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PASTORAL CARE

Telling the Stories of Our Lives

PASTORAL CARE:
TELLING THE STORIES OF OUR LIVES

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Chapter 1

Telling the Stories of Our Lives: Narrative Pastoral Care

If you want to know me, then you must know my story, for my story defines who I am. And if I want to know myself, to gain insight into the meaning of my own life, then I, too, must come to know my own story.

—Dan P. McAdams, *The Stories We Live By*

Imagine you are in a group setting, such as a classroom or a retreat, and are asked to introduce yourself to one other member of the group. At the end of the conversation you will introduce each other to the rest of the group. Instead of beginning with biographical facts, you are instructed to share a story about yourself that communicates something of who you are. What story would you choose to tell? Would it be the story of the summer you went to live in a small village in Peru? Perhaps it would be the story about falling into a trashcan headfirst while chasing a squirrel off the porch when you were seven. Or maybe you would tell about how much you loved leaving your city home for the summer and visiting your grandparents' farm. What might your listener learn about you from whatever particulars from this story you choose to tell? Perhaps it would be something about your adventurous spirit, your single-mindedness despite risks, or your love of nature. You might be surprised at how much you communicate about yourself through a familiar story. Stories are powerful.

Narrative pastoral care assumes that we not only tell stories, but that our sense of self, the meaning we assign to life events, and our understanding of the world are composed through stories. We do not experience our lives as a collection of “naked facts or strings of raw events,” but rather as *stories*.¹ We are “hermeneutical beings,” that is, we continually interpret our experience to make meaning out of the vast barrage of sensory perceptions, emotions, and thoughts coursing through our minds every moment.² And the primary way we make meaning is through stories.³ As gerontologist William Randall asserts, “*The story of my life* [is] far more than a figure of

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speech. It is not that life is *like* a story. On some extremely basic level, it *is* a story—a *lifestory*.”⁴

Moreover, our lives are not singular stories, but collections of stories, or a *narrative* composed of multiple story strands of our experiences. When we claim *Christian* as part of our identity, we also claim this larger story as part of our own. Our lifestories are not a single-authored work, but the result of conversations, spoken and unspoken, with multiple coauthors. We live within a network of stories, held by our families, our local communities, and our religious communities and traditions. We weave our own stories out of this net of stories.

Narrative Pastoral Care: NET

A narrative approach to pastoral care invites us to become pastoral story companions in the dialogical coauthoring of lifestories. Accompanying others in authoring or editing a lifestory requires a range of practices and skills, including listening to and fully hearing the stories of others, being curious about how stories are formed, noting what is included and what is left out, identifying multiple story strands, and assisting a person in revising his or her life (and story) when needed. It is not only other people’s stories or narratives we need to attend to, but our own as well. We, as well as those for whom we care, are called to shape lifestories that are not only good, but also are faithful stories that foster growth in love. In order to become effective story companions, we need to know something about how our lives are shaped by story.

Narrative pastoral care draws on research from a broad range of disciplines that have adopted a narrative approach and hold a view of human beings as hermeneutical, or interpretive beings—storytellers who seek to make meaning out of life. Some of the narrative approaches I explore in this volume include narrative psychology, therapy, gerontology, medicine, and theology, all of which draw on larger developments in literary and narrative studies. Narrative pastoral care, like the disciplines informing it, assumes that we are not the sole authors of our lifestories, but rather coauthors, developing our stories in the context of interpersonal, communal, and cultural contexts. Distinctive to narrative pastoral care is attending intentionally to God’s role as coauthor of our lifestories. Narrative pastoral care is a communal practice that emerges from the stories and practices of a particular religious tradition or community. By encouraging active engagement in writing the stories of our lives, narrative pastoral care seeks to increase our ability to not simply construct a good story, but a good life.

