

“Carrying A Story”
By Daniel Pryfogle
Keynote Address
All-Agency Gathering, LFS Carolinas
Charlotte, NC
October 5, 2007

In early October I addressed the all-agency gathering of LFS Carolinas, a Lutheran-related social services agency. The theme of the gathering was “Talk the Walk,” with an emphasis on accompaniment and vocation. Before I spoke, the organization’s two chaplains, Mark Cerniglia and Judy Klusman, walked around the meeting room. Through a dialogue, they shared the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35).

I want to draw your attention to something that just happened. It’s a bit obvious but worth noting. As Mark and Judy walked around this room, they carried a story. They carried a story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, and within that story the two disciples carried a story of recent events in Jerusalem. The story intrigued yet puzzled them until a stranger came along, walked with them for a while on the journey, and made the story clearer. They were accompanied.

“Accompaniment”: the word is important to you, the people of LFS Carolinas. Bound up in accompaniment is this image of carrying a story. Walking with people means journeying with stories, theirs and our own.

Today I invite you to consider your story. What story are you carrying?

You might take this literally – like Hiro Nakamura does. Are you aware of Hiro Nakamura? Hiro is one of the characters in the TV show “Heroes.” In the first season, Hiro literally carries a story: he travels with a comic book that lays out his destiny in word and image.

You might think of carrying a story more figuratively, like holding a memory within your heart. Perhaps this memory becomes a metaphor for your life. Perhaps it provides structure for your days, serves as an organizing principle. Maybe it’s a guide. Maybe it even accompanies you.

What story are you carrying? What story journeys with you?

Lately I have been carrying a story. It comes from the early Christian hermits. It is an ancient tale from the monks who lived in isolated desert communities in the early centuries after the life of Christ. The story goes like this:

Abbot Lot came to Abbot Joseph and said: Father, according as I am able, I keep my little rule, and my little fast, my prayers, meditation and contemplative silence; and according as I am able I strive to cleanse my heart of thoughts: Now what more should I do? The elder rose up in reply and stretched out his hands to heaven, and his fingers became like ten lamps of fire. He said: Why not be totally changed into fire? (Retold by Annie Dillard in *For the Time Being*, 180).

I can't shake this story. The image of the elder, his fingers aflame, and his question haunt me: "Why not be totally changed into fire?"

I can't shake this story. Yet truth be told, I don't want to. I want to carry the story. I want to travel with it and see what it does to me along the way. I want the story to get in front of me and wave, make me pay attention. I want it to get behind me and push me, kick me, if necessary. The question of this story unsettles me, but it is the very question I long to be asked. So I want the story to stay with me. I want the story to accompany me.

"Vocation" is another word important to your organization. There are various ways to define this word vocation. I would like to suggest today that vocation is a story. It is a story we cannot shake. It is a story we long to hear and a story we want to live by.

I often use "passion" and "purpose" and "calling" to talk about vocation. But I must admit these words are sometimes limited. Oftentimes, to be honest, these terms feel quite lavish, especially when we are confused, bogged down in details that don't make sense, lost. Sometimes "passion" and "purpose" and "calling" feel like rallying cries—of an unintelligible language. The words work for best-selling books, not always for hard-going lives.

Story is closer to home, closer to experience. And story feels more dynamic.

A story is always beginning and ending. There's drama and joy. Settings and surprises. A story can be dull for days on end, then suddenly become a page-turner. Story, for me, is more inspiring, ironically, because it is more realistic, more like my life.

What story are you carrying? You may have carried this story for a long time. Perhaps it's very clear to you. Maybe you've told this story so many times you have certain lines memorized. Who are you? "I am the son and grandson of Baptist preachers," I say. "I am the son and grandson of Baptist preachers."

For some of us the narrative line is fuzzy. Who are you? That's incredibly difficult to say. When we try, we may be frustrated. It's hard to tell a story that's not clear. It's hard to put into words a story that's the drama of my life when I am in the middle of my life.

Maybe the story makes sense only at rare moments, and even then you can't explain it. "I've been here before," you say. "This feels familiar."

However it is for you, I invite you to entertain the idea that this story accompanies you. And as it accompanies you, the story whispers to you: "Get into it." "Finish it." Or, as the voice in the film "Field of Dreams" says, "Go the distance."

