

LIVE : A STORY SHARING METHOD

This method is used in the Podcast LIVE to Tell and for Girl/Friend Theology sessions.



Listen to the Story: Light a candle. Breathe and Center

- Listen as if you are listening to scripture, as if you expect the Holy to show up.
- Listen deeply, without an agenda, paying attention to the feelings the story stirs in you.

Immerse Yourself in the Feelings: Share the full range of emotions you felt as you listened.

- Surface feelings that showed up in your body: tense shoulders, change of breathing, tears, etc.
- Share briefly any stories from your own life that this story called to mind.

View it Wider: Let the story speak to the Stories you know by heart.

- Where does Scripture, your faith tradition, or another faith tradition show up in this story?
- How might this story unearth a new interpretation or invert a familiar passage for you?
- Whose voice is missing from the story or from our conversation around it?
- Where does power, inequity, or systemic evil show up in the story?

Explore “aha” moments: What surfaced for you that you might keep pondering?

- What idea had heat or energy for you?
- What do you want to say out loud so we can help each other hold onto it?
- What Next Most Faithful Step is emerging for you here?

How to Facilitate

I distribute this graphic describing the four steps of the method. The following comments are ones I use to guide facilitators using this method with a group of participants who are new to it.

Step One

I will set a simple center table with a cloth, a candle, and a piece of local nature such as a flower, leaf, rock, or seashell. I will light the candle just before the storyteller begins, to signal that we are entering sacred time.

I say: I will hand out a copy of the story before it is told, but please keep it turned over while the story is being read. Don't be tempted to read ahead. Focus on the storyteller while they are reading. When they finish, if you need to refresh your memory of some detail, you can turn the story over and consult the written version.

Step Two

I always place my hand over my heart as I introduce this step, to remind us that it begins with our bodies. I encourage you to pay attention to what you are feeling in your body, such as increased heart rate, changes in breathing, tearfulness, heavy sighs, etc. These are sometimes our best clues to articulating feelings. Points of identification refer to times when you might say something like, "I identified with the part of your story where you got in the car and started driving."

I say: This step is like playing with a beach ball – we bounce words and ideas back and forth, reminding each other of feelings we experienced during the story. This is not a time to censor yourself. The goal is to get the entire range of feelings out on the table.

I might also compare this step to making seafood gumbo. We are putting a lot of different ingredients into the pot and letting them simmer together. Out of this simmering pot will arise the images, symbols, and motifs that lead us to the next step. Use your own culture's artifacts as analogy here!

Step Three

I may say: I'll ask you to imagine the Bible you carry around in your head – your canon within the canon. Where does the story, its images, or symbols touch part of scripture? Does it remind you of Moses and the burning bush? The woman caught in adultery? Ruth and Naomi as they charted the next stage of their journey? Again, share what comes to mind without too much censoring. Someone else will probably pick up on your idea and expand it. It's okay to gently interrupt each other: that happens in the process of communal meaning-making. It's also okay to acknowledge when someone seems to be entering into a prophetic moment of speaking the truth of her life out loud for the first time, or with heightened passion. The group usually becomes silent and makes room for these moments when they happen.

In addition to biblical images, I also invite images from epic cultural stories (e.g., The Lord of the Rings or Star Wars) and stories from other religious traditions. This is a way of welcoming seekers or others who have not been steeped in any one religious tradition.



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Also, if using the method with a multifaith group, I would add specific references to the holy texts of the groups represented. In this step, I ask questions such as: Does this story remind you of a concept from your tradition that it seems to redefine or to which it gives new meaning? What title would you give this story? And finally, at some point during this step, I usually ask: Where is God in this story? What soulful or spiritual practice might be happening here?

