

## Revisiting Personal Narrative: Unleashing the Power of Accessing Experience

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September 1, 2006

“Let me tell you a story”

These words can gather a group of noisy children into a circle of anticipatory, contemplative silence and can just as easily disarm adults who are locked in adversarial arguments or polarized silence.

Turn the words around: “Tell me a story,” or better, “Tell me *your* story,” and you invite, ineluctably: memory, contemplation, reflection, interpretation, imagination, communion and action. This is not news. Professionals in a variety of fields from psychologists to politicians recognize and depend on the power of narrating personal experience. In graduate theological studies, non-judgmental narrations, such as the “verbatim,” are familiar tools in ministry formation and Clinical Pastoral Education.<sup>1</sup> It can be surprising, however, to teachers in other theological disciplines that accessing and engaging one’s personal experience through a simple narrative can unleash so much power: power for learning in general, power for the interpretive and conversational tasks of theology, power for personal transformation, and ultimately the power of encounter with the divine. In what follows I present a process of remembering, writing and sharing personal narratives, and I discuss elements of the process in relation to specific benefits in the context of graduate theological education.

### Recalling, Writing and Sharing Personal Narratives

Over a dozen years I have used a simple process for accessing experience; through experimentation and refinements, it remains simple. The pace of life and other currents in contemporary society discourage reflection on experience, and can prevent us from even being aware of, much less reflecting on, our experience; therefore, this process is deliberate, focused, and structured to help participants to slow down so that they can discover the riches of meaning that each moment holds. Offering no more background information than this, and with a clear reminder that the stories they choose to write will be shared with the group, I invite groups into the process. Using a prompt from a subject or context, or another occasion for remembering, I invite the group first to silence and then to recollection.

Step One. Travel back in your memory until you come upon a moment that catches your attention. Depending on the context, the span of time I indicate may be the last hour, day, or week or many years. Any moment in your life is suitable for this exercise. Don’t judge what catches your attention; follow it. It is not necessary to identify an “important” or “significant” moment.

Step Two. Hold that moment in your mind and try to see it as clearly as you can. Note what happened and what was said, who was present and the surroundings, what you were seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling and thinking. Try to look from different angles. See all that you can see.

Step Three. Write out the story of that experience in this way:

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<sup>1</sup> My first encounter with a structured form of personal narratives was in a ministry seminar using Patricia Killen and John deBeer, *The Art of Theological Reflection* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1995), 20 ff. and John Patton, *From Ministry to Theology: Pastoral Action & Reflection* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990).

- Describe what you saw, heard, smelled, felt, thought, did, during the event
- BUT
- Do not explain what it meant to you, or what you thought about it then or what you think about it now
- Do not evaluate or judge the moment in any way; do not offer conclusions
- Just tell the story

The tendency to make hasty conclusions about the worth or significance of events, deprives people of the richness and, often, the ownership of their own experiences. The process enables them to get as close as possible to the raw or fresh experience of a moment in their life, and to re-enter it.

Step Four. After everyone has finished writing, which can take from about ten to twenty minutes depending on the group, I ask participants to read their stories to one another in small groups. *Reading* the stories, rather than *telling* them, appears to gainsay rules of good communication, but it allows participants more freedom to re-enter their experience through another door: their own voices and ears. Eye contact, I tell participants, is not necessary in this case, because the primary audience for the story is the reader. Reading frees them from thinking about what they will say next, from noticing and reacting to listeners' expressions and postures, and from the temptation to edit as they go. I ask listeners to offer "kind attention" to the readers, and I ask readers to trust that the group is holding them in attention as they read.

I ask that they conduct the sharing in the following manner. Sit in silence. Someone in your group will begin reading, without offering introductions or disclaimers. When the reader is finished, the listeners will honor the experience that has been shared with silence. Avoid the temptation to comment. After a bit, the next reader will begin, again without introduction or disclaimer. Silence will honor each story. When everyone is finished reading simply remain in silence.

That is the entire process. The reflection that follows can go in many different directions, according to the context. Invariably, I begin the reflection on our storytelling with one or more of the following open-ended questions.

- What just happened here?
- What was this like for you?
- What was evoked in you—memories, physical sensations, emotions, thoughts—as you either read or listened to the stories?
- What did you notice about the process?

