

Unleashing the Power of Elders' Stories for the Sake of the Church

by

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Every time an old person dies, a library burns to the ground.
African proverb

Introduction

By the time I was born some sixty-four years ago, only one of my grandparents was still living. The occasional visits to her house where she resided with my aunt provided a glimpse into this kind, quiet woman who loved her family and the rose gardens she so diligently nurtured. But she died when I was 10 years old, before I had really gotten to know her. And that was unfortunate for many reasons, one of which is that from what I've learned, my grandmother apparently had a deep and abiding faith that sustained her through a very difficult life.

She had left her home in Switzerland as a child, ultimately landing in Minneapolis where she later married and raised six children of her own through the 1920s and '30s. For the most part she raised them single-handedly, as my grandfather died when my father (the youngest of the six) was just two years old. There was no insurance money and apparently little, if any savings. And of course, social welfare programs were nonexistent in those days. Yet, despite what must have seemed like insurmountable circumstances, my grandmother succeeded in raising six healthy kids, all honorable individuals.

My parents raised their children in the Church and were themselves examples of what it means to bear witness to the love of God, but neither one was very forthcoming with their own stories. I suspect this is because telling one's story was not part of their experiences growing up. They both came from poor families, and while I don't know a lot about their situations, I know enough to understand that they faced many challenges and endured numerous hardships. Many of their stories would have been hard to tell. And keeping stories to themselves was consistent with my parents' largely Scandinavian backgrounds. They were quiet and stoic by nature.

In any event, I never had the opportunity to ask them the “bigger questions” I would have asked later in life, as I lost my father when I was just 23 and my mother at 35. In my early twenties, I wasn’t even wise enough to ask these questions, and by my thirties, although I knew I could benefit from my mother’s wisdom, I was so busy caring for three young boys as a single parent that I didn’t have time to engage in conversations of any real depth with her. Besides, we were separated geographically, and since this time pre-dated email and cell phones, our opportunities to communicate with each other were limited. Now, all these years later, I can’t begin to count how many times throughout my life I have thought, “I wish I could ask Mom/Dad about this...” *this* being questions on a variety of topics but primarily, the topic of faith.

My parents and grandmother must have had a boatload of stories in their libraries, many of which, sadly, died with them. I have often wondered what stories they could have told me that would have been sources of inspiration and encouragement in my own faith journey, particularly through dark and difficult times.

I chose the topic of my capstone project because of my belief that the church needs to facilitate the telling of elders’ stories. But this project was really born out of my own longing for the stories that I will never hear from my family’s elders, and out of a conviction to tell *my* stories and to do whatever I can to help ensure that the stories of other elders do not die with them.

“The French moralist Joseph Joubert wrote, ‘The evening of a well-spent life brings its lamps with it.’ Old age enlightens – not simply ourselves, as important as that may be, but those around us as well.”¹ Perhaps it’s because I am on the threshold of *elderhood*,² that I am thinking

¹ Chittister, xi.

² In *Elders Rising: The Promise and Peril of Aging*, Roland Martinson proposes the concept of *elderhood* as a three-decade-long life stage comprised of three distinct periods: early elderhood, middle elderhood and late elderhood (Martinson, 66). The terms *elderhood* and *elder*, as defined by Martinson, are used throughout this paper.

more often about how our stories might enlighten those around us. It isn't that age alone dictates how many stories are in one's personal library or determines how meaningful others will find those stories to be. But elders have lived long enough to have known hardship, disappointment, and sorrow on multiple levels. Yet they have been able to withstand these adversities, due to factors such as personal resiliency, meaningful relationships, and a sustaining faith, even as they continue to face the challenges that naturally accompany the aging process. Elders indeed have many rich stories to tell. And since reflection and "making meaning" are inherent with the life stage of elders, their stories are typically accompanied by a wisdom that only comes with age.

But a key challenge is that typically, there are few opportunities for elders to share their stories. Their children and grandchildren *may* hear them, but even when these familial relationships are strong, opportunities are often missed because conversations of this nature tend not to come up in the course of day-to-day interactions. Instead, and far too often, we find ourselves in the position of having lost a cherished elder and regretting that we never had the opportunity to hear their stories or ask the questions we wish they could have answered.

How can we help ensure that younger generations can benefit from the stories of elders? It seems that churches can – and *should* – play a vital role. After all, it is not only parents who are responsible for bringing their children up in the faith; *the entire faith community bears this responsibility*, as well! We are reminded of this whenever a child (or adult) is baptized and the congregation is asked: "People of God, do you promise to support (name/s) and pray for them in their new life in Christ?"³ Thankfully, I have never witnessed a baptism yet where the response to this question has been anything other than a resounding "We do!"

