

# MORAL DYNAMICS OF STORYTELLING: INVITING TRANSFORMATION

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## Abstract

Telling autobiographical stories is an action that shapes the practice of educating persons in faith. The action of telling such stories has moral significance. Telling our story *expresses* the person we are. It *forms* the person we are becoming. It *effects* changes in the world around us. A religious educator is challenged to engage in a reflective and ongoing inquiry into the nature of these stories to see what they express, form, and effect by way of promoting a more just and peaceful world.

Students in an introductory Christian ethics course were asked to think about ordinary activities they choose which are morally significant to life as a human person and as member of the human family. Few students had thought about the moral importance of daily activities such as eating, resting, leisure, and driving their cars. Similarly, another overlooked, constitutive and morally significant activity shaping the very fabric of our human experience is storytelling. As human persons we both hear and tell many different kinds of stories that shape an understanding of self, others, our world, and God. In *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals*, Anderson and Foley (1998) concur storytelling is a constitutive part of the human experience. Religious educators are challenged to be more conscious of the dynamics of storytelling as a significant moral activity. As a dynamic moral action, telling a story is expressive, formative, and effective. Appreciating these dynamics challenge us as educators to be more reflective about the stories we tell and how they invite transformation in the world around us.

The profundity of storytelling as a moral activity begins in one's earliest years of life. Today parents remain concerned what stories their children hear and those their children repeat. This highlights the action of storytelling with its equally fundamental complementary action of storylistening (Navone, 1990). Whether telling stories or listening to stories, children learn who they are from these storytelling actions. One's very worldview and understanding of self is shaped. As children grow they become more involved in the act of owning their own story as they tell it to others. Storytelling has a vital function in religious education because this is how God is revealed to us through stories of scripture and tradition. Sharing story happens in a relational context of community which makes it such a powerful moral activity for consideration and reflection by educators. Stories have a power to shape our moral vision and consequently, life itself.

In the context of teaching, I am becoming more attentive to the genre of autobiographical stories that are shared in the classroom. While religious educators use a wide variety of different genres, all of which have a morally significant value when we use them to convey our faith tradition, beliefs, and values, I am drawn to reflect specifically upon the influence of autobiographical stories. These stories are constructed from our lived experience. This is a particularly expressive genre that forms learners because of the deep connections that are possible in the relationship fostered between learner and teacher. Fostering intentional and

systematic reflection upon these stories we tell is important because they, for the listener, are a powerful medium for communicating the Christian story. Thomas Groome (1991, p. 216) reminds us that God reveals through concrete experiences of life and our life stories are bound up in the Christian Story with an inherent revelatory power to mediate and manifest God's presence.

In the experience of teaching, there are many times autobiographical stories are included and shared with learners as a meaningful planned contribution to the sequenced curricular story found in a textbook or syllabus. While these inclusions are carefully planned in advance as an intentional, systematic part of a lesson, many autobiographical stories emerge from the dialogical reflective process of teaching itself. These stories shape the experience of the faith curriculum and communicate, for good and possibly for ill, powerful messages that influence the learner in their faith. Many times these autobiographical faith stories, planned or emergent, are storylinking to a theme or story found in the scriptures or the tradition (Yust, 2004, chap. 3). They incarnate a biblical or traditional principle under discussion and thus contribute meaningfully in the dialogical activity of teaching itself. Our autobiographical faith stories are "privileged and imaginative acts of self-interpretation" (Anderson & Foley, 1998, p. 5). As acts of self-interpretation, telling our story is a morally charged activity because our stories interpenetrate with life stories of others, their worldviews, and God images. Listening and retelling our stories alter our understanding of self as well as effectively shapes our relationships to others, the world, and God. Because autobiographical stories carry power when embedded in our teaching, teachers should reflect carefully upon them.

#### DYNAMICS: EXPRESSIVE, FORMATIVE, AND EFFECTIVE

Reflecting on the stories we share can add to our own personal knowledge of faith as well as to our practice of teaching. Telling stories, as a moral activity, has three dynamics shaping our work as religious educators. According to moral theologians Russell Connors, Jr. and Patrick T. McCormick (Connors & McCormick, 1998, chap. 5) moral actions, freely and consciously chosen, are expressive, formative and effective.

Storytelling as an action *expresses* something about the person we are, though only partially and incompletely since we are ever becoming in our character as human persons. The stories we tell show others what we believe and value about our self, others, the world, and God. Whether sharing autobiographical stories that are intentionally planned or those that emerge through a rapid reflection process in the act of teaching itself, these stories express to others who we are as Christian persons and witnesses. Stories express who we are only partially because, as self-interpreted constructions drawing from different facets of our life, they reflect who we are in our vulnerabilities at a given moment. Each of us have personally constructed a story that we share with commonly share with others, what Foley and Anderson call a personal narrative framework (Anderson & Foley, 1998, p. 11). Much can be learned by intentionally looking at the stories in our personal narrative framework and assessing what is revealed and concealed in various teaching contexts where stories are shared.