Why is this story so important?

Simply put, we need story. The author Reynolds Price says, "A need to tell and hear stories is essential to the species *Homo sapiens*—second in necessity apparently after nourishment and

before love and shelter. Millions survive without love or home,” Price continues, “almost none in silence; the opposite of silence leads quickly to narrative, and the sound of story is the dominant sound of our lives ...” (*A Palpable God*, 3).

We cannot do without story. A life cannot be sustained without narrative. Beyond the basic need, however, is the aspiration: we yearn for stories that make sense of our lives, give us reason for living, purpose, and inspire us to carry on.

In a similar way, story is essential to the lives of our organizations. The needs and aspirations for narrative are amplified here. And in this atmosphere story takes on added dimensions.

By this I mean that somehow even the littlest story—about that awkward but ultimately delightful first meal with a refugee family; about that homeless veteran who now sleeps through the night; about the last dance at a gathering of special needs adults, how they played that great song and made the floor shake—even the littlest story can move an entire organization.

We all carry a story, and sometimes we are carried by it. And even this: sometimes the institution carries us, gives us space and structure to make sense of our story. Here many stories may come to expression. Here, in an organization that is committed to vocation and accompaniment, many stories may be told.

I’m always curious about the story. I began my professional career as a journalist—way back at the age of 11—when I got my first bylined story in the San Leandro Gazette. Later on, after college, I became a full-time reporter and editor, then a director of communications for a national nonprofit, then I managed an advertising and public relations agency before starting my own consulting practice. In all this work, I was never satisfied with merely reporting the facts or producing a brochure or spinning out the next press release.

I wanted to get to the heart of the story: where the pulse beats, where there is passion, where there is fire.

As I hang out with leaders and organizations, I am always listening closely for the stories that move, for the possibility of a conflagration. However, I often encounter this awful phrase in organizational life: “Get everyone on the same page.”

As a lover of story, I cringe at the idea of reducing things to a corporate line. And as a coach to leaders, I see us cutting ourselves off from so much energy when we don’t make room for multiple stories.

We don’t need to be “on the same page.” We need lots of pages, a chorus of stories, narrative abundance.

Is that messy? Yes. Chaotic? Of course. Worthwhile? Definitely.

For here’s a wonderful truth amid all this messy storytelling, a truth offered by the psychiatrist Carl Jung: “What is most personal is most common.” When we tell personal stories of our

various experiences, our diverse religious and cultural heritages, when we drill down into our particularities, somehow we hit this substratum, the common ground upon which we all stand, this shared understanding of what it means to be human.

Here, too, I believe we meet the Divine. Amid all our stories, we hear God's story: "I created you. I love you. And I call you to live into the fullness of your belovedness. Follow your story."

What story are you carrying? What stories are you carrying individually and corporately? You may have a clear sense of how all your rich and diverse stories cohere here. Some of you may be less certain, even confused at times. But that's OK. Because something here carries you. You are accompanied.

Your vision is of "a world of wholeness for all God's people." I love that vision. I actually define vision as the capacity to see wholeness. That definition is in contrast to the conventional wisdom that vision is the gift of only a few leaders, the visionaries, and is about seeing things that are not here, things not present.

But vision is really about seeing connection. Vision is about seeing resources already available. It's about seeing the strange power of the most vulnerable. Vision is seeing the wholeness already present—the wholeness that is given, the wholeness that is gift.

So if you cannot see how your story makes sense today, do not fear. Someone sees you. If you cannot imagine how your stories cohere as an organization, do not be troubled. Someone sees you in all your fullness. You are accompanied.

And because you accompany and are accompanied, you have permission—maybe even an obligation—to ask each other this incredible question: "Why not be totally changed into fire?" Or however you want to phrase it. "Why not go the distance?" "Why not follow your story?" "Why not just do it?"

Asking the question, we take up our part in each other's story. We see that our stories are connected. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be" (*Strength to Love*, 72). King's words are about accompaniment and vocation. The two are inseparable.

When Jesus accompanies the two disciples he does more than explain a story. He opens up the story and invites them to join him in the tale. He calls, he woos, he beckons them to get into the story. He perceives they long to do just that. And so when he departs, they say to each other in awe and gratitude, "Did not our hearts burn?"

