

## **Playing with Mirrors: Narrative Inquiry and Congregational Consultation**

Karen-Marie Yust, Associate Professor of Christian Education, Union-PSCE

It's 11:15 a.m. on a Sunday morning in January 2006 and I am perched in the balcony of a New England congregation, observing their primary congregational worship service. I count seven children and youth in the assembly: two brothers of elementary school age, a brother/sister pair of youth, a high school girl, another elementary-age girl, and a middle school boy. I recall that this congregation has 368 children enrolled in its church school and approximately 170 regular participants (out of 240 registered) in its youth programs. Church leaders have told me that it is common for only a few children and youth to attend the main service, as most parents opt to take advantage of the overlapping worship and church school hour at 9:30 a.m. An unusual number of youth attended that earlier service today because participation in a commissioning ritual was mandatory for all those going on the summer mission trip.

As I watch, the brother/sister pair is singing the first hymn alongside their parents. The mother of the two brothers shows the boy closest to her how to find the right page in the hymnal, and then she begins reading the bulletin and singing sporadically. The boy's father stands but does not sing. The boys look at the hymnal and around the sanctuary; they do not sing. At the end of the hymn, one of the boys "forgets" to sit down until prompted by his mother. Both brothers begin looking through the bulletin, and for a short time eight pages of mission trip photos stapled into the bulletin's center capture their attention. Then one brother begins drawing on a pew card with a golf pencil. Two pews ahead of him, the boy of the brother/sister pair leans against his father while the pastor shares several announcements. Both he and his sister are looking toward the pulpit and it appears that they are following the pastor's words.

The announcements conclude and the pastor leads a responsive call to worship and a unison prayer of confession. The mother of the two boys moves her finger along the prayer for the son next to her; the second son looks around. The brother and sister participate in the litany and the first half of the prayer, and then replace speaking with yawning during the second half. They fidget with their bulletins and look around while the rest of the congregation rustle and turn bulletin pages during the pastor's unprinted assurance of pardon. During the anthem that follows, the brother again leans against his father while he and his sister look toward the choir loft. Behind them, the younger of the two brothers leans sleepily on the pew in front of him while his older sibling draws pictures on the bright yellow mission sponsor form tucked into the bulletin.

The preceding three paragraphs represent a fifteen-minute period in the children's ministry of a congregation. Three months earlier, this church's leaders had asked me to consult with them as they worked to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their approaches to nurturing childhood faith and to improve their ministry practices. We agreed on a consultation process that would include on-site observation; interviews with paid staff, members of several pertinent church committees, volunteer teachers, parents, children, and youth; and review of committee minutes, church newsletters, program materials, and other written materials related to their children's ministry. This process would introduce me to the "story" of their children's ministry and allow me, as a "narrative inquirer", to guide them in shared reflection on their religious life together with their youngest members.

Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly suggest, in *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (2000), that narrative inquirers walk among stories in a community and engage in a series of negotiations that enable them to re-present what they have heard in generative ways. They try “to make sense of life as lived” (78) in a particular place by attending not only to stories as they are conventionally understood (as specific narratives about events or persons), but also to “actions, doings, and happenings, all of which are narrative expressions” (79). They position themselves as ethnographic observers, recording the lived stories of a communal body and listening carefully to the narrative themes and frameworks that might further express these stories in ways conducive to communal meaning-making and transformation. Thus, my role as a narrative inquirer consulting with congregations is to compose observational texts as I dwell in the midst of a congregation and then to translate those field texts from research notes to written and presented narratives. In this way, I mirror the stories of congregations so that they can recognize, claim and transform their own narratives.

I am keenly aware that my own story, shaped by my childhood experiences and influenced by the personal and professional roles I have adopted in adulthood, affects the composition of field texts. That I am intrigued by the concept of story as a way of making meaning is surely connected to my lifelong love of books, reading and writing. Something about narrative process appealed to me even as a young child, and I have rarely been without a book in hand since I learned to read at age four. It is hardly surprising, then, that I look for stories in my consulting work, for narratives have been one of my preferred ways of making sense of the world for over forty years now. That I am profoundly aware of the complicated relationship between what people say they do and believe and the embodied beliefs and commitments of a faith community is in part related to my childhood experiences in a fundamentalist congregation where gendered practices and some social behaviors conflicted with theological and moral ideals. This awareness prompts me to hold observational texts in as much, and often more, esteem than interview or survey texts when I want to understand what people believe and value. That I resist sentimental characterizations of children’s feelings and behavior is a byproduct of twenty years of parenting, pastoring, and studying children who have demonstrated a much wider spectrum of emotion and activity than sentimental descriptions acknowledge. When I visit congregations, I expect to hear children’s laments as well as their joy, their persistent “whys” as well as their awe and acceptance, and their anger as well as their expressions of love. I try not to insert a soft gel of “childhood innocence” between my observational lens and children’s activities.