The act of telling our story *forms*. It is morally significant that storytelling forms the educator as well as the learner. From the perspective of the educator, storytelling *forms* the educator into who he or she is becoming. Telling and retelling our stories shape us as persons in an ever deeper way and further develops our sense of self-definition and way of being in the world. By being more reflective about the stories we tell, formally in teaching and even informally among friends, it heightens our own awareness of who we are and ultimately who we

are becoming. Similarly from the perspective of the learner, these autobiographical accounts shared by the educator are deeply formative and influence others in understanding who they are becoming. Stories included to shape the curriculum are powerful sources of formation when they reinforce or emphasize biblical principles or an understanding of the tradition as Yust (2004) suggests. As stories received and engaged by the learner listener, they take on their own meaning. As teachers we can not predict how the story will be heard, interpreted, or acted upon. Yet sharing stories with others is deeply formative. As religious educators we might pause to self-monitor the stories we share and examine how these stories shape us and also lead learners to new self-understanding in their own faith journey.

Storytelling *effects* changes in the world around us. Our stories shape how we think about ourselves, other people, the world in which we live, and God. New self-understandings shaped through the action of storytelling lead to choices that bring about change in relationships in the world. Yust has suggested the purpose of telling a story is to help others become “history-makers” which means people whose words and actions contribute to a more just and compassionate society (Yust, 2004, p. 43). As storytellers we are called to reflect upon how our stories lead others and engage them to make history in ways that uphold the central transforming vision and story of Jesus Christ. If we as educators are not reflective about the effects of our stories, it is possible from time to time that our stories could render harm. It is important to reflect on how our own stories align with the Christian story and vision as well as predispose us toward a greater capacity to make history and reach out in justice and compassion to others. Details of our stories must be closely considered. This is difficult to do with those stories that emerge rapidly in the midst of our teaching. A reflective practice would assist us to see where our stories lead and what effects they may have.

## TRUTH-TELLING: REFLECTION IN COMMUNITY

The moral importance of these three interrelated dynamics of storytelling challenges us to be more than simply mindful of these autobiographical witness stories, but also to engage in a process of systematic and intentional reflection upon them. The benefit is twofold. The religious educator grows in their own self-knowledge through the dialogical process of reflection and inquiry into their shared stories. Learners benefit when religious educators assess how these stories contribute to the learning process and assist learners to appropriate their faith. This process requires tracking stories we tell and engaging in a communal process of truth-telling reflection.

First is it important to gather the stories we tell in order to reflect upon them as a corpus. Writing down the stories we tell and the context in which we tell them is essential. This is not always easy, but critically reflective teaching and autobiographical self-reflection, “often begins alone” (Brookfield, 1995, p. 71). Keeping a classroom story log or journal is one effective method for gathering these stories. Using some form of digital capture or peer observation may be alternative methods for gathering these stories.

Autobiographical self-reflection is fraught with ambiguities because we can feel exposed to ourselves when we begin narrating or capturing the stories we have shared in the classroom. This story-gathering process involves risk because immediately our consciousness is raised about what these stories express, integral to the first moral dynamic of storytelling. This activity of systematically gathering stories and reflecting upon them is what Kathleen Taylor offered as “teaching with developmental intention” (Mezirow, 2000, chap. 6). As a learner we enter into a

dialogical relationship with the self, questioning our stories and exploring our life experiences within the context of teaching. A truthful verbatim of the stories as they were expressed to learners is necessary. Capturing the story is a reflective process that begins to expose assumptions, practices, and biases that we have not closely investigated before. In this step an educator must be disciplined in practicing what Patricia O'Connell Killen and John deBeer call nonjudgmental narration (Killen & De Beer, 1994, p. 26-27); we capture the story as descriptively and truthfully as we can in a nonjudgmental manner. This narration will provide the educator a basis for authentic feedback on what is contained within them for inquiry.

After gathering stories over an extended period of time, an intentional and systematic inquiry to assess what we learn in these stories can begin. The educator now reflects upon the corpus as a storylistener and learner who hears what the stories express, the first moral dynamic. This process of seeking feedback is most revelatory if done in a communal setting for we can never hope to overcome bias and self-deception on our own. This process can be done with a spiritual director, some close friends or with those we teach. These stories express who we are, our deepest beliefs and values, as well as disclose at times our own vulnerabilities and questions about life's meaning and purpose. Our personal self-knowledge grows as a person and as a teacher when we assess what these stories express and reveal, as well as discern what they conceal (Anderson & Foley, 1998, pp. 9-12).