³ ELW, 228.

The sharing of elders' stories can be one means through which the church helps to support and nurture the faith of younger generations. Indeed, the biblical narrative reminds us that elders have *always* been called on to give witness to God's redeeming love for the world:

*Along with shepherds and angels, Simeon and Anna, wise male and female elders representing the tribes and traditions and prophets of Israel, all confirm Jesus's identity as Messiah, give thanks for God's ongoing action, and broadcast Jesus's arrival to those waiting to know. So, too, comes the call to contemporary elders to bear witness to the presence of Christ in their lives over time and throughout their world – to carry Christian witness across the bridge from one generation to another.*⁴

Part 1: Storytelling in the Church Today

Storytelling by elders and the sharing of those stories from one generation to the next is deeply ingrained in some cultures. But my observation as a white, middle-class, Scandinavian Lutheran who has spent my entire life in midwestern urban and suburban congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (and the earlier American Lutheran Church) is that storytelling by elders in the church is quite a rare phenomenon. To clarify, elders generally share many stories *with one another* as they gather for various activities (Sunday morning coffee hour, Bible studies, elder events, etc.). *But their stories are rarely shared with people of younger generations.*

Conversations with a variety of pastors, colleagues, friends and members of the faith community have confirmed that this has been their experience, as well. Yes, elders will occasionally be asked to share their "Faith Story" during a worship service or congregational event of some sort. And this can be incredibly meaningful – both for those hearing the story and

⁴ Martinson, 48

for the one who tells it. But unfortunately, the sharing of elder stories in the church happens far too seldom.

There are probably a wide variety of reasons that younger generations are, in general, not benefitting from hearing the stories of elders. I suspect one of the primary reasons is that we, as Americans, tend to value youth far more than we value elderhood. Actually, it may be more accurate to say that we are, as a society, *obsessed* with looking young. In 2018, the U.S. market for beauty and personal care reached a staggering \$90 billion.⁵ And two years earlier, Americans spent more than \$16 billion on cosmetic plastic surgeries and minimally invasive procedures, the most the U.S. had ever spent on such operations to that point.⁶

In an article in the *New York Times Magazine*, journalist Amanda Hess points out the conflict many Americans experience when faced with the reality of growing older:

We're loath to confront the undignified lengths we will go to in our fight against aging and mortality, whether it's in the "feminine" pursuit of looking younger or the wealthy man's pursuit of life extension, which comes complete with its own ghastly para-scientific fads: intermittent fasting, blood transfusions from teenagers, human-growth-hormone injections, cryonics. We nod and agree that we should embrace our wrinkles while quietly understanding that none of us, individually, want to be the one who actually looks old.⁷

The value that Americans, by and large, place on youthfulness contrasts markedly from other cultures – such as Native American, Japanese, and many African cultures – where elders are revered, their experience affirmed, and their wisdom recognized and sought.

⁵ www.statista.com

⁶ Rossman, Sean. (2017, April 12). Americans are spending more than ever on plastic surgery. Retrieved from <https://www.usatoday.com>

⁷ Hess, Amanda. (2017, September 12). The Ever-Changing Business of "Anti-Aging." *New York Times Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/>

While it would be unfair to assume that the *majority* of younger Americans are not interested in hearing the stories of elders, the fact that we place so much value on youth cannot be overstated, nor can the probable link between our proclivity for youthfulness and the lack of storytelling by elders be overlooked. The unspoken but pervading question seems to be: “What can we learn from those who no longer have something to offer society?”

One of the dangers of negative stereotypes, as Joan Chittister points out, is that they “exaggerate isolated characteristics and ignore positive characteristics entirely,” which is true not only when the stereotype is related to age, but to virtually any other group or demographic, as well:

...older people are portrayed as slow, but not as wise or patient. We see them as ill, but not as quite in charge of their own lives. We are reminded constantly that they forget things, but not a single note is made of the fact that everyone else does as well. Worst of all, stereotypes absolutize characteristics, as if they were part and parcel of being black or being a woman or being old – or of being young, for that matter. We group people together, instead of seeing them as individuals who are full of grace, full of the spirit of life.”⁸

Another reason that younger generations may not be hearing elders’ stories is that the majority of “younger” people (i.e. any age up to retirement) are so busy with work, family, school, their children’s extra-curricular activities, church, community obligations, social commitments, and keeping up with current events, that asking an elder to share a bit of wisdom is likely not something that enters into their stream of consciousness! And even if given the opportunity, they may simply be too busy or distracted to listen.