### **Initial Opportunities for Self-Reflection**

Even before reflection on the experiences being narrated, the challenges presented to the participants by the steps in the process of recalling, writing and sharing personal narrative offer opportunities for reflection on dispositions for study and conversation. Was the group able to keep quiet long enough to allow everyone to complete a narrative? I have been astounded at how difficult this can be, but the simple question, "Why is silence so challenging?" invites both personal reflection and social analysis.

Were individuals able to write without evaluation, judgments or predetermined conclusions? I frequently ask participants to "proofread" their stories to find evaluative language that has snuck into their writing: assessments, criticisms, "could haves" or "should haves," and attempts to get into the minds of other figures in the story. This has helped participants to see the ways that they build evaluations and conclusions into their narrations. Participants who struggle

to write non-evaluative narration of experience discover a beneficial impact on their own listening habits. They articulate an immediate awareness that the unconscious tendency to judge their own stories before really “hearing them out” translates into a tendency to judge others—present dialogue partners as well as texts—without really hearing them. That experiential awareness produces changes in behavior faster than any workshop on listening skills I have witnessed.

Can participants begin to read their narratives without comment, and can listeners receive them in silence? In reflection on these “rules” of the process, participants often voice two insights. First, in view of the common vulnerability in sharing narratives that can tempt us to use disclaimers to protect ourselves and cover our embarrassment, participants express alarm at how quickly and thoughtlessly they diminish and negate their own experiences and words—even when they are trying to avoid that behavior. Second, participants realize that the difficulty in receiving another’s story without comment stems from a positive desire to connect with a speaker, but that making comments intrudes on the storyteller’s “moment” and can inadvertently interfere with the speakers’ full realization of the power of his or her own experience.

### **Power for Learning**

Beyond reflections on silence, on respect for one’s own and others’ experiences, and on one’s ability to suspend judgment and to listen well, the use of personal narrative can unleash power for learning. Biologically, learning entails the physical changes—new synapses, new branches, new networks—of existing neuronal networks in the brain that store knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Learning also involves the brain’s capacity, indeed, the brain’s craving to find patterns and to create models of the world that makes sense out of the data received.<sup>3</sup> Meaningful experience in the present is the product of connections between the world of the learner and what is stored in the brain, connections that establish new neuronal pathways and new branches of neurons in the brain. Engaging students’ prior neuronal connections, that is, their experience, so that new connections can be made, is critical to learning: “The single most important factor in learning is the existing networks of neurons in the learner’s brain. Ascertain what they are and teach accordingly.”<sup>4</sup>

The direct question, “What do you know, or what have you experienced about this topic?” tends to elicit the most immediate or obvious connections. Accessing experience through personal narrative in a framework of contemplative silence, however, opens a broader and deeper field of recall, evoking less predictable experiences and thus deeper and more subtle connections to previous experience. Further, the recall, writing and sharing of personal narratives engages multiple regions of the brain, stimulates the senses, and evokes emotion—each of which is a factor in the way brains function in the learning process.

A typical comment, in this case offered by a physician in a teaching seminar, indicates the activation of both the sensory cortex and the limbic system. “How vivid the memory was no matter how shut away it had been. I haven’t thought of that moment in thirty years. I could see and feel everything so clearly. The intensity was amazing. And it has so much to do with why I

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<sup>2</sup> James E. Zull, *The Art of Changing the Brain* (Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing, 2002), 112.

<sup>3</sup> David A Hogue, *Remembering the Future, Imagining the Past: Story Ritual and the Human Brain* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2003), 89-90.

<sup>4</sup> Zull, 93.

am where I am today.”<sup>5</sup> In typical graduate level classrooms, words dominate, but the world of direct experience is “sense luscious.”<sup>6</sup> The first encounter the brain has with the world is through the senses, the portals of perception. The information perceived is sent to the various parts of the brain known collectively as the sensory cortex.<sup>7</sup> The thalamus sorts the input, sending visual stimuli to the visual cortex, and auditory input to the auditory cortex, etc. The more senses that are engaged, the more regions of the brain stimulated, the more powerful and enduring the learning is. The rich blend of input from all the senses is what makes concrete experience so much more powerful for learning than lectures or reading alone.<sup>8</sup> Recalling, writing and sharing personal narratives stimulates the senses in dual fashion. The process evokes from memory powerful sense images of concrete experience at the same time that it literally engages vision touch in writing, as well as hearing in both speaking and listening, making it a powerful tool for promoting learning that endures.