While my approach to narrative pastoral care draws from other narrative disciplines and builds on previous work in pastoral care, it is distinctive. I define *narrative pastoral care* as an ecclesial, theological practice through which we listen to lifestories in order to discern the intersection of human stories and God’s story in the context of community and culture. By claiming that pastoral care is an *ecclesial*

practice, I assert that its motivation, purpose, and identity derive from the larger mission and ministry of the church to form persons and communities in a life of love made possible by God's love in Christ through the Spirit (Rom 8:9-10). A central purpose of the Christian church is to proclaim, interpret, and live out this story of God's profound healing and redeeming love, which restores our brokenness and invites us to respond through continued growth in love. The nature of love is that it does not keep to itself. Narrative pastoral care is intended to extend beyond ecclesial community, though the church has a particular responsibility to live out God's love story. Not just any story will do. From the perspective of narrative pastoral care, a good *lifestory* also engenders growth in love.

Narrative pastoral care is also a *theological* practice. Christian pastoral care is grounded in the biblical and historical narratives of God's unfolding love story. Understanding the larger role of theology in pastoral practice and being aware of one's own particular theological perspective allows us to discern how theological convictions are embodied in our practices. A narrative, ecclesial, theological, or a NET approach to pastoral care carefully attends to the network of stories bequeathed to us by our families, our communities, our cultures, and our faith—a network in which we write and live out our own *lifestories*.

Story-Shaped Lives

We are story-telling beings.⁵ Whether in the form of folk tales, myths, legends, classic literature, popular fiction, movies, YouTube videos, or accounts of exploits shared between friends, stories are widely present in human culture.⁶ Scholars from a range of disciplines who study story and narrative share the conviction that our sense of our selves, our lives, and our world is shaped and communicated through story.⁷ Philosopher Paul Ricoeur asserts that the impulse to tell stories and construct a narrative reflects our human condition.⁸ Discoveries in neuroscience confirm that our brains are wired for story, meaning “the human brain is designed to construe experience in narrative terms.”⁹ As neurobiologist Antonio Damasio has shown, consciousness and our sense of self, our “autobiographical self,” are linked.¹⁰ Psychologist Dan McAdams states it plainly: “Human beings are story tellers by nature.”¹¹ According to sociologist Anthony Giddens, it is “the capacity to keep a particular narrative going,” rather than behavior, that shapes identity in the modern world.¹²

We become more consciously active in the construction of our *lifestories* as we progress from childhood through adulthood.¹³ Our narratives lengthen, we add more story strands, and our own stories become increasingly entwined with a multiplicity of other stories and narratives as we move through life.¹⁴ We know from our general experience of hearing and reading stories that some seem better to us than others; some seem truer, more honest, more satisfying, and they provide us with a deeper understanding of life. Drawing from psychology, sociology, as well as philosophy and

ethics, William Randall proposes that having a “*good lifestory*” enables us to live “in a sensible, responsible, more or less satisfying manner.”¹⁵

The Nature of Story

Stories do many things: they entertain, educate, inspire, persuade, and motivate, but above all, they make sense of our lives, they convey meaning.¹⁶ Stories teach us about the world.¹⁷ But what exactly is a story? Are stories communicated only in words, or can they be enacted or performed even without words? The term *story* can have multiple meanings. For some a story connotes something fictional or made-up, while in a legal context, it can refer to “an argument, angle, or alibi.”¹⁸ In the usual everyday sense in which we use the term, a story is generally understood “as a particular arrangement of events, real or imagined, in the realm of space and time.”¹⁹ In simpler terms, stories are told by somebody “about somebody doing something.”²⁰ Stories, then usually have at least these elements: (1) the storyteller or *author* who tells the story from a particular point of view; (2) one or more *characters*, or somebodies doing something; and (3) the *plot* in which the actions, conflicts, and concerns of the characters are laid out; and (4) the *setting* or the “temporal and spatial context in which the characters do something.”²¹

While the terms *story* and *narrative* are often used interchangeably, they can have distinct meanings. Literary theorists who study narrative define it as the “showing or telling of . . . events and the mode selected for that to take place.”²² So defined, poems, songs, movies, scientific theories, rituals, or performed action without words may be considered different modes of narrative. As I use the terms here, narrative refers to what we mean by the “story of my life,” or a lifestory, a larger framework that provides a more or less cohesive, thematic organization of the multiple stories we have lived in the past, are living in the present, or imagine we may live in the future.

