

Telling Our Story

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**A Research Project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the Spiritual Directors'
Training Programme of Spiritual Growth Ministries**

2023

Introduction

This paper looks at the power and purpose of reflecting on the stories of our life and the power of telling our story.

A person recommended the book “To be told” by Dan Allender¹ along with the “To be Told workbook”². These books form the basis of the material in this paper. I have also drawn from other internet resources and the book *Spiritual Autobiography* by Erin Crider. I will discuss why it is helpful but challenging to look at our life stories and as this was a personal activity I will reflect on my learnings and how as spiritual directors we can assist people in reflecting on and telling their stories. I will also look at the different ways people can reflect on and tell their stories.

One of the reasons I was drawn to look at and reflect on my stories is that, in my own spiritual growth and healing, certain memories have had a big impact. At times when I have been struggling, reflecting on a memory or a specific story has revealed something that God wanted to show me or say to me. This has always brought new freedom and healing for me. So initially the idea of looking back to see where God has been in all my life was a great invitation, but I also found it challenging.

The power of our story

The Bible is full of people’s life stories, and we learn so much about God from them. These stories remind us of the ongoing active care of God and how that same care and love can be seen in our own stories.³ As I worked on this I discovered that the word HESED, the word love, in Hebrew is translated as loving kindness, steadfast love, mercy, grace, unfailing love, undeserved kindness & generosity, a steadfast, rock-solid care that remains faithful.⁴ When we look at biblical narratives, we can see this love of God in them. These biblical stories reveal God’s grace, faithfulness and love to us. This is what we are looking for in our stories, the Hesed of God. We look for and celebrate God’s faithfulness as

¹Allender, Dan. *To be Told*. (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Waterbrook Press, 2005)

² Allender, Dan B & Fann, Lisa K. *To be told workbook*. (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Waterbrook Press, 2005).

³Crider, Erin. *Spiritual Autobiography*. (Cambridge, UK: Grove Books Ltd, 2020) Pg 4

⁴ *The meaning of Hesed*. (n.d.). Retrieved from firmisrael.org: <https://firmisrael.org/learn/the-meaning-of-hesed-hebrew-for-love/>

we see how our creator has been at work in our past. As a spiritual director, these are moments of gold we can help our directees discover. As we look back on the stories in our lives it is important that we remember we can invite God to give us eyes to see where God was and has redeemed, or is in the process of redeeming, those parts of our lives that have been impacted by that story. God chose the year of our birth, the place we would be born, our family and the stories that preceded us. God has been and is intricately involved in our life story.⁵

Stories carry history and all our life is a story. We are shaped by our stories, and they can bring brokenness and repentance. Facing our hurts and disappointments, forgiving those that have hurt us, invites transformation. When we look back, we can see how God was laying foundations in our lives even before we knew God personally.⁶ As we become familiar with our story, we will see more of the character of God revealed.

God is the author of each of our lives. We are each unique and just as we have a face, hands, and especially fingerprints that are not like anyone else's, so our stories are unique to us. The person we are today is shaped by events in our lives and our responses to those events. When we take the time to look at our stories, we can see patterns and themes that define who we are and what God wants me to reveal to others about our creator.

One reason we may choose to look at our stories is that we may be asking ourselves a question like where is God in my life? How has God been at work? We maybe at the crossroads of a major decision or just longing for a deeper connection and intimacy with God. Sometimes we just want to look back and map our spiritual journey. While our stories don't give us all the answers they can give us a perspective, a window for us to look through and help us to see who God created us to be. Looking at our stories engages the heart, emotions, and our imagination not just our mind.⁷

⁵Allender, Dan. *To be Told*. (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Waterbrook Press, 2005) PGg64

⁶Shattuck, Nathan. Lorenzen, Myles. Miller, Steve. Clinton, Robert. "Instructions for Life Map exercise. PDF. Retrieved from [Life Mapping Exercise \(soulcare.net\)](https://soulcare.net) September 2023

⁷Shattuck, Nathan. Lorenzen, Myles. Miller, Steve. Clinton, Robert. "Instructions for Life Map exercise. PDF. Retrieved from [Life Mapping Exercise \(soulcare.net\)](https://soulcare.net) September 2023

As we reflect on our life stories in whichever way we choose, we will be called out of our comfort zone. To recall our memories, identifying the setting, characters, dialogue and impact will require courage and honesty.⁸ There will be pain, discomfort and joy. We will remember stories of peace but also of tragedy. Ann Voskamp in her blog on Transition & Brokenness asks the question “What part of your story was broken but if it had never happened you wouldn’t be who you are today?”⁹ When we feel like we don’t want to remember a story or feel ourselves resisting looking at our life story it can be helpful to remember that treasure can be found on the other side of our resistance.¹⁰ It is just as important to remember those stories that brought us peace and that were warm and kind as well, so that we don’t get stuck with only painful memories.¹¹ Timing is something that is important to be aware of. As spiritual directors being led by the Holy Spirit, guiding our directee to reflect on their stories in God’s time is part of our role. There are times when it is not helpful for a directee to retell their stories, e.g when someone is in the middle of trauma or tragedy. There may also be some memories that should not be relived and again we must be sensitive to God’s leading.