Step Four

This is the “so what” part of the method. Is there anything we’ve talked about here that you want to underline? Did you have an “aha” moment? Is there something you want to continue thinking about, or something that will change the way you act in the future? I usually refer to the story about Emma’s friend Rachel I recounted in chapter 3 of the book *Girl / Friend Theology: Doing God Talk with Young People*. In step four, these girls made a commitment to one another never to commit suicide. They acknowledged that the story of Rachel’s suicide heightened their awareness of the risks of mental illness and the importance of seeking treatment. The story session helped them determine future action. This is a stark example: usually it is more subtle. I will remind you that we don’t all come to the same conclusions. Don’t try to force anyone into seeing the story your way. Once the storyteller has told her story, it becomes all of our stories. We are each free to draw our own conclusions from the conversation that follows.



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How to invite the story teller...

This template can be adapted to recruit storytellers

Hi! I am inviting you to write a one page story about an event in your life that you would not mind sharing. Sometimes, the first story that pops into your head is the one you need to tell. We will be using these stories in a small group process that will send us looking for meaning, help us find liberatory images for God / Spirit / Creator, and engage us in the collective work of uprooting harmful images that are no longer helpful.

The story can be about almost anything and does not need to be explicitly spiritual: a special adventure with a friend, a close call with danger, an incredible gift you received, a loss you grieved, a spoiled birthday, or just a memory that won't let you go.

It **does** need to be in writing in advance of our session, or you can voice record it and send it to me.

The story:

- should **not** be one you have told repeatedly in a small group or therapeutic setting
- should **not** include your spiritual interpretation or lots of religious language (we will surface these in the conversation that ensues)
- should **not** be a story that is too painful or too fresh to feel comfortable sharing

Please use your most creative voice to tell an engaging slice-of life-story that will help listeners experience what the moment felt like, smelled like, etc. Thanks for considering this request! Reach out to me at (insert you're contact information here) if you have any questions.

(your signature here)



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Frequently Asked Questions

1. Can I start a group of my own? What skills does the facilitator need?

Yes! To help launch new groups, I've created a podcast called Live to Tell. Each thirty-minute episode engages a storyteller (who is under 30) with a conversation partner who is an older friend or mentor. We experience the entire method together. This podcast is a good way to introduce a group to the idea of practicing the method; and it is also a good way for the facilitator to become comfortable leading.

The facilitator should be someone who embraces a feminist and/or liberatory theology and is able to hold space that is safe enough for everyone's participation (see Creating Hospitable Space below)

They should also hold a nonjudgmental approach to spirituality and be a calm, non-anxious presence. Levels of comfort in leading small groups vary, as does ease in holding space for diversity opinions. The best facilitators will be comfortable in supportive rather than central role, who are able to interject their own thoughts when helpful to the group, and who are able to make sure the group abides by its agreed-upon norms.

It may be helpful to have sacred texts on hand. Sometimes a participant will think of a story from scripture, but they might not remember the details. If the details are important to making the theological connections, the facilitator may pause to consult the text.

When facilitating a group, I take notes on the conversation. If people stray too far from the four-step method, I gently point it out and circle back. For example, people are quick to move beyond their feelings into thoughts and analysis. If we have not dwelt long in feelings, I might say, "Tracy, you've introduced an important image here. Can I ask you to hold on to that for a minute while we remember to listen to our feelings? What were we feeling while we listened?" This creates habits in the group, if practicing the method over time.

Similarly, participants are sometimes reticent to share theological imagery, staying in a more literary mode. The facilitator might remind them to look for images of God / Creator / Spirit by repeating one of the questions from the handout, such as "Where is God in the story? What stories or images from the Bible or another sacred text does it call to mind?"

On occasion, I have encountered stories that reveal stark evil. On those occasions, it is hard to find traces of God. It is important, in this instance, for the facilitator not to push persons to find God or good where there is none. It is appropriate to acknowledge the reality of evil, while remaining in supportive community. Ending such a session with a breathing exercise, a movement meditation, or a song may be appropriate.

It is also important that the facilitator and other adults refrain from the impulse to "fix" an interpretation that surfaces. Emerging voices are sometimes tender. It is important to gently welcome ideas, while also offering compelling alternatives to patriarchal, colonizing versions of God.