Stories Shape Time and Identity

One of the things stories do is structure our sense of time.²³ Stories generally have some temporal sense, meaning they occur and unfold over time. Philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s exploration of the interconnection between temporality and narrative has had a significant influence on the study of story and narrative.²⁴ Stories interpret our past, make sense of the present, and project a future. While most human cultures have a sense of time, not all understand time in terms of the sequence of past, present, and future that we tend to assume as normal in Western culture. Stories, however, require a sense of time. Stories move through time in some way, whether in a straightforward or a circuitous way.

If we were able to pay attention to every sensation, every experience, and every person encountered in a day, we would feel quickly overwhelmed. We generally do not experience the world in such a direct, unfiltered way. What we define as *experience* has already been filtered through “a complex interpretive process, commencing with initial sensory perceptions and culminating in emotion, thought, and action.”²⁵

A primary function of stories is to give meaning and shape to what might otherwise seem like random, unconnected events. By arranging the episodes of our lives into stories occurring over time, we provide meaning and coherence to our lives that otherwise might feel scattered and confusing.²⁶ We notice some details and filter out others, interpreting and translating the raw data of life through an implicit narrative framework; construct a story, even as we are in the midst of living it. We notice what we have interpreted as important to us, experiences we have deemed meaningful, whether positive or negative. Narratives are not some abstract idea we impose on our lives from afar, but rather “something we look through.”²⁷ In fact, we don’t just *have* stories; we *are* story-shaped beings.²⁸

Culture’s Influence on Story

We do not write our lifestories on a blank page. Our lives take on meaning “to the extent that they conform to or express culturally meaningful *stories*.”²⁹ We interpret our life experiences and shape them into *our stories* through the narratives we construct from the various stories available to us, including our own life experiences, stories others tell about us, and stories from the larger culture, including religious traditions.³⁰ For Christians, the stories of our faith are a prominent source from which we draw in the construction of our life narratives.³¹ These various story sources may help us construct coherent and life-giving stories or they may constrain or limit our lifestories.

The culture may also decide who is allowed to tell what kind of stories and which stories count as acceptable. We often see this dynamic played out in movies or television, as well as in real life. Are we more prone to believe the coherent story of a prominent surgeon and civic leader who says he did not commit abuse or sexual assault, or a distraught woman whose story is fragmented by the trauma she has endured? Likewise we may have grown up in religious traditions with stories that confirm our sense of self as beloved children of God, or we may have been deemed unfit for certain roles in the life church due to our gender or sexual identity.

Ways of Knowing

Stories are not the only way we make sense out of the world, but they are the primary way we make sense of ourselves and other people. Psychologist Jerome Bruner argues that we come to understand the world either through *paradigmatic* or *narrative* knowing.³² Paradigmatic knowing explains phenomena through rational argument and the scientific method. In paradigmatic knowing we rely on our senses and our intellect to make sense out of what we see in the world. Narrative knowing, on the other hand, is what we learn through stories. It is through stories that we make sense of human conduct and make meaning of our own lives.³³ If I want to know how my computer functions, I rely on paradigmatic knowledge. If I want to know why my friend, now nearing fifty, has never learned to drive, or why another friend volunteers with the Sierra Club, I need to know something of their stories. It is through stories

that we understand one another's identity and motivations.³⁴ Narrative psychologists assert that our identity is shaped by stories as well as communicated through them.

