation. The man remained at home and later regained consciousness.

To commemorate this event, the primary care nurse and I later visited the family. Wearing Viking hats, we unfurled a parchment scroll and bestowed on the patient's wife the "Helga Award" for manifestation of the Viking spirit in our contemporary world.

At another juncture on this man's journey, he became fearful of dying. A photograph of a Viking ship beset by storm was integrated with the biblical passage of Jesus' calming the waves, which had so terrified his disciples (Mt 8:22ff). On the basis of these, the patient wrote this personal prayer:

Oh Christ,  
so long asleep within my boat . . .  
Though waves of anguish  
and helplessness  
ravage my life,  
I've not disturbed your soft slumber.

Wind whipped and frightened  
I've sought to fight the storm alone,  
a solitary battle for this  
fragile craft,  
tossed from wave to wave  
as if for play  
until broken.

Sinking amid  
fierce waves  
with gnashed white teeth  
ready to devour,  
at last,  
I shout  
not a moment too soon—  
O Christ awake.  
Save Me!

### ORIGINAL STORIES

Another source of healing is the original story, which can help a patient and family see their situation in a new light.

A powerful, charismatic, creative man, whose surname meant lion, became more fearful as his disease progressed. He tended to roar and bellow at his family rather than share his vulnerability, thus driving them away. I was inspired by this situation to write *The Lion Who Learned to Purrr* about an ailing lion much like the patient. In the story, however, the lion allows the lioness and

cubs near. Their presence brings warmth, comfort, and the abatement of fear. The story concludes with a sound emanating from the lion unlike any sound ever heard from him before. "It was the sound of peace and contentment—a purr which had gentle reverberations throughout the animal kingdom." The patient was so delighted with this story, he made copies for his family and

friends. More important, he began to acknowledge his fears and allow his family to come closer. Occasionally, he would even purr when I visited to symbolize his effort to live the story's lesson. At his funeral, I shared the fact that, although I may have helped this man learn to be more gentle, he taught *me* to roar when I need to be more assertive.

A second story, *The Lady Clothed in Light*, was written for three children whose young mother had died of a brain tumor. Before she died, the woman underwent a radical personality change, becoming very angry. She died without her illness ever having been discussed with the children. I wrote a story wherein a mother who had died appears to her children in a dream. She is clothed in radiant light and tells them her illness was not their fault, that she was not angry at them but at her cancer. The mother tells her children she loves them and that she was sad to leave them. And she lets them know she is in a place of peace, where they shall one day meet again.

### **HUMOROUS STORIES**

Humor, used appropriately, can be a redemptive gift. This was made clear to me by a dying man who, still lucid, was surrounded by his family. After praying, they began to tell funny stories of the life they had shared. The patient laughed, the family laughed. And the man, literally, died laughing. When this occurred, his sons and daughters said, "Isn't this terrible? We *laughed* while our father died!" Recalling the aphorism, "As we live, so shall we die," I observed how fitting it seemed

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that this man, who had lived surrounded by love and laughter, should die the same way. The family, in gratitude, concurred.

### **CELEBRATING THE STORY**

When unfinished business has been completed and issues of forgiveness resolved, there is little left but to celebrate the life of the dying person.

One way of doing so is epitomized by the experience of a 50-year-

old patient who gathered shortly before death with his father, three children, a physician, me (a hospice chaplain), a nurse, and a social worker. We began with a guided meditation called "Celebrating the Colors of Our Lives" (see Jean Roche, *Celebrations of Life*, Religious Sisters of Mercy, Albany, NY, 1991, pp. 3-5). Those present reflected on their multifaceted experiences with the patient, Herbert. Subsequently, we took crayons and began a large mandala. Herbert drew three red hearts for each of his children. As he did so, he spoke a personal message of affirmation to each.

His daughter then drew a pink abstract design, thanking her dad for always having affirmed her femininity. His other daughter drew roller skates and talked about how her dad taught her to skate and to ride a bicycle. Herbert's son drew pictures of hunting and fishing with his dad and shared funny stories of adventures. Herbert's father drew a sun and stars, expressing hope that God would guide his son through the darkness to light. Staff members drew symbols that represented lessons Herbert and his family taught us. The experience ended with a song of gratitude. To this day, the family reverences the framed mandala that remains as a symbolic celebration of Herbert's life.

### **LEARN FROM JESUS**

The story can thus be therapeutic, diagnostic, a source of healing, a means of fostering reconciliation, and an occasion for celebration. As Christian care givers, may we continue to return to our religious roots and learn healing from the eminent storyteller—Jesus Christ. □