With Mary Louise Pratt, then, I think, “it is fairly clear that personal narrative persists alongside objectifying description” in observational narratives (Clifford and Marcus 1986, 32). The consultant does not shed her or his narrative skin before entering into a relationship with a congregation. Rather, she or he acknowledges the subjective nature of fieldwork and works to identify the aspects of her or his personal story that, through unconscious projection, might influence the narrative inquiry in unhelpful ways. Elements of the personal story include the kinds of personal experiential knowledge the consultant brings as well as philosophical and theological commitments, sociocultural stereotypes and biases, methodological preferences, professional needs and anxieties, and partially-developed theoretical frameworks that she or he is testing. That these elements coexist with other, more easily objectified, elements of the field observation is not inherently bad for effective consultation. However, if the influence of these

elements remains hidden, subjective interpretations of congregational life that remain open to discussion and revision can masquerade as objective snapshots of religious reality that are fixed and incontrovertible.

Consider, for instance, the personal assumptions that shape my observation (recorded above) that the brother/sister pair “are looking toward the pulpit and it appears that they are following the pastor’s words.” My cultural experiences as a middle class white woman in the United States, as well as my knowledge that the congregation is comprised primarily of affluent Euro-American families, influence my assessment that looking at a speaker denotes listening to that person’s words. However, my awareness of other cultural norms that equate respectfulness with a downcast gaze and rudeness with a direct stare challenges me to wonder about the meaning of the children’s gaze in this instance. I also know that cognitive processing of information does not necessarily accompany visual engagement, and conversely, that persons can be listening even when they are not looking at someone. Therefore, rather than saying, “the children are looking at the pastor and listening to his words,” I qualify my description of the children’s activity to allow for other possible interpretations while stating my “best guess” assessment of what was happening.

I can similarly assess my use of the phrases, “one of the boys ‘forgets’ to sit down,” and “they fidget with their bulletins.” In the former case, one of the two brothers remained standing after the rest of the congregation had been seated, and when his mother touched him on the arm and motioned for him to sit, the boy looked first startled (as if his mother’s touch was unexpected and surprised him) and then turned red, suggesting embarrassment. I interpret his actions as possibly indicating one or more of three realities: 1) an unawareness of what others were doing around him; 2) a lack of a well-developed embodied knowledge of the liturgical movements of his community; and/or 3) a moment of being caught up (or simply, caught) in something more personally engaging than the communal activity of worship. My use of quotation marks to qualify “forgets” reminds me to review my observations holding all three of these possible interpretations in mind and to test these possibilities against other data gathered – including, ideally, an interview with the child – as I decide how to narrate children’s experiences and practices in this congregation as part of the story of their ministry with children.

In the latter phrase, my reference to fidgeting evokes connotations that may be clearly defined to me but might not correspond to the meanings others assign to the word. I use the term to describe movements that suggest restlessness or repetitive actions (like paper-folding or doodling) that fill or pass time without producing something meaningful to the actor. This neutral definition arises in part from a desire to transform my negative childhood experiences of adult reactions to my fidgeting, a theological inclination to balance grace and responsibility on a case-by-case basis, and a pedagogical openness to attribute positive meaning to conventionally non-productive or condemned activities. A child who pleats and unpleats a worship bulletin or colors in all the open spaces in the bulletin’s printed words and then tosses the bulletin away is, by my definition, fidgeting. If a child pleats the bulletin and then uses it as a fan, that action is not fidgeting, but an alternative use of the bulletin as a cooling implement to solve a perceived problem (being hot) or to recreate an action (paper fan-making) learned from others. Other observers might classify both of these activities as fidgeting because neither contributes to the primary task of the context, which is worship. Some might assume that my use of fidgeting

connotes a negative judgment of the child's activity because they correlate restlessness with impatience or a lack of attentiveness and condemn both as inappropriate attitudes for worshippers. (This was my childhood experience of how adults interpret fidgeting.) As I construct this congregation's narrative of children's ministries, I have to consider whether the vocabulary of my field notes will help or hinder their ability to hear their story in a constructive way. This consideration echoes a concern for the usefulness of the specific vocabulary practitioners and evaluators use to describe educational practices expressed by William Pinar's concept of *currere* (Pinar 1975, 401-402).

