Toward a Theology of Story Listening

Meditative Crow and Spirited Weasel are friends on a journey seeking wisdom for their people.

“Remember only this one thing,” said Badger. “The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive.”
Ancient teachers in many traditions say that God hides in the stories; stories are where God takes refuge, hoping that someone will uncover and dream another reality, closer to God’s dreams.”

Always in the story is ‘the thing not named,’ tempting you into it, forcing you to hear, to wonder, to interpret, to decide.” (Keepers of the Story)

The underlying truth—the inspired layers that are hinted at, must be searched out, struggled with and taken to heart.

- In more theological or religious terms it is the Midrash (‘interpretation’ or ‘exegesis’)

“THEOLOGY is the living understanding of the story of God in play with the story of our lives.” Noirin Ni Riain, Ph.D.

THEOSONY: from Greek Theos (God) and Latin sonans (sounding). Theology of listening.

HOLY LISTENING
Theology of Story Listening

- All the riches of the oral tradition, operate like the Torah, the parables, the koans, etc. Every time a story is told there is a meaning.
  - The power of the story is in the faith of those who speak and those who hear.
  - This faith provides an openness a possibility of conversion, a space where miracles can happen.

- The power of the story is in the faith of the listener.

- “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”
  (Scriptures record the same phrase from Jesus 14 times)

- Listening is also a key aspect of wisdom.
  (Proverbs 18.2 and 18.13)

- “Don’t fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other.” (James 1:22)
A story is like a vessel with the truth inside.
- A form of self disclosure
- Listening for the unconscious meaning
- Metaphorically expresses the joy or pain

Abstract
- Protect the storyteller from exposure
- The unconscious is speaking–unaware of the connection between story and present issue.
  - We would like to tell the truth or pain to another but it is too frightening
  - When the trust level is low or the pain is deep, the story is more distant or abstract

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**Story Listening**

Story listening

is “listening between the lines” by asking the question (silently),

“Why is this person telling this story at this time?”
4 Levels of Story Listening

1. Data Back Then
   - “When I was a kid, I…” , “Back when I…”
   - Loaded with data and factual info – rarely contains feelings/emotional words
   - Put story in distant context
   - Social conversation

2. Feelings Back Then
   - Sometimes direct feeling statement: “I remember 5 years ago when I was really angry at ________.
   - Emotions in voice – body language

3. Feelings Now
   - Face flushed – voice tone located in throat
   - Eyes moist, more direct (less abstract)
4 levels of SL…

4. Self-Disclosure
- Story Teller may become aware of the hidden meaning of their own story – an “aha” moment
- Personal insight comes through to consciousness
- Cry or laugh

Types of Stories (told at any 4 levels)
- Reinvestment story is a story telling how you invested in something new by placing your time, energy, and money into a new activity.
  - Investing in new pursuits and letting go of commitments made in the past. Replaced activities may be substitution.
  - “I used to _______ but now _______”
- Meta stories: stories inside the story or alongside of main story
Reinvestment Story – Meta story…

- I used to be very active in this church…I used to be feel really close to the people at church, but I seem to have more friends at the station.

- Meta stories
  - Replaced church commitment with fire station
  - Pain in lost relationships

- It’s revealing to check out what’s behind the reinvestment…

Predictable Themes or Elements

- Reinvestment story is an important story structure because it almost always contains predictable elements:
- Loss (change in one’s invested associations)
- Rejection
- Transitions with endings that aren’t clean –
  - re-investment of new without ending old
  - leftover feelings and incomplete endings brought into new

- It’s revealing to check out what’s behind the reinvestment
Rehearsal Story

- Tells story out of past and the event retold contains same themes as the current problems.
- The listener is able to hear common themes through the use of metaphors, single words, phrases, or complete thoughts.
- The further back one starts with a story, the deeper the pain it represents.

Rehearsal Story Examples

- Pt is seriously ill with cancer. The pt asks if you have any large trees in your backyard?