The Construction of Identity through Story: Narrative Personality Theory

Narrative personality theory describes the formation of personality and identity. In a way, it presents an imagined ideal process of narrative identity formation, the way it ought to unfold if everything goes right.³⁵ Narrative personality psychologist Dan McAdams argues that identity is not only communicated through a lifestyle, but that in a very real sense, I *am* my story.³⁶ Although we compose our sense of self throughout our lives, the period of late adolescence and early adulthood is a crucial time in this process. McAdams also argues that the “main psychological challenge” in contemporary culture for those in “emerging adulthood,” or the ages between seventeen and twenty, is the formation of narrative identity.³⁷ While we are able to tell stories about our experience from an early age, it is only in late adolescence or emerging adulthood that we begin to consciously to arrange our lives into coherent narratives with a remembered past, a perceived present, and an imagined future.³⁸ In this period of our lives we begin to ask identity questions: Who am I? Where am I going? What do I believe in? What do I want to do with my life? What gives my life meaning, purpose, and coherence? These questions begin to form in our minds at this life stage “because the cultural conditions and expectations of modern society are such that *we have to ask them*.”³⁹

Questions of narrative identity may have been less pressing in earlier historical periods where who one was and what one did were often determined by one's place in the society. Contemporary society, particularly in the United States, offers us a wide variety of life choices and possibilities. We are faced with the freedom and dilemma of choice and it is our stories that help us hold our disparate choices together, as McAdams describes.

There is no single one-size-fits-all “correct” way to live in a society like ours. There are many things we can do and be, many choices we can make. And we have to make them. We cannot do everything and believe everything. . . . And if an individual does manage to do and believe many different things . . . she is likely to wonder what it is that ties these different things together. What makes her life coherent? The answer is, the story she lives by—that is, narrative identity.⁴⁰

During the period of emerging adulthood, we begin to form our narrative identity, which is “the internalized and changing story” of our lives.⁴¹

Narrative identity provides a means to hold together our various beliefs, hopes, dreams, and roles in a coherent way. The story you tell about yourself, for example at that church retreat or in the classroom, interprets your past, conveys beliefs about

how you have developed over time into the person you are now, and projects an anticipated future. This story also communicates your convictions, values, and commitments.⁴² While this story begins to take shape in early adulthood, it not yet finished, it is “complex, contradictory,” and it undergoes considerable revision over our lives.⁴³ Does the shape of our narrative or the themes prominent within it matter? According to research psychologists who study narrative identity, the answer is yes. Narrative psychologists have noted variances in the “dimensions of plot, image, theme, tone, and complexity” between one person’s story and another’s, linking these differences to “important psychological and social outcomes.”⁴⁴ The primary motive communicated through a narrative may also reveal psychological differences between people.

Through analysis of hundreds of lifestory interviews, McAdams and his colleagues have identified two primary motives embedded in the plots and themes of our narratives: *agency* and *communion*.⁴⁵ *Agency* they define as “a broad tendency to expand, assert, defend, control, or express the self.”⁴⁶ *Communion* is defined as “the broad tendency to connect the self to others, even to the point of giving up self for the benefit of others,” loving and caring for others, and feeling a sense of commitment and belonging to a group.⁴⁷ The protagonist of a narrative emphasizing agency is trying to get ahead, influence others, or achieve a goal, often one that improves his or her own stature.⁴⁸ The lead character in a narrative that emphasizes communion may sacrifice himself for his beloved or herself for some greater good of her community. Human beings experience and express both motives in our narratives and we often live in the tension between these two motives, which at times can compete with one another. Sometimes one is emphasized over the other and the theme of agency or communion may dominate a life narrative. And our preference for one theme over the other, as well as the way in which we seek to balance these themes, can reveal something about our psychological makeup.

Think for a moment of your favorite movie or narrative. Are you drawn to action and adventure in which a hero or heroine relentlessly pursues some goal over all odds to achieve great personal success? James Bond comes to mind for me. Ostensibly he is serving his country, but he usually comes out ahead. Or do you like the stories in which people care for and tend to one another, even if it requires self-sacrifice? The film *The Sound of Music*, in which Maria von Trapp and her husband leave a comfortable home and their homeland to secure the safety of their children, comes to mind for me in this category (but this example may simply show my age!). Perhaps you are drawn to a film like *Cabaret*, in which the main character struggles between agency and communion.⁴⁹ Perhaps you can imagine other examples from contemporary films or novels that emphasize either agency or communion, or the tension between the two.