What I am suggesting is that there is a dynamic relationship between the autobiographical stories (both personal and theoretical) a consultant brings with her or him to field work and the diversely expressed stories of the community in which the consultant sojourns. A consultant must consider the effects of her or his personal story on the shape of the congregational narrative being created, as well as the likely interpretive frameworks of those who listen to the narrative with the expectation of discovering something important for their understanding and practice in it. Congregations, like Snow White's stepmother, bring some degree of established self-understanding to the narrative mirrors consultants hold up. If the narrative we present is so far removed from the expectations of the congregation or so unfamiliar that it seems to belong to someone else, then the congregation will likely reject the narrative, and with it, any suggestions the consultant might make for engaging that narrative creatively and transformatively. Thus, we would do well to keep in mind James Clifford's reminder that narrative inquiry, in its use of ethnographic writing as a means of telling congregational stories, functions

(1) contextually (it draws from and creates meaningful social milieux); (2) rhetorically (it uses and is used by expressive conventions); (3) institutionally (one writes within, and against, specific traditions, disciplines, audiences;... (5) politically (the authority to represent cultural realities is unequally shared and at times contested); [and] (6) historically (all of the above conventions and constraints are changing) (Clifford and Marcus 1986, 6).

The language we use to construct a narrative mirror must recognize and negotiate these multiple functions effectively.

The story we tell is also shaped by what we choose to describe and what we do not include. Clandinin and Connelly remind us "it is important to be aware not only that selectivity takes place but also that foregrounding one or another aspect may make other aspects less visible or even invisible. Field texts, in an important sense, also say much about what is not said and not noticed" (93). In focusing my attention primarily on the two pairs of children sitting near one another in worship, I am less aware of what other individuals (including the three other children and youth present) are doing at any given moment. I have no record, either, of what is happening in the church nursery during this time, nor was I able to accompany a family home following the earlier worship/church school hour and explore with them their perceptions of what they had experienced that morning. My ability to mirror this congregation's story is limited by the bounds of my own attention as surely as a looking glass can only reflect what stands before it.

Furthermore, in naming congregational worship as a locus of children's ministry and presenting it as a significant narrative, I have positioned my mirror somewhere other than where the congregation thought it would hang. The congregation expected me to assess the strengths and weaknesses of its explicit children's programming (e.g. church school, youth group, children's choirs) rather than call attention to the challenges and possibilities of its liturgical catechesis of children and families. My decision to observe and describe the second service is a deliberate attempt to resist the congregation's practical devaluation (via a lack of participation) of worship as a means of forming children in faith. It foregrounds an aspect of children's ministry previously unnoticed by the storytellers of the congregation, or at least by the small group of lay leaders who first told me the congregation's presumed story of its ministry with children when they invited my consultation. In theoretical terms, describing and analyzing congregational worship in terms of its role in children's ministry challenges the "operational ideology" – the "shared way of life that teaches a certain worldview or set of values through action" (Eisner 1994, 55) – framing the congregation's own efforts to tell its children's ministry story.

Presenting what others may not have seen but might find illuminating in an artistically intriguing manner is also a crucial task for congregational consultants. Elliot Eisner describes the inadequacy of evaluative reporting that presents such a "slender slice of educational life" (189) that stakeholders cannot envision the richness and texture of the findings and the possibilities for transformation that reside within them. He advocates "the construction of an evaluational landscape" that uses "a wide range of information secured from a variety of sources and revealed through different types of reporting procedures" (189). To recast his idea in narrative terms: consultants need to tell congregational stories with more than just words carefully written into a report or presented to committee members. We need to employ visual images, such as videography and photography; excerpts from taped interviews; and samples of children's work that we have analyzed, as well as explicit critical commentary on the story we are telling (190-191).

