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Story starvation and stories that nourish

Story is important for understanding identity. Sharing each others' stories might be a part of a first peer group gathering.

by [Kenneth L. Carder](#)

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Soon after our six-year-old granddaughter, Megan, arrives for a visit, she invariably snuggles beside me and says, "Pawpaw, tell me a story." When she began that ritual a couple of years ago, I tried to come up with imaginative stories that would interest and entertain her. Running short of imagination, I turned to stories of my own childhood or her mother's childhood. Those are the stories she remembers and repeats to her friends, often adding her own twists and interpretations.

Recalling and telling stories from my past, particularly those from my childhood, has provided more than just entertainment for grandchildren. Those stories have added to my own self-understanding, kindled gratitude and hope, motivated confession and assured forgiveness, intertwined my life more deeply with my grandchildren, deepened my sense of life's mystery, and heightened my awareness of the lavish Grace in which we live and move and have our being.

Living consists of participating in, creating, and sharing stories. Our lives represent the unfolding of a series of narratives, and we are bound together in the human family with intersecting and interwoven stories. Our minds are storehouses of recollected stories that shape our identity, our sense of meaning and purpose, our vision of the future, and our connectedness with one another.

In his provocative and challenging sermon delivered at the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence gathering in Indianapolis, August 7-11, John Wimmer said our society suffers from "story starvation." It is an intriguing and helpful diagnosis of current realities in the church and society.

Strangely enough, however, even as our society suffers from "story starvation" we are constantly bombarded by stories. Television saturates our homes with stories — commercials, drama, news,

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cartoons, “reality shows,” athletic events. Interactive technologies enable us to inject ourselves into the stories and create “virtual realities.” Yet, these stories leave us unsatisfied and hungry, malnourished and malformed.

The solution to starvation is not junk food. Being full and satiated is not synonymous with good health and proper nourishment. The answer to starvation is food rich in nutrients necessary for the growth and sustenance of the body’s cells and organs. Nutrition requires balance, substance, and consistency.

Dr. Wimmer reminded us that we as Christians have the solution to “story starvation.” We have been made participants in and heralds of THE STORY of God’s mighty acts in Jesus Christ. We have been incorporated into God’s Story and given the privilege of bearing that Story in word and deed.

Pastoral excellence is defined by the gospel Story of God’s mighty acts in history and in Jesus Christ. The unfolding of God’s continuing story of redemption, reconciliation, and transformation of human hearts and lives, congregations and communities, institutions and cultures is the source of and standard for pastoral excellence.

Cultivating awareness of God’s presence and power in the unfolding of our life stories is the true source for sustaining pastoral excellence. Growing numbers of pastors are rediscovering THE STORY as they share their stories in peer groups and listen attentively to signs of God’s presence and grace in the stories of others.

During the peer groups meeting in Indianapolis, we listened to and shared stories of the Sustaining Pastoral Excellence projects. One question we asked as we listened to the stories told by colleagues was, where was “the juice” in the story? What in the stories gave life, passion, and substance? Accounts of transformed lives, rekindled imagination, recovery of calling, deepened relationships, loving community — these were the “juice” in our life together in Indianapolis .

Several thousand pastors and laity across the country gather regularly in peer groups in pursuit of pastoral excellence. Isolation is being overcome and passion and imagination for ministry are being fueled as stories are told and heard in light of THE STORY. Listening attentively for signs of God’s grace — God’s presence and power to heal and transform — provides nourishment for pastors and laity who suffer from “story starvation.” After all, the One whose story is the incarnation of excellence is “the bread of life” who made this promise: “he who comes to me shall not hunger” (John 6:35).