Life narratives that place a significant emphasis on agency and the main character’s striving to get ahead with little regard for others or concern for friendship or love may suggest narcissism.⁵⁰ An overemphasis on communion over agency may also be problematic. Lacking the sense that one can act on one’s own behalf or that one has some control over one’s life may lead to depression, low self-esteem, a negative

evaluation of the self, or overdependence on others.⁵¹ These core themes can provide a sense of coherence to our stories and help us evaluate the adequacy or functionality of our lifestories.

Criteria for Evaluating Lifestories

While the process of narrative identity construction may become more self-conscious in emerging adulthood, our identities are not set at this point, nor do they stop when we reach a certain age. We continually work on our stories “consciously and unconsciously” throughout our lives.⁵² We update, revise, edit, and often rewrite our lifestories as we move through adulthood, ideally moving “in the direction of increasingly good narrative form” in our middle and later years.⁵³ McAdams proposes six criteria of “good life-story form” expressed in how we talk and write about our lives: coherence, openness, credibility, differentiation, reconciliation, and generative imagination.⁵⁴

Coherence means that the story hangs together and makes sense.⁵⁵ It has a certain story logic so that we can follow the plot or thread of the story. The themes of agency or communion may provide the connecting thread that allows us to follow the story. *Openness* in a lifestory refers to flexibility, the ability to allow the story to unfold, to incorporate new experiences, and to change course if needed.⁵⁶ For a story to be *credible*, it must give a reasonably full account of our lives, not omitting great chunks.⁵⁷ For McAdams, “the good, mature, and adaptive lifestory cannot be based on gross distortion,” nor can the identity fashioned from this lifestory be “fantasy.”⁵⁸ The concept of *differentiation* for McAdams echoes the concept, mentioned earlier, of lifestories as rich, complex, and multistranded.⁵⁹ Another way to describe this is to think of how our stories broaden and thicken with age: the longer we live, the more we have to tell. Some lifestories we hear, however long, may seem thin to us, leading us to wonder what was left out or how a life became so narrowed. Besides that, what is true in literature is also true in life: a good story has conflict. As the story progresses, however, we look for some resolution to conflict. *Reconciliation* is the term McAdams uses to describe this process in our lifestories in which the “tough issues and dynamic contradictions” are met by “narrative solutions that affirm the harmony and integrity of the self.”⁶⁰ As we age, reconciliation can become increasingly challenging; we may face greater contradictions between what we can imagine and what is possible. Crisis and trauma can also challenge our ability to reconcile certain kinds of events with the lifestory we have constructed so far.⁶¹ The concept of *generative imagination* reflects McAdams’s use of Erik Erikson’s developmental theory, combining Erikson’s seventh and eighth stages: generativity and integrity.⁶² A good lifestory is not simply inner directed but also extends beyond the self and “should eventually be oriented toward the wider world” and benefit others, including one’s community and the larger society.⁶³ We will discuss these criteria further as they inform what we consider a good, life-giving, faithful story from the perspective of narrative pastoral care.

Narrative personality theory provides a description of the process of narrative identity formation and emerges from the larger field of personality theory developed within the context of research psychology in universities primarily in the United States. Narrative psychologists conduct quantitative and qualitative research studies in order to describe the processes of narrative identity development. *Narrative therapy* emerged from clinical practices of counseling and psychotherapy for treating persons in situations of psychological distress. While significant points of connection exist between the two theories, they developed more or less simultaneously and initially without much mutual influence.

