

Redeeming Our Life Stories: Narrative Family Therapy

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Stories can help us make sense out of our lives. When I was young my parents took my brother and me to see the movie Mary Poppins. Later, we received the book by the same name. I didn't know it then, but the themes in this story of a brother and a sister being valued and honored for who they were, yet loved enough to be given direction and discipline, helped to shape and form me.

Another type of story that shapes and forms us is the story of our own lives, meaning our lifetime experiences and relationships. Australian therapist Michael White pioneered Narrative Family Therapy, whereby interventions are used with a family to help them “re-author” the painful parts of their lives in a new empowered story. In a Christ-centered approach to Narrative Family Therapy, the stories embodied in the life and person of Jesus Christ can be a powerful tool. Let us explore how the redemptive story of Christ can transform or touch our positive or negative experiences, memories, and relationships.

The story of Calvary brings healing to brokenness. It brings victory to despair. Christ promises love, glory, honor, and forgiveness to those He died for—you and me. Throughout life we may endure abuse, betrayal, loss, and the consequences of our own sin. But we will also experience times, *even if it's only moments*, of restorative joy and wholeness. We have a choice as to which stories we will allow to have the greater pull on our hearts. We also have a choice to allow Christ to redeem our pain and re-author our lives.

I once worked with a seventy-year old man in group therapy. His childhood included poverty, multiple foster home placements, abuse, and the deaths of siblings. Due to the effects of alcoholism, he had three months to live. When asked the question, “What memory, even though very small and perhaps very long ago, may help you to hope again?” he responded with the following: “I remember in first grade I had a very nice Catholic nun for a teacher. I remember her handing me back a worksheet and telling me that I did a very good job on it.” I then asked him, “What might your teacher have seen in you that was hard to see in yourself...back then...and maybe even today?” He responded with, “That I can still be somebody.”

Dan Allender, in his book The Healing Path, challenges us to ask ourselves, “Which of my stories will have the greatest power?” “Of course I am the product of all my stories,” states Allender, “but I can consciously embrace the stories I know to be most uniquely me.” A question we might ask is, “But *how* do we embrace the restorative stories or moments and allow God into the broken ones? In spite of my brokenness, how can I still ‘be somebody’—the somebody that God created me to be?” Consider the following possibilities:

1. Invite Jesus into painful memories. Ask Him *how* He was with you, loving you, and bearing your sorrow. Journaling these thoughts may help.
2. Where your own sinfulness played a role, ask His forgiveness. Ask Him to make real to you how “He has removed your transgressions as far as the east is from the west” (Psalm 103:12) and how He does not condemn you (Romans 8:1).
3. Ask God to help you hear with your ears, and see with your eyes once again, the memories of times you felt loved and valued. Choose to make these stories the most important and most memorable. Choose to believe that these stories, regardless of their depth or brevity, *reflect the TRUTH about God and the TRUTH about you*. Journal what it seems He is showing you.
4. Present struggles can threaten to unravel our connections with God, ourselves, and others, and cause us to doubt the truth. During times of trial, turn toward Him for strength. Ask Him to reorder and empower the redemptive stories of your life.

The alcoholic man in the final months of his life chose to believe that the memory of his first grade teacher took on more importance than his other lifetime stories of abuse and neglect. As you allow the story of Christ’s redemption on Calvary to touch and change the painful stories of your life, may it be a never-ending chapter of truth and healing for you.

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