

# The Necessary, Amazing Power of Story

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*by Michael Gibson, Woodbury Meeting, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting*

*Story* is how we share who we are with those we love the most. We tell and listen to stories of the ordinary and the extraordinary. We delight in stories of cherished moments. We record and catalog them in words and photographs. People of all ages hunger for stories. We may ask, “What did you do at school today,” or “how was the wedding,” or “what did you do on your vacation?” Families that tell their stories are blest. The family with a rich store of tales going back many years is truly fortunate. As creatures who live in time and space, we cannot avoid story; our lives *are* stories, and they are wonderful ones. Through telling our stories we relive past experiences, remember emotions, and discover and reinforce the substance of our lives. Through story we find and articulate who we are.

The further we move away from our trusted inner circle of family and friends, the more we are inclined to say who we are through facts, figures and concepts. We may resort to the inaccurate, but convenient, simplicity of labels. When we tell our stories to those close to us, the same objective facts and figures may be present, but they are parts of the narrative, not disconnected data. Sometimes they are implied or embedded in the stories and are not expressly stated. Like the knots at the back of some types of needlework, they reveal the path, or process, but are not the picture itself. Young children have not yet divorced story from who they are, and their circles are not as rigidly drawn as those of adults, so they delight us with their openness in telling their stories in all kinds of settings. Children may remind us of our own *need* for story.

Within our most intimate circles, our lives speak in such a way that we ourselves become the narrative that our loved ones read. At the outer edges of circles, we may attempt to let little pieces of the data of our lives speak. It is easy to forget that our lives always speak and, in fact, may communicate just as much as what we say about ourselves, and some- times much more powerfully. When we do not know a person’s story, we might create a narrative of sorts based on our observations. This is tricky business and can get us in trouble. We may have little to go on but an open smile, a smirk, a nervous habit, a gait, or an inner feeling of warmth or coldness when we are around that person. To understand others we seem to rely on story. This may be because on some level we know that our own stories define us, shape us, comfort and challenge us, and propel us forward.

Within communities of faith, we share Spirit stories with those we may barely know, and the narratives everyone in the group shares constitute much of the glue that bonds all together. We share stories of the Bible, ancient stories that we identify with, stories of other people in which we discover our own individual and corporate narratives. We share stories of our history as Friends. But the story is not a completed text. Our corporate life together is our common story, and each person is a part of its unfolding. God speaks to us in and through the narrative of our worship, learning,

sharing and playing together, and through the records of our acts of love and service that give our relating meaning. Our corporate stories express our deepest joys and dreams, and our deepest sorrows, as well. Our co-creating and co-telling of stories help to give us our corporate identity and strengthen our connections. We may act out our stories, or sing them, create images of them, even dance them. We need to tell and hear our corporate Spirit stories in order to make sense of our own individual ones. Stories weave the fabric of our lives.

While our stories are always present for us, our deepest stories do not unfold to us without our effort. Sue Monk Kidd speaks with eloquence and insight about this in her book, *Firstlight: The Early Inspirational Writings* (Penguin Books, 2006, p. 21).

God, the sublime storyteller, calls us into the passion of telling our tale. But creating personal spiritual stories is an act of soul-making that does not happen automatically. It comes only as we risk stepping into the chaos of our lives and naming the angels that inhabit the shadows. It comes as we give expression to our struggle for individual meaning, identity, and truth, as we wrestle with the angels, both light and dark, and celebrate the places where God stirs. In the crucible of story we become artists of meaning. There we meet God most surely.

I believe that what Sue Monk Kidd says of personal spiritual stories is also true of our communal Spirit stories. Ultimately we all, both as individuals and as communities of faith, are not what we believe or what we do, but who we are—and our lives are played out in endless song and continuous story. Our stories not only guide, shape, heal and inspire, but give voice to what cannot otherwise be expressed yet must be communicated. Through heart-filled storytelling we find our place in God's story.

In our families and communities of faith, we do well to create, with intention and care, creative safe spaces to discover and tell our stories to one another. One of the best gifts we can offer those we love is the treasure of undivided attention, for we all need to tell our stories and be listened to. And as communities of faith we can uncover and share our corporate narratives, whether ancient or newly written, for story is essential to who we are. What are the stories that have helped to shape us as a people of faith? Are we careful to keep passing them on? What are the stories we tell, or might tell, about who we have been as Friends? What can we say about who we are becoming? What are our visions, our dreams, our hopes? What are the stories the Spirit is writing in our hearts, in our meeting communities, in our religious society? Discover, or rediscover again and again, the power of story to shape and nurture persons and communities, and the power of story to bring us face to face with God. Be holy storytellers and holy listeners, and enjoy the various levels of story that you are

So, where do we begin? There are numerous ways to tell our stories within monthly meetings and as meeting communities. Here are but a few possibilities. Please note that many of these can and should be done multigenerationally.

- Corporately write and perform a play or puppet play about your meeting's history, a Bible story, the story of a historic Friend or deceased or living member of your meeting, or a major project your meeting community took on.
- Create a meeting timeline and display it on a long wall. Invite members and attenders to put sticky notes on it marking when they started coming to meeting and adding any kind

- of remembrance (particular food at a potluck, something that happened in worship, something fun that happened in the meeting, an underlying tension that was a part of some problem when they first came to the meeting, etc.) Use notes, photos or drawings.
- Have a table or two loaded with more random objects than there are participants (a pinecone, spoon, hammer, telephone receiver, pencil, toy, measuring tape, etc.). Invite people to come to the table one at a time to pick out something that represents something or someone they are grateful for in the meeting, then place that object in a large pot or box on another table, naming what it is they are thankful for. The whole group can hold in the Light each person as he or she approaches the object table. Having either a clear acrylic receptacle for the selected articles or a container made for this purpose by meeting children would be excellent. Stories are welcome!
  - Create a tapestry, quilt, display or collage that tells a story you wish to remember, or that documents an event in the life of the meeting.
  - Working as a group, write and then sing a song that tells a story about the meeting. Perform it for others within the meeting community.
  - Put song, art, photography, poetry, dance and drama together to create a multi-media expression of a treasured narrative or that celebrates the life of someone in the meeting.
  - Provide worship sharing opportunities that focus on journeys.
  - Create a monthly meeting scrapbook documenting people and events.
  - Corporately create a loose-leaf meeting book on a given theme, with contributions coming from members and attenders of all ages employing the written word, paintings, photographs, graphics, etc.
  - Corporately create a sculpture of part of your corporate journey, or of your meeting's vision of the future.
  - Study story-telling techniques and share stories within your meeting.
  - The community can help cover the expenses of Godly Play® training for one or two adult meeting members who can then tell stories and facilitate everyone wondering together about them.
  - Have a meeting-wide gathering for story, where people of all ages are invited to share a story and listen to the stories of others.
  - Encourage and provide tools to facilitate regular times for family story sharing in the home.

- Working together, create a diorama, a parade float, a video or a story garden. Use your imagination.

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