Narrative Repair: Narrative Therapy Theory

The beginnings of narrative therapy can be traced to Michael White, from Australia, and David Epston, from New Zealand, who were initially trained in family systems theory. Steven Madigan, a student of White and Epston, has built on their work and promoted narrative therapy theory in the United States and Canada. Narrative therapy theory and practice are now well established in the United States and around the world.⁶⁴ The goal of narrative therapy is to repair limiting and disabling dysfunctional stories.

Narrative therapy theory is a distinctly postmodern approach to therapy. The therapist is considered not an expert, but a consultant. A key practice of narrative therapy is distinguishing between the person and the problem.⁶⁵ The idea here is that we tell the story of the problem in a way that takes over our lives, so that the “*problem-saturated*” story becomes the defining story.⁶⁶ We lose track of the rich, multi-stranded narrative of our lives. A principal goal of narrative therapy is the “deconstruction” of problem stories and in their place, identifying alternative story strands, then thickening and strengthening this “alternative” story into one that is more functional and life-giving.⁶⁷

A key process in narrative therapy is naming and *externalizing* the problem a person brings to therapy.⁶⁸ Externalization separates the person from the problem. For example: Consider the difference between saying, “Ed is an alcoholic” or “Joy is a drug addict” and saying, “Ed is a person who struggles with alcohol” or “Drugs have a hold on Joy and she can’t seem to get free.” These represent different ways of telling the story between the person and the problem. In the first case, the person is labeled and defined completely by the problem. The problem story eclipses additional dimensions of a lifestyle. Though Ed may struggle with the power of alcohol over his life, he may also be a loving father and loyal brother. Joy is a brilliant artist and a doting aunt, as well as a woman struggling to free herself from the grip of drug addiction. Through the processes of naming and externalization, the person seeking help begins to identify her or his relationship to the problem and can begin to recognize the influence that the problem exercises over his or her life. In addition, the care

seeker begins to identify her or his influence over the problem and begins to gain a greater sense of agency.

The therapist and client work in a collaborative process to name the problem, but the naming is ultimately up to the client. Perhaps Ed will name his problem “Al,” almost personalizing it, and will begin to see how Al talks him into drinking and will identify the false promises he makes, thus allowing Ed to see himself making choices about how he relates to Al rather than seeing himself as a helpless victim, or a hopeless alcoholic, and nothing more.⁶⁹ The narrative therapist is not interested in identifying pathology or diagnosing the problem according to DSM-5 (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*).⁷⁰ The narrative therapist believes that such diagnostic labels totalize the problem story and identify the person too much with the problem.

Additional tasks of narrative therapy include deconstructing damaging cultural narratives that contribute to the problem narrative, identifying unstoried or understoried parts of a person’s life, and assisting in the reconstruction of a more complex, coherent, multistoried, life-giving narrative. This is a dialogical process that occurs between the participants in the therapeutic process. Unlike many other forms of therapy, narrative therapy makes significant use of questions. It also draws heavily not only on psychological ideas but also on the postmodern philosophy of Michel Foucault, particularly his analysis of the constraining role of dominant cultural narratives.⁷¹

Both narrative personality theory and narrative therapy theory can make contributions to a narrative approach to pastoral care. While the two theories have somewhat different starting points, they are nonetheless compatible. Both have in common a nonpathologizing approach that focuses on identifying and building on people’s strengths and increasing agency. While this approach is helpful with any number of persons, it is particularly helpful with persons who have been marginalized or labeled as pathological. It is also consistent with an approach to narrative pastoral care that emphasizes growth in love.