While memories are stimulating the sensory cortex, they are simultaneously activating the limbic system of the brain, which has primary responsibility for emotions. The hippocampus, a structure of the limbic system, helps to integrate sensory input and store it in long-term memory.<sup>9</sup> “Emotional significance” is one of the ways that the hippocampus determines what is worth learning and remembering.<sup>10</sup> The sensory data that is “tagged” by the limbic system as emotionally significant is more likely to end up in long-term memory.<sup>11</sup> “Emotionally charged memories have more supporting circuits and flow more readily to influence thoughts than thoughts do to influence feelings.”<sup>12</sup> Feelings matter for learning, and put head to head, feelings are likely to override cognition. Personal narratives inevitably evoke emotionally charged moments—circumstances and ideas that the storytellers care about. When this process is connected to a new idea or topic that is the subject of study, it dramatically increases a learner’s engagement with it.

### **Power for Engaging Theological Conversation**

Using Roger Haight’s definition of Christian theology as “the discipline that interprets all reality—human existence, society, history, the world and God—in terms of the symbols of the Christian faith,”<sup>13</sup> and presenting the entire theological endeavor as a “mutually interpretive critical and transforming conversation,”<sup>14</sup> my invitation to students in introductory theology courses is to become full participants in that conversation. Many educators agree that theological education should enable students to engage their personal and communal experience,

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<sup>5</sup> The practice of personal narratives was used in a teaching seminar as part of a research project. Celeste DeSchryver Mueller, “To Be Leaven: Transformational Teaching Practices in the Formation of Mission Leaders” (D.Min. thesis, Eden Theological Seminary, 2006), 51.

<sup>6</sup> The phrase belongs to Diane Ackerman, quoted in Zull, 135.

<sup>7</sup> Zull, 137.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 80-81.

<sup>10</sup> John Bracke and Karen Tye, *Teaching the Bible in the Church* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003), 17.

<sup>11</sup> Hogue, 61.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>13</sup> Roger Haight, *Dynamics of Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1990), 216.

<sup>14</sup> Rooted in a definition for all Christian theology, [see David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order the New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 23], the Association of Graduate Programs in Ministry used this language to define *practical* theology, quoted in Barbara Fleisher, “Practical Theology and Transformative Learning: Partnership for Christian Religious Education,” in *Forging a Better Religious Education in the Third Millennium*, ed. James Michael Lee (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 2000), 203.

their own contexts and the wider culture, and the breadth and depth of the Christian tradition in that mutually critical and transformative conversation.<sup>15</sup> My particular concern is that students engage both conversation—with texts, contexts and one another—and interpretation reflectively so that their practices of interpretation and conversation become in them a theological *habitus*.

In the last five years I have witnessed a steady rise in resistance to that invitation from students who, reflecting the increased polarization in society, come to university and seminary with narrow viewpoints and rigidly held positions. An increasing number of students who believe that theological education should provide objective, univocal truth resist full engagement in the interpretive task of theology. As one first year seminary student phrased it, “All my life I’ve been told to question; I’m tired of questions. The Magisterium has answers and that’s what I’m here for.”

Although not intended as a tool for self-reflection, Paul Ricoeur’s description of the process of interpretation as it moves from naïveté through distanciation to a second naïveté can help draw learners’ attention inward as they engage interpretation. Seeing the stages in the process as descriptions of “what happens to me as I interpret” echoes, as well, the biological process of learning. Writing and sharing personal narratives offers a particular contribution in each stage which engages the students self-reflectively in the process of interpretation and amplifies its transformational potential.

#### **Presuppositions – First Naïveté**

“All understanding, like all interpretation. . . . is never without presuppositions. . . . It is only on the basis of that prior understanding that [one] can, in general, interrogate and interpret.”<sup>16</sup> Although effective learning needs to be built on prior understanding, presuppositions are often hidden from learners. Ricoeur’s description of naïveté as pre-reflective or uncritical corresponds to descriptions that brain research offers of the mental models held by the neocortex. Mental models, like presuppositions need to be made explicit and need to be engaged in order to arrive at understanding.

