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Seeing God's Presence in Others and Ourselves: Telling Our Stories

By David M. Johnstone

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One of the central (and delightful) pieces of what I do as a practitioner developing student leaders is listening to the myriad of stories that our students represent. I intentionally ask them to tell their stories because I think it provides a glimpse into how the spirit of God is working in their lives. Understanding their own background gives them insight into their identity and character as followers of Christ and leaders.

I focus on helping them discern the details, trends, celebrations, and challenges in their own narrative. *Understanding yourself* has been an axiom in education for a few millennia (at least that is what we assert). So, I ask lots of questions. Some love talking about themselves; some find it intrusive. But it helps me to understand who they are and allows me to highlight for them what I see. Their stories give me a window into how the Holy Spirit is working in their lives. It gives me a glimpse into how the Holy Spirit might be inviting them to partner with God in accomplishing his purposes in our communities.

Inquiring into their stories is a way to extend grace, kindness and mercy to them. It is a way I can bring good news into their lives. Together we unpack their personal narratives to discern celebrations, challenges and surprises.

One challenge in these stories is that there is often a predominant story or perception about campus demographics with regards to family income/class, sexual identity, family dynamics, faith history, racial heritage and politics. These stories are not always correct or accurate. Sometimes this inaccuracy pushes the student or others to the periphery of the community- they feel that they do not *blend* and are *not from these parts*. Sadly, when I ask a student to “tell me your story,” it only takes a moment to discern that some students feel that they do not fit into the common description of our communities.

Part of my privilege in hearing these many stories is to note the uniqueness and richness of their own stories. And when appropriate, help students see that their experiences are similar and present in the

stories of others. Realizing this detail is significant and empowering for them. Suddenly their own narrative no longer isolates and pushes them to the community margins. Those similar experiences draw them into the community. The possibility that others share similar stories is often astounding and freeing for them.

These stories are important for our understanding of how we are in relationship with God. **Keith Anderson** observed: “*A significant truth of the gospel is that our stories are uniquely given to us, in order to help others, recognize the value and uniqueness of their own stories.*” Our stories help us imagine how the Holy Spirit invites us to partner with the divine. When so many students despair and lose hope in their circumstances, the unexpected possibility of partnering with God to expand his kingdom on earth is unimaginably powerful and life changing. It is in their stories that others can begin to see the grace and good news of Jesus.

I believe that telling and hearing personal narratives is foundational to developing empathy, humility and kindness in our relationships and community. In our current time, the idea of personal story, narrative and identity have become politicized. In this season of extremes, disunity, and physical distancing, both identity and story are often viewed suspect and occasionally generate anger, hostility and dismissiveness. Yet our world needs stories more than ever.

Parker Palmer wrote: “*Storytelling can create community at an even deeper level; the more one knows about another person’s story, the less one is able to dislike or distrust, let alone despise, that person.*”

Half a century earlier, when speaking at Cornell College (Iowa) in 1962, Martin Luther King, Jr **remarked** *“People fail to get along because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don’t know each other; they don’t know each other because they have not communicated with each other.”* I deeply believe we need to hear each other’s stories.

Sometimes these personal stories are disruptive. We have personal, family and community stories that are dear to us, but they are sometimes not accurate. Sometimes hearing others’ stories can often be disconcerting; they can insert dissonance into the perceptions we have about ourselves. This dissonance can be uncomfortable causing everything from surprise, insecurity, anger, and fear. But sometimes the dissonance causes amazement, relief and peace.

Occasionally our predominant stories push certain community members onto the edges. Our narratives can unintentionally marginalize people we care for and love. I have seen this in many family and community narratives. There is a tragedy tied to this. At the same time when we hear stories, they can shake things up and allow us to realign our community narratives with truth, virtues and values. Hearing these stories can be moments where our communities are given a chance to realign ourselves with our faith and priorities.

There is a risk in telling stories. Telling our personal narratives are often sharing precious parts of ourselves. It involves trusting, but it also hopes the listener is trustworthy. I ask students, colleagues and peers to provide a glimpse into their own stories. Whether it be

chronological, thematic, or historical reflections told in a classroom, assignments, training or over coffee, these narratives provide hint of God's presence. I speak about treating the things I hear as "pearls" – precious details trusted to my care (Matt. 7:6).

Jesus' invasion into our world created tremendous dissonance. It flipped things upside down. It provided the opportunity to consider, realign, and deepen our understanding of God, ourselves, and our fellow humans. Scripture observes: "*For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known*" (1 Corinthians 13:12). Jesus coming brought and continues to bring clarity to our own and the world's story.

When stories from the margins come to the center of the community, their presence adds depth and clarity to a community. When these stories are part of a community of faith, we catch a glimpse of God and his work. Eugene Peterson observed: "*God reveals himself to us not in a metaphysical formulation or a cosmic firework display but in the kind of stories that we tell our children who they are and how to grow up as human beings, tell our friends who we are and what it's like to be human...*" Stories help us see God and each other with clarity, discernment and grace.



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David M. Johnstone is the associate dean of students at George Fox University. His vocation has taken him to the co-curricular side of higher education for the past 20 years. He provides support and care for undergraduate students, trains student leaders, and gives particular attention to the Western student experience at faith-based institutions. He is an immigrant to the United States; the bulk of his education took place in Canada. His early education was in Brazil, with his doctoral education in the States.



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