My consultation visits with congregations include videotaping worship services and other gatherings where such taping can be done unobtrusively (or is already part of congregational practice) and taking photographs of children's church school rooms, choir rooms, hallways, fellowship halls, sanctuaries, nurseries, playgrounds, and anywhere else children and their families formally or informally congregate in and around church buildings. While I rarely audiotape or videotape interviews (for reasons of logistics, interviewee discomfort, and congregational concerns for individual confidentiality), I note and mark verbatim quotations from my interview subjects in my field notes, and will ask others to read anonymous excerpts aloud in order to simulate the multiple and diverse voices that contribute to their narrative. I take photographs of children's work, collect discarded pictures, worksheets, and paper airplanes from church hallways and trashcans, and create collages of my findings or discuss a particular item or set of items in a visual display as part of my analysis. These elements of the narrative landscape help a congregation encounter their own story in such a way that they can better "understand and appreciate the problems as well as the achievements" of their ministry (Eisner, 189).

I have also found it helpful to reflect on potential metaphors embedded in a particular congregational narrative, and then to use visual images and concrete items that symbolize that

metaphor in my presentation of the story during the consultative relationship. I am still reflecting on possible metaphors for the congregational story highlighted in this paper, as my work with them is ongoing. However, I am playing with the idea of a Blackberry or DayTimer as a visual metaphor for their high valuation of time, multitasking and calendaring events. I am also considering juxtaposing this image with a Godly Play presentation of the liturgical calendar, with its rhythms of preparation and participation, ordinary time and festival events, reflection and action. The story of their ministry with children encompasses both of these calendars, although they are much more aware of the social aspects of their ministry story than of the liturgical shape of their narrative. Perhaps a visual encounter with the two calendars will clarify dimensions of their congregational life with children that their previous reflections on their work have not brought as sharply into focus. Or perhaps, as I continue to interact with this congregation and reflect on the materials gathering in my fieldwork with them, a different metaphorical image or visual juxtaposition of ideas will emerge to shape or illustrate the telling of their story.

Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin remind us that qualitative research, of which narrative inquiry is a part, “is both science and art” (Strauss and Corbin 1988, 13), and the selection of useful metaphors is an element of the artistic side of our work. Other elements of our creative work include our ability “to aptly name categories, ask stimulating questions, make comparisons, and extract an innovative, integrated, realistic scheme” (13) from the observations, interviews, and written materials we have accumulated as part of the consultative relationship. Metaphorical and other creative expressions are not divorced from scientific rigor or grounded theory. Instead, they are creative conversations that emerge from the consultant’s critical and prayerful immersion with a congregational text. We engage in rigorous critical analysis of what we see and hear, using our familiarity with Christian theologies and educational theories as means of assessing the implications of a congregation’s story. From this perspective, we might comment on the ineffectual use of liturgical catechesis in the case study congregation that has been the focus of this paper. We also practice *lectio divina* with this congregation’s narrative, listening for how God evokes our religious or pastoral imagination in holy conversation with their story. *Lectio* may prompt us to wonder about and celebrate the spiritually formative power of two brothers looking at photos of a previous youth mission trip while sitting in the midst of a worshipping congregation. Or to notice the few instances of parental modeling of worship participation and practice and wonder what they mean in relation to the general inattention to children’s formation in worship that otherwise characterizes this congregation’s story.

My goal in the preceding pages has been to suggest, through critical reflection on my own story as a narrative inquirer and the supporting literature of qualitative research theory, that religious educators can successfully transpose the general methodology of narrative inquiry into an effective methodology for congregational consultation. This approach, writes Donald Schon, is “a way for someone both to lead a life and to reflect on it, thereby combining living with self-criticism and growth” (quoted in Clandinin and Connelly, 82). Naming and evaluating my own practice serves the significant purpose of personal professional development as a theorist and practitioner. While a good in itself, it is not, however, a sufficient reason to invite colleagues into a public discussion of this paper. I intend my reflections to serve also as a means of re-presenting an individual experience as illuminative of educational consulting practices. Telling and analyzing my story thus becomes both a means for me to “get clear” and a way for those who listen to my story to “shape[] what is interesting and possible under the field circumstances”

(Clandinin and Connelly, 73) for contemporary religious education community-based research and consulting. As we gather in Atlanta, I invite those who participate in our session discussion to tell of their experiences as we continue to shape this emerging story of how practices of narrative inquiry in congregational consultation help us position evaluative mirrors so that congregations might better catch a glimpse of possible transformation in the stories reflected by our collaborative work with them.

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