

## SHARING OUR STORIES

I have a good friend who was born and raised in the Memphis, Tennessee area. No one can tell a story like Tim and many of his stories relate to events and happenings in his hometown. People from Tim's church and his community "come to life" as you listen to his stories.

Cultures have always recorded their history through the telling of stories. With the exception of some of the letters (or epistles) found in the New Testament, nearly all of our scripture began as oral history or stories. Perhaps you can envision ancient people sitting around a fire hearing stories of patriarchs like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; or stories of kings like David and Solomon.

Stories help us understand who we are and where we come from. They help us identify how God is working in our life. I come from a blue collar Appalachian town. My father dropped out of school in the eighth grade so he could work and help support his family. He became a Christian as an adult and, in his early thirties, felt a call into ministry. He secured his GED and enrolled in college and, subsequently, seminary. Decades later, as I look back over my life, I realize how different it would have been had my dad not pursued higher education and answered the call to ministry.

Richard Peace, in his book "Spiritual Journaling" writes of "hinge events," turning points in our lives that move us in a new direction or yield particular insight.<sup>i</sup>

As people of faith, knowing our history and being aware of the significant changes that take place within our lives provides the opportunity for us to view our stories and events through the lens of faith in order to discern the ways and places that God's Spirit is leading, guiding and equipping us. We want to live with *spiritual self-awareness*, taking time, periodically, to consider, remember and evaluate the events of our lives and how God is at work through them.

Did you know there is a genre of literature called *spiritual autobiographies*? Augustine of Hippo likely wrote the first spiritual autobiography, entitled "Confessions." If we utilize journaling as a spiritual discipline (recording not only events and happenings, but also our inward feelings and growth), then journaling can become the venue through which our spiritual autobiographies unfold over time. The journals of John Wesley function as a spiritual autobiography as, within them, Wesley identifies the struggles and growth in his relationship with God through Christ and in his relationships with fellow Christians. In his journal he writes of what has become a famous spiritual "mountain top experience" when, on May 24, 1738, he attended a meeting on Aldersgate Street where someone was reading from Martin Luther's *Preface to the Romans*. Later in his journal, Wesley wrote, "while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death." This event was neither the beginning nor the end of Wesley's spiritual journey. However, Wesley identified this experience as crucial to his faith development (one of those "hinge events").

Lisa Hess, in her book *Artisanal Theology* writes...

*You know less about yourself now than you will when you have shared your story. If you are willing to risk becoming more aware of the mystery of being human and a child of God, you will come to hear unexpected elements of your own story..."*<sup>ii</sup>

It is important to note that "telling our stories" can take place through a variety of medium. Perhaps you do not enjoy writing and are self-conscious about your grammar or spelling; yet, you love to draw and find self-expression through drawing. Then, "tell" your story through pictures rather than words.

This week will be a different experience when you come together with your group. Rather than discussing the reading and engaging in some group practices or exercises, you will be invited to share a

*portion* of your spiritual autobiography with your group.

Richard Peace has suggestions on how to begin. He recommends dividing your life into a series of time periods that are bookended by significant events or transitions (“hinge points”). These could be things like:

- Moving to a different state;
- Getting married or divorced;
- Going off to college;
- Having your first child;
- A career change

Once you have blocked out the time periods, note how that period of your life was impacted by the following:

- Key people and relationships;
- Your primary activities or responsibilities during this period of time;
- Any strong emotions you recall;
- Significant events happening in the world that impacted you;
- Your health;
- Creative impulses, dreams or ideas that developed during this time;
- And, of course, your inward, spiritual life, significant spiritual events, and your relationship with God during this period.

What is listed above is a suggestion. But you may develop your spiritual journal in whatever way best allows you to identify God’s movement in your life. It can even be drawn or represented through other artistic medium. Remember that a spiritual journal is not the same as a diary. The goal is not to compile a chronological listing of events and activities. A good length for your spiritual autobiography is 4-5 pages (1.5 spaced). Pray before you begin asking the Spirit to reveal to you the significant landmarks (“hinge events”) along your spiritual journey.

You may feel some trepidation with regard to sharing your story with the others in your group. You will only be asked to share one time period; so you may select what you feel most comfortable sharing. Your group leader will share first, thereby “demystifying” the experience. Remember that we are on this journey together and sharing our stories allows us to encourage and guide one another. Be sincere and trust that the Holy Spirit will work within your group as you open your hearts and lives to one another.

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<sup>i</sup> *Spiritual Journaling: Recording Your Journey Toward God* by Richard Peace.

<sup>ii</sup> *Artisanal Theology: Intentional Formation in Radically Covenantal Companionship* by Lisa M. Hess.

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*Session Four – Facilitator Discussion Outline*  
(Items needed – candles, anointing oil)

- Remind the group of the format for your time together. Begin by lighting candles; hear a word of scripture; take a few moments to breathe deeply and relax; and, have a prayer time that will conclude with the Lord's Prayer.
- Light a candle and explain that it is a reminder to us of Jesus' presence with us since Jesus is the light of the world. Invite members to come forward at their own pace and light a candle.
- Share this scripture from Psalm 139:  
*O Lord, you have searched me and known me...For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb... My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.*
- Invite members to take a few moments to close their eyes and breathe deeply and slowly using the time to begin to relax and let go of the day's tensions.
- Explain to the group that you will open with prayer. They can then name anyone or any situation for which they desire prayer. All they need to do is speak the name of the one in need since God already knows every need. Let them know that the prayer time will conclude with the Lord's Prayer.
- Remind group members that this week's format will be different than previous weeks. Tonight each member of the group will be asked to share a portion from their spiritual autobiography that they compiled during the week. You will want to begin since your willingness to be open and vulnerable with the group will set the tone for everyone who follows. Let them know that, at the conclusion of each individual's sharing, other members of the group will provide feedback. This will not be a time of judgment or advice giving (unless advice is specifically requested); rather, this is a time for others to reflect back to you what they hear in your story. Listeners will be encouraged to:
  - Name challenges they heard the "storyteller" identify during this period of their life;
  - Celebrate where they detected growth taking place in the "storyteller" during this period of time;
  - Name unresolved issues they heard or detected that the "storyteller" may want to reflect upon moving forward.

Next, those who tell their story will also be invited to share with the group:

- What was the easiest part of this process?
  - What was most difficult?
  - What new insights into your life and your walk with God were revealed to you as you engaged in this process?
  - What would you like the group to pray about on your behalf?
- Once everyone has had an opportunity to share a portion of their story, as group leader, conclude by saying a prayer of blessing and thanksgiving *individually* over each group participant. Give thanks to God for the Spirit's work in their life and for the gifts, graces and growth that you have

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seen evidenced in their life. If you feel members of your group would be comfortable with anointing, anoint them with oil – a symbol of the Holy Spirit – and lay hands on them as you pray for them.

- Finally, invite members to take some time in silence to inwardly reflect on what they have heard and experienced in this sacred time of sharing.

After a few moments of silence, read these verses from Psalm 139:

*Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts.*

*See if there is any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

- Invite members to come forward, as they are ready, to blow out their individual candles.

- End with this traditional Gaelic blessing:

*May the road rise to meet you,*

*May the wind be always at your back,*

*May the sun shine warm upon your face,*

*May the rain fall softly on your fields,*

*May God hold you in the hallow of his hand. Amen.*