When starting a new group, I usually invite someone who has already experienced the method to be the first storyteller. This takes pressure off the new participants and allows the seasoned participant to practice what they've learned from prior experiences.



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2. Does the storyteller take part in the conversation? Does the facilitator?

Yes. Both the storyteller and the facilitator are active participants, but it is best for the storyteller to listen first, share later. Additionally, the storyteller should abstain from adding content to the story itself, once it has been read. I like to say “Once the story has been shared, it no longer belongs to the storyteller. She has shared it, and it has become our communal story for the purposes of our collective meaning-making here and now. The story, as given, has a beginning, middle, and end.”

It is distracting to ask the storyteller, “What happened next?” It is sometimes necessary, however, to ask a question for clarification around a confusing or unclear element of the story.

The storyteller’s entry into the back-and-forth conversation is critical. The facilitator, too, should participate. Occasionally, a participant stretches to articulate a meaning that seems new or unfamiliar. This is when the facilitator draws on her usable past of history, tradition, and theological interpretation to add to the new image, acting as a midwife to its emergence. I describe more of these teachable moments in the book *Girl / Friend Theology: God-Talk with Young People*.

3. How might this method be adapted? Is this Bible Study? Does it work as a way to help youth workers examine the beliefs and practices that inform their caregiving? Could it be used as an ongoing small-group curriculum for high school youth groups or campus ministries?

Yes, it adapts easily to different contexts.

I have used this method effectively with adults who volunteer as youth counselors: it helps them learn and practice thinking theologically, and is a way for them to build community. In advance, I solicited stories from each of my ten volunteers. We met monthly for shared meals. I set aside forty minutes of our time together to do *Girl / Friend Theology*. At first, I chose stories that did not call for a lot of self-disclosure. As the group bonded and grew more trusting, I used the stories that called forth deeper levels of engagement. This prepared the adult volunteers to lead the method with young people.

It is often used as a small-group curriculum for a youth group. Among young people who are not steeped in a religious tradition or who have suffered church harm, this method can be a gentle first step toward fostering a hunger for deeper engagement with the stories of a faith tradition. Some facilitators have successfully adapted it for totally secular spaces, calling it simply LIVE and using the method to help guide a search for meaning and purpose that is not specifically religious or spiritual.

In my work with congregations I have seen someone come to an “aha” moment in which a Bible story seems incredibly relevant to their life story. They sometimes uncover a desire to know more about the Bible, its origins, meanings, and history. This Bible study “from the bottom up,” begins with life experience and moves toward the Bible, as opposed to traditional Bible studies that begin with the text and move toward life application.

4. What size should a group be? How often should it meet? For what duration?

The ideal size for a group is from eight to ten people. When a mixed- age group is new, it is best to have two adults for every six to eight young people so that younger voices are not overpowered by adults. Additional adults could be added as the young people gain confidence in their voice and ability. In this way, the method could become an intergenerational curriculum – a way for young people to engage purposefully with adults in an organization or congregation.



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I have used several formats, such as an eight-week session, a retreat weekend, and monthly meetings. The important step is to begin with an introduction, explaining the method, using the handouts, and trying to reduce the expectation that the story needs to be a finely crafted work of art.

On the initial meeting, I suggest walking through the method with a sample story. This allows participants to get a feel for the method immediately, reinforcing the steps by actually engaging in them. It can be helpful to begin with the story of an adult co-facilitator, to take the pressure off young people who may be unsure of how to go about choosing or writing a story.

I allow thirty minutes to one hour for each story session, but this varies greatly from group to group. Groups who know each other well, or who have regularly immersed themselves in theological conversation, usually enjoy a more relaxed pace and can take up to seventy-five minutes. When I am facilitating, I progress toward the next step in the method when everyone who wants to speak has spoken. I move on to step four and toward closure when I feel that the energy around a story seems to have peaked.