Challenges to looking back on our story

Just as there are reasons to write and reflect on our stories there are many challenges that try to stop us. Thoughts may enter like ‘I already walked through that. The past is the past; there’s no reason to rehash it. What benefit could possibly come from walking back into those stories?’¹² I think these are valid things to think about. It is not wise to keep sitting in the pain of past stories, but it can be about how we approach the memories and the reason we are doing it. When we look back to see where God has been and where the divine fingerprints are on our lives, then it can bring healing and freedom.

⁸ Allender, Dan. *To be Told*. (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Waterbrook Press, 2005) Pg45

⁹Voskamp, Ann. “In Transition and Brokenness.” September 2020.

Retrieved from [In Transition & Brokenness: This Strange Masterpiece of Art is Always Happening in Your Life - Ann Voskamp](#)

¹⁰ This was said to me once, but I can’t remember who said it.

¹¹ Allender, Dan. *To be Told*. (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Waterbrook Press, 2005)

¹² Allender, Dan B & Fann, Lisa K. *To be told workbook*. (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Waterbrook Press, 2005).

One of the challenges I found was the concern of whether I would even remember any stories. I found in the workbook some helpful ideas.¹³ It uses questions like who your friends from High School were, what was your favourite thing to do in the rain, favourite holiday, and using our senses to remember. There are many helpful questions divided up into chapters. They assist with reminding us of incidents or memories related to certain things in our lives.

As a spiritual director some of these questions may be helpful when talking to our directees about their stories.

Ways we can tell our story

As a spiritual director we can offer our directee's, or people on a retreat, different ways to write and tell their stories.

When we physically write our stories we slow down, and we create time to notice God. This is also known as reflective journaling. It is important that we don't rush this process but give it time and attention. As we slow down, we can think more deeply, which gives space for a revelation of God's activity in our lives.¹⁴ Writing does take a lot of time and energy, so we need to allow space and time for this activity. We may need to do it in small increments of time over a long period. What advantage does writing our story have over just telling our story? Both are important. Writing our stories makes them more real, we start to see them in a different way. We may discover more content and emotion in them than we realized was there. We then need a trusted companion to be able to share these stories with.¹⁵

We can tell our stories by creating mosaic art. In Ann Voskamp's article "Transition & Brokenness," she shares her experience of using blank canvases and bowls of broken glass to make beautiful art.

¹³ Allender, Dan B & Fann, Lisa K. *To be told workbook*. (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Waterbrook Press, 2005).

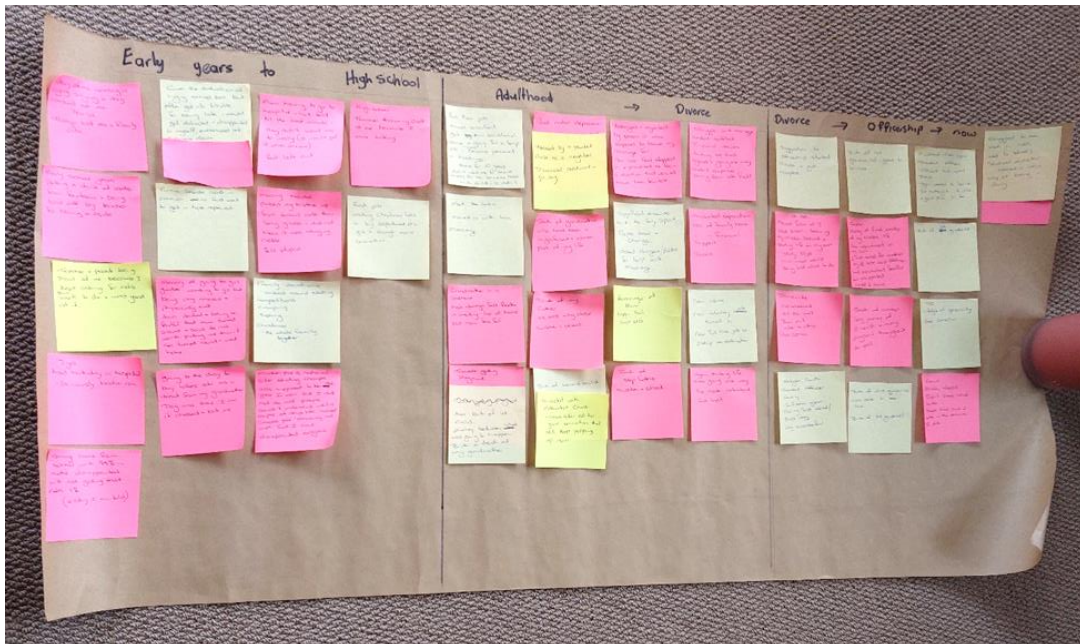
¹⁴ Crider, Erin. *Spiritual Autobiography*. (Cambridge, UK: Grove Books Ltd, 2020) Pg 6