Restorying: Narrative Gerontology

Constructing a lifestory is a lifelong process. As a consequence we are often revising or “restorying” our lives.⁷² Various practices of narrative care, including forms of life review and reminiscence, have been developed in the field of gerontology to assess the relative goodness or functionality of our lifestories and to provide a basis for revising these stories as we age.⁷³ *Restorying* practices a close reading of our lifestories, revising chapters that no longer work or reinterpreting memories from a new perspective. Gerontology, or the study of aging, may seem like an odd discipline to inform pastoral care. If we are at all familiar with gerontology, we may associate it with the study of older adults, or with the illnesses of old age such as Alzheimer’s disease. This is partially correct, given that gerontology is a broad and interdisciplin-

ary field encompassing a range of approaches. One approach to the study of aging that may be familiar to us is “a biomedical model that essentially equates aging to what happens to our bodies,” or another perspective we may have encountered is “a social policy perspective” that deals with Social Security, Medicare, or other programs for the elderly.⁷⁴ An unfortunate side effect of these approaches to aging is that they contribute to a cultural narrative of aging in the United States as a time of loss and inevitable decline. Rather than portraying aging as a process of “actively growing old,” this cultural narrative portrays aging as a passive process of “getting old.”⁷⁵ Many older adults actively resist the sense of invisibility and obsolescence this narrative assigns to them.⁷⁶

Narrative gerontology presents a different story of aging, one that is more interested in how human beings interpret the experience of aging from the inside out, rather than describing aging bodies aging from the outside in, as we might find in a biological or biomedical model of aging.⁷⁷ Narrative gerontology views human beings as “hermeneutical beings” who interpret and make meaning out of experience.⁷⁸ This view of human beings is consistent with the views presented earlier and coincides with the perspective of narrative personality theory and narrative therapy. As an interdisciplinary endeavor, narrative gerontologists draw on these disciplines as well as others in both the social sciences, such as sociology and anthropology, and the humanities, including literary theory and philosophy. Like narrative psychology, narrative gerontology seeks to describe certain human processes, specifically aging, which is a lifelong process. And like narrative therapy theory, narrative gerontology may develop interventions, such as life review, to assist persons in examining and revising a lifestory so that it becomes a better story, reflecting the criteria of good stories discussed earlier. Narrative gerontology is often more concerned with how we interpret the normal process of aging and less concerned with what we might call *narrative repair*, as is narrative therapy.

Narrative Pastoral Care (NET) in the Larger Story of Pastoral Care

A narrative approach to pastoral care is not entirely new and other pastoral theologians have proposed various forms of it. Edward P. Wimberley draws on indigenous storytelling practices in the Black church to inform care.⁷⁹ Others have adapted narrative therapy theory for use in pastoral care and counseling and spiritual formation.⁸⁰

First, it is my intention to contribute to the growing literature on narrative approaches to pastoral care by presenting the NET (narrative, ecclesial, theological) model, which draws on a broad range of narrative disciplines and holds a view of humans as relational, meaning-making, story-telling beings. Second, I hope to reclaim strengths of various approaches to pastoral care throughout Christian history, from the early church, through the rise of modernity, to our current post-modern context.⁸¹ The NET model reclaims fostering individual and communal spiritual

formation as a central task of pastoral care. While spiritual formation has been a significant dimension of pastoral care throughout the history of the church, less attention has been paid to this element in those expressions of twentieth-century pastoral care that have been focused primarily on psychological healing.⁸²

The NET model I propose is deeply grounded theologically and viewed as an ecclesial practice, which resonates with key emphases of the “classical” model of care.⁸³ A theological narrative of love, which is enacted by the community of love at the heart of the Trinity, runs through the NET model. The relational context of narrative formation is crucial in the NET model, thus reflecting the centrality of relationship as a means of care, which is in line with a key emphasis of the “clinical pastoral” model.⁸⁴ Given the centrality of love in the theological narrative that informs this model, however, it rejects hierarchical notions of an expert caregiver and a passive care recipient, which are limitations of the clinical pastoral model. Storyteller, listener, and the ever-present spirit of God are all coauthors of our stories. Because we author our stories in a particular narrative environment, the stories told around us and about us shape our own stories, requiring us to pay attention to cultural stories, as does the “communal-contextual” paradigm.⁸⁵

The influence of postmodern thought on the communal-contextual model is evident in the NET model’s understanding of story formation as an ongoing social process. Our stories are not fixed at some point in our lives but are constantly being developed and edited. A narrative model (NET) values diversity as divine gift and insists that love and justice are inseparable, critiques the abuse of power, and seeks to encourage positive transformation of the world through fostering growth in love.