  You ask, “Do you have large trees in your backyard?” “Yes a beautiful old tree, but it’s rotting out on the inside and I think it’s going to die, so I guess I had better cut it down.”

  Deeper Meaning and how would you check it out?
Rehearsal Story--Example

- Elderly man fell, broke hip, sitting in chair, sitting up for first time after pin was placed in hip.
- 2 rehearsal stories (data back level)
  - “When I was 17 yrs old, I worked with the PA RR. Railroads were strong back then – darn near bankrupt now.”
  - “Did you know I worked for Bethlehem Steel in Pottstown for 40 yrs? I built towers for the Golden Gate Bridge. It’s closed now – out of business”
- Deeper Meaning – how do you check it out?

Anniversary Story

- Themes of an event that happened in past but at the same time of the year. A type of rehearsal story but timing is crucial
- Ex: Wife died a year ago – lives in nursing home.
  - “I’ve really been sad lately. I have lost a lot of friends here at the nursing home. It’s very hard to give up those you have learned to love.”
- Classical event is known by those who become depressed at holidays.
Transition Story

- Themes for all transitions: endings, confusion, and beginnings
- “I’m not sure I want to continue doing this (i.e., job, church, medical treatment) but not sure what I want to do. I used to…I love….
- Stories are filled with themes of the shifting sands of life. Move into wilderness, a time of letting go and facing confusion.

Vicarious Story

- I know someone who…Projection
  - I have a friend who…
  - I have a church that…
  - He/she has suffered enough…
- Protects storyteller from being exposed while dealing with the problem.
- Latent language maintains security while under a time of threat or displacement – uses obscure ideas to represent inner struggles and concerns.
Common stories

- Weather = change, hopefulness, terror
- My house = my body, my self.
- War Stories = the battle is now.
- First Sentence or remark carries the theme of the story:
  - I don’t know where to begin. (Beginnings and endings a problem – i.e., divorce)
  - They will probably do what they want. (no control)

Making a Story Check

- Story listening involves a perception check with a highly tentative qualification – it is a guess.
- Story check has 3 parts: stem, name of meta story (theme or metaphor) and a question.
- “I may be wrong, but I wonder if you’re telling me that…”
- I’m wondering if you might be feeling like a tree that is rotting out inside and if that isn’t pretty scary for you?
Checking In…

□ “Seek first to understand” involves a very deep shift in paradigm
□ Most people listen with the intent to reply: speaking or preparing to speak.
□ They’re filtering everything through their own paradigms, reading their autobiography into other peoples lives. P. 239 of 7Habits of Highly Effective People.

Counter Story

□ Changing the subject or story is done often by telling a counter story of our own.
  ■ It is usually due to our own issues or pain.
  ■ You can enter the pain of another only at the level you can enter your own.

Why are you telling this story at this time?
Counter Story

- Your mind picks up themes at the unconscious level by scanning its own history
  - It locks onto a similar story thematically
  - The counter story surfaces in your conscious
- “Yeah, I know what that’s like. As a matter of fact, if you think you had it bad…” - Yeah, I remember when…
- It’s easy to go with past time conversations.

Therapeutic Story Listening

- Identify themes in your own story so you will have a better chance of getting in touch with what’s going on in another
- You can’t avoid telling your story. It is a container which holds the truth of the unconscious.
- Examples
Theology of Story Listening

- Bringing it to the consciousness makes it possible to work more effectively on its pain for the purpose resolution – transformation.
  - Garden of Gethsemane – Meta story
  - Jacob wrestling with the angel
- Ending the story differently. “Would you like to consider a new ending to your story?”
  “What would it be like?”

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I will tell you something about stories,
They aren't just entertainment.
Don't be fooled.
They are all we have, you see,
all we have to fight off
illness and death.
You don't have anything
if you don't have the stories.
--Leslie Marmon Silko
Resources


- **Keepers of the Story**, Megan McKenna and Tony Cowan (1977)