The neocortex, especially the front cortex, acts as an overseer of both brain and body, responsible for action, planning and consequences.<sup>17</sup> The front cortex holds tightly to mental models that allow a person to make sense of the world. Presuppositions can actually affect one’s ability to see or hear, “The learner loves his [or her] ideas, and their impact can extend deep into the perceiving brain.”<sup>18</sup> Ken Bain relates a startling example of this “tyranny of belief.”<sup>19</sup> Two physicists at Arizona State University conducted a study in which they employed a variety of teaching methods to teach Newton’s laws of motion and to discover if the teaching actually transformed the way students thought about motion. When it became clear that even students who had earned A’s in the class still held Aristotelian rather than Newtonian views of motion, the instructors interviewed some of the students. During the interviews, the instructors demonstrated to the students that their theories of motion failed to be verified by experimentation, and asked the students to account for the discrepancy between their theories and the experiment. “What they heard astonished them: Many of the students still refused to

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<sup>15</sup> This common concern is documented in the study by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, see Charles Foster, et.al. *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 25ff.

<sup>16</sup> Bultmann, quoted in Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 351.

<sup>17</sup> Zull, 21.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>19</sup> Jerry Larsen, *Religious Education and the Brain* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2000), 33.

give up their mistaken ideas about motion. . . .The students performed all kinds of mental gymnastics to avoid confronting and revising” their mental models of the universe.<sup>20</sup>

Accessing experience through personal narratives can help students see presuppositions that may not be immediately apparent to them, and would not necessarily become apparent upon direct questioning. In an ecclesiology course, for example, imagine the difference between asking, “What presuppositions do you hold about holiness as a mark of the church?” or even, “What do you believe about the holiness of the church?” versus asking students to, “Recall (and describe and share) a time when you have been challenged or edified by the holiness of the church.” Each question may elicit genuine beliefs or positions of the learner, but the narrative will reveal the belief within a personal and social/cultural context, and it will illuminate to the learner his or her degree of investment in that particular position.

Students frequently respond to the exercise of writing and sharing a personal narrative by saying, “When you asked us to remember, I had no idea this was the story that would come out; it wasn’t in my mind at all, I haven’t thought of it in years.” As a source of reflection about the nature of presuppositions and their relationship to the process of interpretation in theology, this response from students can lead them to recognize how powerfully and unconsciously presuppositions can function. While presuppositions can unwittingly create barriers to engaging new ideas, recognizing one’s presuppositions begins to disrupt what Ricoeur calls the sense of “contemporaneity and congeniality,”<sup>21</sup> which characterizes first naïveté, and moves the learner into the awareness of distanciation—the second stage of interpretation—that characterizes critical inquiry.

#### **Critical Inquiry—Distanciation**

Distanciation, the awareness that one is not as closely familiar with the subject of study as previously imagined, can be provoked by becoming aware that scholars and other conversation partners illuminate multiple meanings of a subject from their varied perspectives and that the subject itself may speak with multiple voices. The emotional reaction to this awareness, especially for new students in theology whose subjects include beloved texts and cherished ideas, ranges from mild anxiety to outright fear: “If what I have always believed is not so, or is so complex, then can I ever know. . . trust. . . ?” You know the rest. This reaction is *physical* and has consequences for one’s ability to engage interpretation fully.

All new information, which the brain receives as sensory input, goes directly to the amygdala,<sup>22</sup> an important fear center in the brain, before one is even conscious of the perceptions.<sup>23</sup> If danger is detected in the new input, the brain may trigger the instinctive “fight or flight” response. The threat does not have to be physical; emotional threats like humiliation and sarcasm, as well as threats to firmly held positions or worldviews, can trigger danger responses.<sup>24</sup> If a challenge passes over the threshold of threat, the potential for learning can be diminished. One possible response is known as “downshifting” in which higher order thinking and critical reasoning are arrested while the parts of the brain concerned with mere survival take over. Karen Tye and John Bracke describe what they observe when students feel threatened. “It’s almost as if the lights go out—their eyes glaze over; the expressions on their faces become

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<sup>20</sup> Ken Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 22-23.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation,” trans by John B. Thompson, in *From Text To Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 87.

<sup>22</sup> Hogue, 33.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 284ff.

<sup>24</sup> Bracke and Tye, 21.

rigid and fixed—and we know that the child, youth or adult is simply working to ‘survive’ the threat they feel to their worldview and well-being.”<sup>25</sup> When engaged in interpretation, if distanciation provokes too much threat, downshifting can mean retreat into the long-held, and seemingly safer world of one’s presuppositions, or it can result in a disillusioned abandonment of theological conversation as ultimately meaningless.