¹⁵ Allender, Dan B & Fann, Lisa K. *To be told workbook*. (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Waterbrook Press, 2005). Pg 3

It would be possible to have an activity where people sat with broken mosaic pieces and as they chose pieces to put into an art project, they could reflect on painful stories that would match with the sharp pieces they may feel and then enjoyable stories that go with the smooth pieces. Once they have put them on to the canvas and created a beautiful piece of art, they could share how they see God using each of those stories to create a beautiful piece of art in their own lives. If you are sitting around in a group people could share their stories as they put pieces onto the canvas.¹⁶

A life map is another option, and this is the one that I chose to do. In this exercise you take a pile of post-it notes and write places, people and events that have shaped your life. Write one event or story per post-it note. Once you have written as many as you can remember take them and put them into sequence on a large piece of paper (see photo). You can divide the paper up into age, years, or stages of life however you would like to organize them. Then take a different color post-it note and write the painful stories on that color. Then swap out the painful stories for the same story but on the different color post-it note. This clearly separates the negative from the positive.¹⁷

My Life Map



¹⁶Voskamp, Ann. "In Transition and Brokenness." September 2020.

Retrieved from [In Transition & Brokenness: This Strange Masterpiece of Art is Always Happening in Your Life - Ann Voskamp](#)

¹⁷ Shattuck, Nathan. Lorenzen, Myles. Miller, Steve. Clinton, Robert. "Instructions for Life Map exercise. PDF. Retrieved from [Life Mapping Exercise \(soulcare.net\)](#) September 2023

A directee may draw their life story as a timeline. Draw a line down or across the middle of a page and list important life events in chronological order from birth to present.

A person can draw a stream on a piece of paper, the stream representing their life journey and then along the stream they can put different things that represent their stories e.g rapids for the stormy times, trees for things that brought them life, mountain tops for the times of celebration and smooth parts of water for those calm stories.

Taking one story and bringing God into it

Amongst the things I have learnt in gathering my stories was the difference it made to a story when I took the story and wrote the facts of it down and then rewrote it bringing God's voice in. Praying to see God's perspective and presence in my story. I saw that even before I knew who God was, or that God was interested in me, my creator was right in the story with me, nurturing the person I was created to be.

Here is my journal entry of how this worked for me and led me to doing this essay.

I was out for a walk today and a tree growing out of a cut off tree stump caught my attention. I stood gripped by how it grew up out of an old stump that had obviously been part of a huge tree and then it was cut off. I noticed that around this tree grew other little sapling trees.

God what do you want to say to me about this – what do you see?

This is what I felt God saying:

The bottom part, that big stump with its roots is the foundation of your life, a life before you knew me. It has been cut off like you were cut off from me. But out of that foundation has grown a new tree, a strong tree. This tree represents new life, your new life in me and those little trees are the next generation that have come from you. Can you see? All of your life mattered, the part where you didn't know me was the foundation and I was a part of that. I was there in the foundation; I drew you to new life and that new life now speaks into a new generation.

Photo of tree at Magnificat retreat June 2023



As I thought about this, I thought of an incident that happened when I knew about God, but did not know God relationally. I could see how God had stepped in and redirected my life without any contribution from me. It felt like an invitation to look back and see where else God had been active in my life and what my stories had to tell me.

Sharing our stories

There is power in telling our stories to another person. Each time we tell another part of our story to a trusted person, e.g a spiritual director, we invite God to reveal what has shaped or misshaped us and see God's continuing redemption of who we are.¹⁸

Nathan Shattuck in his article on soul care uses the analogy of a pearl necklace in telling our stories. The string is what ties everything together and the pearls are the treasures of our story. As spiritual directors we handle those pearls as the treasure they are.¹⁹ My own experience with my spiritual director has often felt like this. As we have talked, and she has asked me interesting questions, it has felt like those pearls have been connected on a thread and I could see God's fingerprint in the story.