When stories are told like this, they move way beyond an explanation. They become something else, something very powerful. "Event" is what keeps coming to mind for me. "Event." That's what theologian Karl Barth called the *logos*, the word, the story that is incarnated, the story that is embodied in particularities.

How then do our stories get out and about in the organization? It happens sometimes through intentional processes when we invite people to tell stories. It happens when we ask each other generative questions that kick up story, questions like “What’s become clearer to you?” and “What are we noticing?” and “Where are you feeling energy?”

Finally, it just happens—the stories get out and about without our making it happen, which is another way of saying that our stories, and our mutual accompaniment of them, are gifts already present.

People talk. People spread the word. People say things that bounce off the walls. Sometimes they say things we can use. Sometimes people give us big clues about our own stories. Sometimes they finish our sentences.

How does the story get around? Sometimes confetti falls on our cubicles. Sometimes a place resounds with fanfare. No? You haven’t heard this before? The trumpets in the hallways, heralding the approach of a hero...you?

OK, maybe I’m making this up. But that’s also how a story gets around. We drop narrative seeds here and there, and tales bloom. We invest in character development – tomorrow I will wear brown – and something changes, a turn in the story. We face dramatic decisions: Will I choose this or flee from that? And the story turns again, races down the hallway. Have you ever noticed that?

At this point, you might reasonably say, “Enough of this silliness. This is a company, not a storybook club; it’s not a sandbox for imagination, it’s a corporation.”

But didn’t we just hear a story of a stranger who appears out of nowhere to explain another story, which turns out to be his story, only the two disciples don’t come to understand this until the stranger suddenly disappears? That sounds like a fairy tale, doesn’t it? Yes, it does. There’s no getting around it. It sounds like a fairy tale. What to do? Well, as the story *We’re Going on A Bear Hunt* puts it, “We can’t go over it. We can’t go under it. Oh, no! We’ve got to go through it!”

We’ve got to get into the story. Play our part. Put on makeup. Wear our costumes. Say our lines. Pretend. Whatever it takes.

And why not? Is there an alternative that’s more interesting? Is there anything else we’d truly rather do?

Abbot Lot comes to Abbot Joseph in the desert and says he’s done everything he’s supposed to do. We could substitute our own tasks completed. I have attended meetings. I have filed my reports. I have turned out the lights. Now what more should I do?

Underneath that question is a more fundamental one. Is there more? I believe there is. I can’t prove it, but I can tell you my story. If the answer is yes—if the answer is yes, there is more; yes, there is a Great Story that includes us all, awaits us all—then why not get into it? Why not?

The adventure of accompaniment is to know we are in this together; it is to know we are caught up in something big, something epic, and the universe is rooting for us; the very rocks and trees await our flaring up, our contribution to the shimmering beauty of the world.

In the afterword to his play *Angels in America*, Tony Kushner speaks of the collaborative creative process as well as the adventure of accompaniment. He writes,

Together we organize the world for ourselves, or at least we organize our understanding of it; we reflect it, refract it, criticize it, grieve over its savagery; and we help each other to discern, amidst the gathering dark, paths of resistance, pockets of peace and places from whence hope may be plausibly expected” (*Angels in America, Part Two: Perestroika*, 158).

In other words, we tell stories. And our storytelling creates environments that, from time to time, are charged with spirit—inspired—and so more stories come to expression, more lives get in tune with the stories, more people get into the stories. The word becomes event, which means things change. A day at the office – Could it shine? A visit to a home—Could it flare up? An all-agency gathering—Did not our hearts burn?

Yes, for the story is incarnated. The story dwells among us. The story accompanies us.

At that, in some traditions, we say “Thanks be to God.” At the close of some sermons, we say “Amen.” And at the conclusion of some stories, we read “The End.” But I’ll just say “Carry on.”

Carry on in your good work. Carry on in your story-telling and your story-sharing.

May your accompaniment of each other and of the people you serve create “paths of resistance, pockets of peace and places from whence hope may be plausibly expected” —in other words, places of healing and wholeness.

Carry on, friends, as you talk the walk. And may you become like fire.