As Dan McAdams reminds us in the opening quotation, we come to know ourselves and others through sharing the stories of our lives. We become fully our selves, fully human, and enter fully in relationship with another only as we coauthor life together. Implied in this shared narrative of care is a calling to reconfigure our storied lives in the context of a faith community implicated by and discerning God’s presence in tales of love told and lived. We encounter a myriad of potential coauthors in every single day and our stories are continually being revised. Anyone can be a story companion, but those who choose to become story companions on behalf of a religious community commit to reading and authoring lifestories that honor and affirm the religious and spiritual narratives of that community, attend to God’s presence in the midst of a life narrative, and promote good, strong, and hopeful stories. We become story companions by extending an invitation to sit awhile and tell a tale.

The *purpose* of pastoral care is to generate stories that promote growth in love of God, self, and others.

Christian pastoral care is a narrative, ecclesial, theological practice (NET). As a *narrative practice*, pastoral care attends to the inseparable interconnection between our own lifestories, others' stories, the larger cultural stories, and God's story. As a ministry of the church, pastoral care is an *ecclesial practice* that derives its motivation, purpose, and identity from the larger mission of the church to bear witness to and embody God's mission of love that extends beyond the church for the transformation of the world. As a *theological practice*, pastoral care is grounded in God's love story. God's profound love for humankind heals our brokenness when human love fails and invites us into an ongoing process of growth in love of God, self, and neighbor.

Intended for those who provide care with and on behalf of religious communities, this book focuses on listening and "restorying" practices occurring in the context and setting of congregations. By coauthoring narratives that promote healing and growth in love, pastoral caregivers become cocreators and companions who help others revise and construct lifestories reshaped by the grace of God.

"What Karen Scheib has done in this book is reposition pastoral care as a theological activity performed in the context of the church. She draws deeply upon her Wesleyan theological heritage, upon an understanding of life in its fullness as growth in love and grace, and upon a 'communion ecclesiology' undergirded by a communal understanding of the trinitarian life of God. Thus grounded, she envisions pastoral care first as a rhythm of the life of the whole church and secondarily as a work of trained pastors.

"In her vision, pastoral care is rescued from a narrow understanding of it as exceptional acts of intervention performed only in moments of dire crisis. Instead, it becomes a 'daily practice of pastoral care,' an attending, in love, to the stories of others, and a 'listening for ways God

is already present in a lifestory.' This book by Karen Scheib is a great gift—solidly theological, grounded in the life of the church, and eminently teachable." —from the foreword by Thomas G. Long, Bandy Professor Emeritus of Preaching, Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Atlanta, GA

"In a wonderfully engaging, reflective, and useful way, Karen Scheib captures something absolutely essential to pastoral care and yet often overlooked—the utter centrality of storytelling/listening, the power of stories to heal, and their vital connection to bigger stories told within religious communities. This book is a real milestone, reclaiming the importance of "narrative knowing" and grounding care not only in community but also within a comprehensive theological framework." - Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Professor of Religion, Psychology, and Culture, The Divinity School and Graduate Department of Religion, Vanderbilt University Divinity School, Nashville, TN

"Implementing narrative personality and therapy theories and anchored in ecclesiology and Wesleyan theology (NET), Karen Scheib's book advances a long awaited and holistic approach to pastoral care. Her NET approach presents the embodiment of pastoral care by emphasizing both narrative and paradigmatic knowing, proposes the subjectivity of our stories in pastoral care by pointing out the interchangeability between us and our stories as subject and object, and underscores the dynamic process of pastoral care through the interconnection of the storyteller, listener, and context. Scheib's image of story companion contributes to the field as a new paradigm of pastoral care and promises to be a significant resource in generating hope and growth in love for both pastoral caregiver and receiver." —Angella Son, Associate Professor, Drew University, Madison, NJ

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