Initially I was excited by the thought of reflecting on and then sharing my stories in spiritual direction, but then started to feel overwhelmed and a little resistant to looking back as I was wary of what emotions or pain maybe stirred up. This may be something that our directees feel as well.

My own personal experience of telling and sharing my story at this time was seeing God redeem stories I had thought of as negative into ones of positiveness or redemption. There were two stories that my family always told about me, neither of these events or situations did I remember. One was a story of when I was 3 or 4 years of age and the other was when I was 10 or 11 years of age. These stories were told in the form of joking and whenever I heard them, I always felt belittled or the joke of the family. However, in sharing these stories with my spiritual director and inviting God into my reflection I discovered that they spoke of the sensitivity that God has placed within me even as a small child. Today this sensitivity has been affirmed, by a psychologist when doing an Officer review for The Salvation Army, as the way I am wired and it is seen in the calling that God has placed on my life.

¹⁸ Shattuck, Nathan. Lorenzen, Myles. Miller, Steve. Clinton, Robert. "Instructions for Life Map exercise. PDF. Retrieved from [Life Mapping Exercise \(soulcare.net\)](https://soulcare.net) September 2023

¹⁹ Shattuck, Nathan. Lorenzen, Myles. Miller, Steve. Clinton, Robert. "Instructions for Life Map exercise. PDF. Retrieved from [Life Mapping Exercise \(soulcare.net\)](https://soulcare.net) September 2023

This scripture comes to mind as God revealed to me that even as I was being created, this sensitivity was placed in me:

Psalm 139

¹³ For you created my inmost being;

you knit me together in my mother's womb.

¹⁴ I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;

your works are wonderful,

I know that full well.²⁰

Not only that, but as I continued to reflect, I recognized that this was also in my whakapapa, as I saw that same caring and sensitivity in my grandmother. In sharing my story, these two memories were redeemed by God from a negative memory to one of love and positivity in the revelation of my sensitivity that God now uses to help others.

As a spiritual director, when we are listening to people tell their stories and it seems like there is a lot there, it can be helpful to listen to their voice. Where does it seem that there is emotion, or hesitancy, excitement? These can be the areas that we can be curious about.

While some stories may be painful, there will also be stories of religious experience. People will have stories of their first encounter with God, the Holy Spirit and other times when they have experienced God in different ways. All these come together to make up the person we are today and the directee we will work with as Spiritual Directors.

A spiritual director can help a directee to see patterns and themes as they listen to what is being repeated and how stories may go beside others or hand in hand with others. As we accompany others on their spiritual journey, we will hold things they have previously told us and can help them connect those with the experience they may now be sharing.

²⁰ NIV version

To be continued

My story continues to be written by God. So there are more stories to come, as well as more stories to be reflected on and redeemed as I continue to look at my life and discover more of how God has created me.

I did the exercise of a life map of my life up until now, with the post-it notes, and took this along to my own spiritual director. During our session we looked at two stories out of all the ones that I had noted down. These were the stories that connected and felt they had energy around them. Once we looked at these it didn't feel as though we needed to look at others at this time, but the life map is something I can bring back and keep working with as I feel led by God.

As spiritual directors we work with what is being presented at the time. God brings to the surface the right things at the right time, and we are to hold that space with care, sensitivity and curiosity, allowing the Holy Spirit to reveal to the directee what God is wanting to do.

When people share their stories with us, we provide a space of unconditional acceptance, warmth, trust and confidentiality. We provide a safe space for people to share their experiences.

Conclusion

Looking back and gathering our stories can feel like we are making a quilt. When we start a quilt, we have lots of pieces of material, all different shapes and colours and as we gather them together a beautiful picture or pattern emerges.²¹ It is the same with gathering our stories, it may start feeling messy but slowly a beautiful life story emerges.

It takes patience and hope to keep journeying from one story to another, but the result is worth it. We can have a clearer sense of how God has already written our life and how it speaks into who and where we are now.²² When I started this journey, my hope was that I would see the creator's

²¹ Allender, Dan B & Fann, Lisa K. *To be told workbook*. (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Waterbrook Press, 2005). Pg 5

²²Allender, Dan. *To be Told*. (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Waterbrook Press, 2005) Pg 52

fingerprints in my story even before I knew God, that I would see a pattern and theme that would help me to understand my calling. I was not disappointed. As I shared just a small first part of my story, right back to when I was a toddler, God showed the sensitivity that was placed in me from the beginning. As I am coming to understand this, I am able to see a little more clearly the things that are good for me to say yes to and the things that I am better to say no to.

All of this is helping to shape the stories I am yet to tell and discover.

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Further Reading

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