This systematic reflection process itself is also deeply formative, the second moral dynamic. What do we learn from these stories? Where do they lead us or those we teach? It is formative to reflect upon what motivated telling the story in the first place. Stories are shared for different reasons and in different ways. Was the origin of the story borne primarily from the dialogical process of teaching itself or was it crafted ahead of time in a detailed way to support a particular curricular moment? Many surprises emerge from reflecting upon the unplanned stories that emerge in the activity of teaching. What prompted or motivated telling the story one chose? A teacher's knowledge of practice grows if they are more aware and reflective about how they utilize and tell stories in the classroom. With the help of others this reflective process leads to the last moral dynamic, the effective. Listening to what our own stories express shapes us and leads us toward change. The action of "naming and claiming" our experience and seeing how our stories contribute to a larger network of relationships in the learning process is can be transforming (Mezirow, 2000, p. 160-163). Much is learned by the educator in and through this reflective process, but one must also take into consider what other learners may hear in our stories.

As a curricular activity, sharing autobiographical stories in our teaching shapes the learning process and adds storied content to the curriculum. Through an intentional process of reflection we can learn more about our own stories and storytelling practices to best answer the questions that Connors and McCormick view as fundamental: 1) What stories should we tell? 2) Where do these stories lead us and others? 3) How do these stories make demands upon us and others to take new action? (1998, pp. 87-89).

Each of these three questions is significant. If we know our students, we can listen to our own stories from the framework of a learner's perspective. This perspective taking process will likely yield new awareness about what our stories express and begin to answer the question related to those we should even tell. By attending to each story's narrative detail and imagery from a learner's perspective we can learn more about where the stories lead to new understanding of self, others, world, and God. How might learners be called to act by our narrations? Researchers on teacher learning, Joy S. Ritchie and David E. Wilson (2000) suggest

a process of teacher reflection challenges us to problematize our own stories and deliberately search out what our stories teach or fail to tell within the particular social context in which we are teaching. The social context of our learners is given central consideration. We pose questions about our own stories and wonder what our learners will be called to think about and do as a result of sharing this particular story at a given juncture in a course or classroom. Our ability to grow in self-knowledge about what our stories tell and where they might be leading others is important if we desire to influence the actions of those learners in our care. The assumption here is that thorough reflection on storytelling within our teaching will help us become more skilled as storytellers in the pursuit of good teaching that offers Good News and shapes learner praxis toward gospel living.

In research literature on reflective teaching, the espoused perspective that is being embraced here by personal and communal reflection on autobiographical stories is in the social reconstruction tradition of reflective teaching (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). The social reconstructionist version stresses reflection upon the social and political context of education and assessing our actions, like storytelling, for their ability to “enhance equity, justice, and more humane conditions” in our world (Zeichner & Liston, 1996, pp. 52, 59-61). This perspective is aligned with those who uphold that educating religiously is embedded in an institutional, cultural, and political context. From this perspective a teacher who engages in the morally dynamic action of storytelling is attentive to the stories one tells in his or her own practice. A teacher is reflective about story content; namely, they are concerned with what stories express, how stories continually form the teacher in their own self-understanding and how it shapes learner listeners. A teacher is concerned with the effect of these stories. Where will the stories lead them? Leading them toward action must take into consideration the particular learning context and culture for this group of listeners. A reflective teacher storyteller that is concerned with the effective dynamics of their storytelling is outwardly attentive to the social conditions in which these storytelling practices are situated. From this perspective a reflective awareness of our own stories is always held up against gospel standards that call us to right relationships with learners and for living in the world. This focus upon justice can be transforming in the life of a teacher when one recognizes that autobiographical stories contribute to the larger Christian story and vision of a world that knows peace and justice. Embracing reflective teaching with respect to storytelling invites not only the teacher into personal transformation of their teaching practice, but also it invites the learner as a storylistener to hear and consider taking a similar path.

## CONCLUSION

As reflective practitioners we must recognize that storytelling is a morally charged act that contributes to the realization of a more just and human society. The challenge for religious educators is to embrace intentional reflective practices that help them learn about their own teaching practices and most specifically how the practice of telling one’s own stories effect transformation for oneself and for the learner. When assessing the ecology in which one’s stories are told and heard, as in the social reconstructionist tradition, one not only positively shapes the curriculum, but also shapes the world itself.

Engaging the community to help us systematically reflect on these autobiographical stories that are intentionally incorporated in the curriculum and those that emerge in the act of teaching becomes an important social practice for teachers. It supports an educator’s desire to continuously learn, to improve their teaching, and to better proclaim the gospel through this

ordinary activity of storytelling. Developing an appreciation for intentional and systematic reflective teacher practices in the field of religious education will make greater use for storytelling in religious education.

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