

Chapter Six

Tell Stories

“And what they have stammered ever since are fragments of your ancient name.” Rilke, *Love Poems from God*, translated by Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy

Donald Miller, the author of *Blue Like Jazz*, once asked a crowd at a book signing to tell him lines from their favorite movies. The crowd was initially hesitant to answer, till they understood Miller was serious. Their answers fairly tumbled out. You could feel them living the story lines. Then Miller asked everyone to recite a portion of the Nicene Creed. There was a palpable silence.

It’s no secret, we exit the womb, loving stories. No matter our culture, heritage, tribe, or occupation, we are to the bone story lovers. We are hopeless in the face of a great story. I read almost exclusively nonfiction, yet I find myself often scanning the page, speed reading through the text, looking for the story. I’ve been collecting stories forever.

Sadly, most of us through education and life’s disappointments forget the power of story. We forget what Hollywood knows so well. Story is embedded inside us as eternity in our hearts.

Sometimes when I speak to adult audiences, I start by reading a children’s story. It invariably transforms the whole audience into starry eyed three-year-olds. Truth finds its home in no time flat in a story.

Story Silencers

What hinders us from telling our stories to the next generation?

We think we have no stories, (what story?). Even if we realize we have a few, we think our stories belong in Yawnsville. We’ve all met people who tell the same story repeatedly.

One man I knew told the same four stories. In one of the stories, he recounts the miracle of his two daughter's birth because he had such a low sperm count. It's the famous sperm story and we all smile graciously living with way too much information.

But the stories of struggle, of hard times, of failure, of wisdom learned the hard way, give the next generation courage to endure, courage to pursue greatness.

I walked into the pantry of an extraordinary friend, and found everything alphabetized. I was impressed and dismayed. If you walk into my pantry, everything is placed randomly, haphazardly, with a few things like tea or pastas groups together. Everything else needs a global positioning system. So, it is with most of our stories. We haven't placed them in easily retrievable places. When we need them, they're often hard to find. I have half a century of stories in the cupboards and pantry of my mind, like preserved jam long forgotten.

A Series of Story Starters

What was it about your childhood that prepared you for your future? Your story here does not need to be positive to be impacting. I moved many, many times as a child. That part of my story while not ideal, built into me an enduring resilience, a capacity for adapting, and a love for the wild diversity of people and cultures.

As a speaker, I find myself privileged to enjoy many different audiences. My childhood stories have served me well, in doing what I do now. Had I lived in the same house, in the same city, going to the same school, with total predictability, I might be less adaptive.

What was hard for you in the past, but in retrospect made you better prepared for today? This generation loves to hear how people overcame challenges. For me, because my mom had very definite ideas about modesty I dressed strangely as a child. As you can imagine, this led to a lot of ridicule on the playground, and it did little to help attract friends. As hard as it was to be the laughingstock of the entire school, my outcaste status prepared me to swim upstream, to be countercultural in good ways, to never take friendship for granted. The greatest surprise of my life as an adult is that I've been gifted with stellar friends around the world. I feel immense gratitude for them because I basically had a friendless childhood.

What were the moments when it seemed God kissed you? Do you remember a time of feeling wholly delicious? I remember in third grade riding my new bike down a street in Ojai feeling as free as the wind. I wanted that moment to last forever. Since I was born forty, and more serious than God, moments of being carefree for me, were few and far between. Riding that bike, was a moment of unfettered joy.

What did you once believe as a child that you realized later was a lie? I used to think that people who were beautiful were favored by the universe. My crooked teeth and less than gorgeous face was proof to me that I

would never be someone people desired. But life has taught me that beauty rarely trumps character. It's been a sweet discovery.

What have been your biggest disappointments? I spent my whole life planning and scheming to live in the less developed world, making a positive difference. One month after we were married, Joey and I moved to Micronesia.

A few years later, we were living my dream. We were the first white people one tribe in the mountains of the Philippines had ever seen. I rode a tiny horse only slightly larger than a large dog, across the same river 23 times to get to this remote village. We were received with joy. The village was chicken rich when we arrived, and chicken less when we left. The chickens traveled back with us, part of muscle, bone, and sinew. The tribe happily gave us rich hospitality. I'll never forget the first night sitting in the middle of a dried river bottom all of us picking up rocks and banging out interesting rhythms. It was one of those purely delicious moments you never forget.

But then one fateful day, Joey felt like we needed to move back to America. I was dashed. I lived for many years in America as if I was waiting at a bus terminal, waiting for the next bus to take me back into Asia. That was twenty seven years ago. Twenty seven years of being a fish in a desert, feeling utterly out of place.

What have you done with your life when it didn't turn out like you'd expected? These hard stories are important to tell as you embrace a generation into greatness.

What are your stories of despair? I have known despair, feeling like my dreams would never come to pass. Shakespeare isn't a likely encourager, but realizing his plays usually had five acts helps me. Sometimes in the midst of my life's second, and third act, I've had to remind myself it's not the end of my story.

This generation comes out of the womb with a great baloney detection kit. They love authenticity. They love hearing stories where we expose our Achilles heel, where we tell our weakness, our fear. The times when we looked good but trembled inside. Don't let pride edit your stories. Tell them raw and true.

Are you still thinking you don't have stories? I know you have a treasure trove of them. Ellie Wiesel said that God made man because He loves stories. Ellie got it right. When you tell your story you create expectancy, and courage to those who listen.

My counsel to you friend is start telling your stories to the next generation. Don't wait till you think your story deserves blockbuster status. Tell the little things. Now is the perfect time. Take your story out of hiding. You'll find eager ears and hungry hearts, waiting for the telling.

Ponderings

1. What is one specific fear that keeps me from telling my story?
2. What kinds of stories inspire me?
3. Considering the questions in this chapter, what is one of one of the more remarkable stories from my life?
4. Who is there in my life that I could embrace into greatness by just telling a personal story?