An experience that remains vivid in my memory can illustrate. I was teaching an undergraduate ecclesiology course at St. Louis University to a group of students who—from my perspective—were becoming more openly hostile to the topic and to me with each day that passed. My sense of myself as a teacher was threatened; I was downshifting as well. About three weeks into the class, as I watched them huffing and glaring during an exam, I realized that in my own enthusiasm for the topic I had not stopped to find out what their experiences of church had been. I asked them to flip over the exam papers and write a story of an experience or encounter with church. That evening, I came close to tears as I read page after page of heartfelt, but overwhelmingly negative narratives of their experiences of church that had hardened into presuppositions. No wonder they couldn’t engage the subject of the four marks of the church. When we discussed their stories next class, the students felt safe enough to admit that my enthusiasm evoked feelings of stupidity and humiliation because their experiences did not match what they thought they were “supposed” to feel about the church.

By accessing experience that made their presuppositions visible, that moment of storytelling made it possible for me to help the students make meaningful connections between their own frustrations and the difficulties facing the church in history and today. The connections happened at the level of their emotions; the stories allowed what might be called getting “below the neocortex” to more primitive brain structures that can have a powerful impact on mental models.

### **Critical Conversation**

A common response to sharing personal narratives is, “As we went through the process of remembering and writing, I saw so many more details than I thought I remembered.” Multiple images and layers of meaning emerge for storytellers from the focused recall and description of a single life experience. Listeners also find that *hearing* stories evokes their own memories with layers of images and meanings. This vivid, even somatic, illustration of the “surplus of meaning”<sup>26</sup> enables students to see and engage the hermeneutical possibilities of texts and contexts. Thoughtfully and critically engaging the complexity of one’s personal narrative offers a pattern for reading texts closely, for investigating the worlds behind, of and in front of texts and for exploring social and cultural contexts.

The critical theological work of putting texts, perspectives, contexts and experience in conversation with one another cannot flourish without an environment conducive to conversation with fellow learners. The flip side of recognizing the thickness of one’s life experiences is realizing the common ground that accessing experiences delineates for conversation partners. Narratives evoke images, emotions and listener’s own stories. Despite the uniqueness of their own stories, individuals are connected along some neural pathway to the stories they hear. Connections made on the common ground of experience are real connections. The neuroscientific discovery that brains are hard-wired for empathy accounts for one aspect of this

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 45-46.

phenomenon.<sup>27</sup> In place of the barrier to conversation erected by an exchange of disembodied views, which allow those who hold them to be objectified and dismissed, these connections allow learners to see their conversation partners as subjects whose views are rooted in their being and experience.

Learners with whom I have practiced writing and sharing narratives regularly name the stories they hear as precious gifts of the storyteller's self. Discussion of the experience of sharing personal narratives with a group of educators in a teaching seminar suggests that the same process that increases participants' sense of connection with others simultaneously allowed them to appreciate and engage the "otherness" of participants in the group.

I am not used to moving so close to people in such a short time. I'm thinking, I don't even know these folks and yet there is this closeness and connection that is revealed.  
(Jerry)

[The stories generated] a very quick movement to intimacy with the group, which allowed me to be more open with myself and with everyone else. It set the stage for allowing me to listen more deeply to what the others said, to listen to the wisdom and insights which they had, and to allow the wisdom and insights. . .to challenge me to grow. (Amy)

When you tell stories and you listen to those stories you are engaging in a relationship which isn't something you focus on most times. . . It's hard to develop a polar opposition or an ideological opposition to someone when you know something about their life.  
(Colin)

And then they become part of your stories. (Karen)

In the listening, I feel there is a huge responsibility. In the gift of each one of your stories, there is a responsibility. In the meshing of our stories, we become responsible for each other. (Amy)<sup>28</sup>

Whether with one another, with texts or with contexts, critical theological conversation depends on receiving the other as subject, being transformed by the gift of the other and nurturing one's own subjectivity through responsible action. Sharing personal narratives till fertile ground for those conversations to grow.

### **Appropriation and Transformation**

There is a natural resemblance between the experience of receiving a part of someone else through his or her story and the process of appropriation, "making one's own that which is other,"<sup>29</sup> which is the aim and desired outcome of learning and of the theological task of interpretation. Outcomes of graduate theology and ministry programs, such as finding voice, developing ministerial identity, and offering competent leadership, reflect concern that appropriation of learning result in transformation of both what the students do and of who they

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<sup>27</sup> Hogue, 42.

