

Why Telling Our Stories Matters

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Let me offer 7 reasons why it's important for us to be both story-tellers and story-listeners, 7 "identity-markers" for a storied people beginning with "We Are...":

1. We are Hardwired for Story - Curt Thompson writes, "the process of reflecting on and telling others your story, and the way you experience others hearing it, actually shapes the story and the very neural correlates, or networks, it represents." In other words, we thrive when we listen and tell. Without it, we settle for a life of reactivity, not reflection - stuck in our reptilian brain, disconnected from both of neo-cortical brain and from other human beings. Simply put, Story is healthy.
2. We are Meaning-Makers - For millennia, telling and listening to stories was the fundamental building block of civilization, the way of passing along tradition and family tales and myths. It was a kind of social glue. Today, our meaning-making happens in radically different, and often compartmentalized ways - seeing a therapist, connecting with an old friend on Facebook, attending church (often infrequently, and in churches where the Christian story isn't necessarily told and practiced each week), gathering data piecemeal from Google searches, a quick coffee with a friend. Busyness has robbed us of time. Individualism has robbed us of community rituals. Consumerism has redefined our purpose. Story can set it straight.
3. We are Honest - Story-telling requires honesty. I have told my own story in highly edited ways, often trying to cast myself in the best possible light. Eventually, the truth will get you. In the recent political conventions, I heard both sides speak frequently of American exceptionalism, and I could not help but wonder if we've taken our own American community-story seriously, with all its good and bad - Selfless heroism and slavery, gracious giving and genocide, beauty and brokenness. Even America has a story...and the point is that there is no shame in telling the truth. The shame is in the radical editing for the sake of glossing over the hard times, the failures, the suffering, and the errors.
4. We are wounded - Telling our stories heals us. We've seen that it heals the brain. But consider this. After the Rwandan genocide, there were many therapists who visited Rwanda with new techniques for healing - quick fixes for the damaged and abused human soul. What did psychologists and theologians eventually find? No new techniques seemed to help. But old-fashioned, group story-telling seemed to heal wounds. As Rwandan men and women sat together and told of their sons and daughters, of rapes and ravaging, healing and forgiveness took place.
5. We are storied/historical beings, not Gnostics - I give credit to Eugene Peterson for this one, as his writings on Lament reminded me that what is grieved in that ancient biblical book is actual suffering. You see, we don't live in a vacuum. Modern enlightened guru's speak of living in the eternal now, and I understand the value of living in the present moment. But Judeo-Christian religion is storied. We are not Gnostics. We believe in actual events, real and felt.

This is why I feel the most orthodox Christians ought to be the most storied of them all - rooted in narrative, God's and ours - mindful of the need to remember...

6. We are liturgical - In historic Christian worship, we come together to rehearse the Story. In Confession and Assurance, in the Sermon and the Eucharist, in the Lord's Prayer and the Benediction, the whole Story is told - the story of original goodness invaded by sin, the story of dignity and depravity, of hunger and thirst, of blessing and mission. Worship, at its best, is NOT an Oxytocin high, a praise-song-feel-good-love-fest, but an intentional engagement with God as his loving, desiring, obeying, hoping creatures, longing to be re-storied and re-branded in the Great Story told each week...

7. We are commanded - I can't help but return to the frequent admonitions to Remember...It seems that over and over again in Scripture, God's rescued people are told to remember. The Israelites are commanded to remember the great rescue from Egypt. The exiles are told to remember God's faithfulness. Christians are given the Eucharistic meal as a meal of remembrance. It seems telling and listening is a kind of corporate remembering for Christians in worship.

And this is why I'm both a therapist and a pastor. Because, I'm in the business of the telling, the listening, the remembering. I'm called to invite people out of their hurried lives into an intentionally reflective space, where God can show. And this is why I think it's so important that you remember. Listen, quick-fixes are available all over today, in religious forms, in medicine, in self-help books, in internet and TV gurus. But the unhurried process of telling and listening invites us into a kind of sacred cadence, a rhythm that can reform our hearts, and even rewire our brains. Science and faith agree - Story is central.

We tell stories in order to live, as Joan Didion says.

Tell and listen as if your life depended on it.