5. How do you go about getting stories? What makes for a good story?

I send out the “invitation to tell your story” (see template above) at least a week in advance, with a deadline for returning the story to me. Then, if the stories, haven’t flooded in, I gently nudge with email reminders. If, as the event approaches, I still haven’t gotten a handful of stories, I will reach out directly to a few known members of the group, offering to talk with them about choosing a story, or asking if they’d like to send me a voice memo of the story. Sometimes the act of writing it down can be an obstacle and talking it out or recording the story can be very helpful. I still transcribe the story so a written copy is available to listeners after the story is told out loud.

I always ask that stories be provided to me a few days in advance. This is so I can choose a story best suited for the context. This also allows me to prevent the sharing of a story that would be re-traumatizing or otherwise unhelpful to the group. On a few occasions when a very traumatic story surfaces in this process, I decide that pastoral care or mental health referral is necessary. I then make sure I get a story from a different member of the group,

I ask that people try to leave the word “God” out of the story. We will be looking for meaning, purpose, and symbols in the story together – so I ask them to leave the interpretations to the group time. Sometimes this means gently coaching the storyteller to leave out summary statements at the end of the story or other comments that interpret, rather than tell, the story.

There are a few things the story should not be about. It should not be about a moment of religious conversion: extremely overt references don’t leave us enough room to play. It also should not be a story you have told repeatedly in a small group or therapeutic setting or one you are still in the middle of living through. For certain groups, stories about suicide or self-harm are not appropriate. However, when those stories surface, and they will, I try to hold carefully the need for people to talk about mental health struggles. The story in chapter 3 of *Girl / Friend Theology* “Will You Be My Friend?” is about a suicide, and it led to a rich experience for participants. Please, always err on the side of having extra support on hand for stories like this.



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Here are some brief descriptions of stories that have worked well in the past:

- A woman's story about a glistening spring day when, as a teenager, she gathered with her brothers on a tree branch for a family portrait.
- A boy's story about taking a walk to the cemetery with an elderly neighbor whose husband had died six months before.
- A woman's story about a dream that came to her the summer after her twin sister died of leukemia.
- A teenage girl's story about a day she went swimming with a friend and all was right with the world.
- A young woman's story about getting a snake tattoo and the way she navigated this with her parents.

For more examples of stories that worked well and the conversations that arose from them, see my 2012 book, *The Barefoot Way: A Faith Guide for Youth, Young Adults, and the People who Walk with Them* (Westminster John Knox)

When leading a group of adults engaged in youth ministry, I ask them to think of a story from their own adolescence. In general, I will get people thinking about the story they might tell by asking them to reflect upon a time in the last six months that they have felt the presence of Spirit or Source, a time when they survived a difficulty, stood on holy ground, or experienced an event that still seems to be at work in them.



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Covenants for Creating Hospitable Space

The practice of Girl / Friend Theology requires space where people can bring their whole selves into collective meaning-making. While this is clearly not a therapeutic intervention, these kinds of groups can support healing emotional and spiritual trauma, if we establish a trauma-sensitive environment with a clear boundaries.

When starting a new group that is not part of an already existing community of practice, I begin by establishing group norms called "Covenants of Presence." [1] Your group covenants might include such agreements as:

- Be present
- Presume welcome
- Turn to wonder
- We come as equals
- Think twice before speaking more than once

In addition to Covenants of Presence, gentle warnings about what to expect can help create hospitable space. If a given story holds potential to raise intense emotions around past trauma, be sure to inform participants in advance. Welcome them to gather whatever might be supportive to them. This may include materials for self-expression through art, journaling, dancing or meditation or talking to a friend, therapist, or counsellor. [2]

[1] Created by the Forum for Theological Exploration and based on work from the Center for Courage and Renewal, these norms can be found in ongoing iterations via a quick internet search. For more on other practices for creating hospitable space, see the 2020 book *Another Way: Living and Leading Change on Purpose* by Stephen Lewis, Matthew Wesley Williams and Dori Baker

[2] For more on creating trauma-sensitive learning environments, see Kate Ott and Darryl W. Stephens, editors, *Teaching Sexuality and Religion in Higher Education: Embodied Learning, Trauma Sensitive Pedagogy, and Perspective Training*, (Routledge, 2020)



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