<sup>28</sup> Mueller, 51-53.

<sup>29</sup> Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, 2d ed. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 172.

are. From the perspective of the brain, learning has not happened until new sensory input has become new branches or reconfigurations of neural networks—literally embodied knowledge—and has been interpreted, that is integrated into coherent meaningful patterns. Appropriation, then, is transformational, and happens as one enacts, embodies, or gives voice to a new idea, attitude, or insight.

Sandra Schneiders uses the evocative term “aesthetic surrender” to describe what happens within a person as one fully engages interpretation so that it leads to appropriation and to mutual transformation.<sup>30</sup> To describe aesthetic surrender, she draws on the experience a person has when “caught up” in a work of art. Aesthetic surrender allows the interpreter to fully enter the world projected by what is being interpreted not as an “exercise of discursive rationality, but a process of aesthetic involvement.”<sup>31</sup> The entirety of a person is engaged. Ricoeur describes this movement as “the playful metamorphosis of the ego” in which the subjectivity of the interpreter emerges because ego is placed in suspense.<sup>32</sup> “Appropriation, in this way, ceases to appear as a kind of possession, as a way of taking hold of things; instead it implies a moment of dispossession of the egoistic and narcissistic ego.”<sup>33</sup> Evidence of appropriation is found in the mutual transformation of subjects and is manifest in responsible action. Appropriation involves both recognition of and exercise of one’s subjective agency as a human being.

The practice of writing and sharing personal narratives in the classroom fosters appropriation by creating a disposition of openness to transformation and by nurturing personal subjectivity and agency. The mere fact of including learners’ stories as an essential component of a course sends the message that the learners’ lives are implicated in the study. One’s lens for learning is adjusted toward transformation. If regular input into the course is reflection on my own and my classmates’ and my professor’s life stories, I cannot escape the intimation that the outcome of the study will make a difference in our life stories. What we do and say matters. As the subject of the stories that I write and tell, I hear my own subjective agency read aloud. I see it emerging as I am engaged in conversation with others and with the subject of my study. Like an ostinato in the score, I hear my identity sung as “agent-subject-in-relationship.”<sup>34</sup> Stories engage the whole self, and personal narratives provide a vehicle for attending to the question of how one’s story—in being and action—is being rewritten as a result of the engagement in interpretation.

### **Power of Encounter with the Divine**

In *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance*, Dorothee Soelle warns that:

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 day, and increasingly we are losing the visions of our life.<sup>35</sup>

Soelle notes a cultural tendency to trivialize all experience in systematically destructive ways,

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<sup>30</sup> Schneiders, 172.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>32</sup> Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation,” 88.

<sup>33</sup> Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 94.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), 8-9.

<sup>35</sup> Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 14.

and she names the “trivialization of experience” as the strongest anti-mystical force in contemporary society.<sup>36</sup> Over the years, I have discovered that writing and sharing personal narratives in theology classes creates a space in which learners can become more attentive to the revelatory power of their own experiences, and in which their sacramental vision is broadened to see the revelatory character of all that we do together and each moment of their lives.

The ritual character of the narrative process accentuates the solemn honor give to each story which, in turn accentuates the presence of the sacred. As the stories are read, I have observed a startling similarity in the experience across diverse groups. The room becomes hushed; someone begins to read. As the air is filled with the details of the person’s story, no matter how ordinary or extraordinary the story is, the quality of the silence deepens and the level of attentiveness to the speaker increases. Silence is broken only by the words of each individual narrative. When each story finishes, and, finally, when all the stories are finished, the silence is profound.

“The pause of silence in between the stories caused us to be able to listen, and once [the speaker] was done, to continue listening in the silence. . . .The silence came and we kept listening, and there was a sense of awe.”

“What is that about?” I asked.

“I really think, as we tell the stories, it is the presence of the Holy in our midst. We listen for the Holy in the stories and in the silence in between the stories.”<sup>37</sup> God is recognized in the silence, and each person’s story occupies a ritual space that honors it as a sacred text. In one group, after the stories had been read, a participant said simply and quietly, “The word of the Lord.”

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>37</sup> Mueller, 48.

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