Some people are genuinely interested in hearing the stories of elders but are hesitant to initiate a conversation with them, especially if they don’t know them well. When I asked several

⁸ Chittister, 22.

individuals who had expressed interest in hearing from elders in our congregation why they hadn't approached them, they responded with a barrage of questions: How does one even enter into such a conversation? Logistically, how could I make that happen? Where would we meet? What questions are appropriate to ask? What if the elder doesn't want to share their story? What if the opportunity doesn't present itself?

These questions underscore the fact that my church (and I would venture to say *most* churches) have not developed intentional ways for the sharing of elder stories, which leads to the obvious question: *Why not?*

One possibility may be that since the church is not immune from the values and stereotypes of the culture in which it exists, the church itself – as difficult as it is to admit – may place considerably more value on its youth than its elders. Or perhaps in light of the church's limited resources, developing ways for elders to share their stories simply does not rise to the top of the priority list. Yet another possibility is that *we simply don't know how to facilitate storytelling in our congregations.*

It is likely that all three of these factors play a role in the absence of storytelling by elders in the church. But I suspect that our lack of knowledge around how to facilitate this may be the primary stumbling block. My conversations with peers on this topic have revealed that there is not a lack of desire to make this happen but a lack of “know-how.” Even a pastor of one of the largest Lutheran churches in the Twin Cities – a congregation regarded as dynamic, creative and forward-thinking – told me they haven't yet “cracked this nut” but are actively exploring how to do so.

Part 2: The Power of Storytelling – A Two-Way Street

Stories have power. They delight, enchant, touch, teach, recall, inspire, motivate, and challenge. They help us understand. They imprint a picture in our minds. Our storytelling ability, a uniquely human trait, has been with us as long as we've been able to speak and listen. Not only do people love to tell stories, but people also love to hear stories!⁹

A number of years ago, my 84-year-old mother-in-law was the guest speaker at my “Developmental Psychology of Adults” class. We were studying the late stages of adulthood, and she had hesitantly agreed to let me interview her in front of the class. Her reluctance wasn't due to being shy; my mother-in-law *loved* talking to people and as far as I knew, was never uncomfortable in front of a group. Rather she was hesitant because she was afraid of disappointing me – and my fellow students. “I don't know what I have to offer that can be valuable to your class,” she had told me. I assured her that she had plenty to offer that would be of value. She wasn't convinced, but she trusted me enough to go along with the idea.

As we began the interview, my mother-in-law's responses were short and to the point. But within five minutes she became noticeably more relaxed, and the stories began to flow out of her. I was actually a bit surprised at how open she was about particularly painful events in her life – the tragic drowning of her 17-year-old son, the sudden death of her husband of almost 50 years, and the grief she experienced as a result of outliving all ten of her siblings in spite of the fact that she was the second oldest. When someone asked how she dealt with all that loss, she pointed to her faith in God, the support of family and friends, and the gift of humor.

My mother-in-law's stories were heartfelt and her perspectives insightful. At times, that wonderful gift of humor evoked laughter from the whole room. As I had anticipated, she clearly

⁹ Garboden, Jean. (2019, February 5). Story-telling: The Power to Transform. Retrieved from <https://truenorthelderhood.wordpress.com>

did not disappoint! But what suddenly became evident to me is how much my mother-in-law was truly enjoying herself! And then I realized why: she had an attentive audience who took genuine interest in hearing her stories and gleaning whatever nuggets of wisdom she offered. Although her own family loved her stories and sage advice, speaking to a room of strangers seemed to affirm my mother-in-law in a very different way. After we left the classroom following the interview, she talked about how much fun she had had. And then with a little smile and a twinkle in her eye she acknowledged, “Maybe the students got something out of the interview, after all!”

We all know from personal experience that stories have power – both for those hearing the story and for the one telling it. Storytelling is, after all, “...the most effective, time-tested way to transmit meaning from one human being to another...It’s how civilizations pass on their wisdom to the next generation. It’s how religions pass on the sacred teachings of their faith. And it’s how parents...transmit the values they want to impart to their children.”¹⁰

As human beings, we have an innate desire to know that our lives – and our stories – matter! The deep longing to tell our stories is evidenced by the phenomenal success of *StoryCorps*, the American nonprofit organization whose mission is “to preserve and share humanity’s stories in order to build connections between people and create a more just and compassionate world.”¹¹ According to its website:

*StoryCorps reminds the nation that every story matters and every voice counts. Since 2003, StoryCorps has given a quarter of a million Americans the chance to record interviews about their lives, to pass wisdom from one generation to the next, and to leave a legacy for the future. It is the largest single collection of human voices ever gathered. These powerful stories illustrate our shared humanity and show how much more we share in common than divides us.*¹²

¹⁰ Ditkoff, Mitch. (2017, December 6). Why Tell Stories? Retrieved from https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-tell-stories_b_8703710

¹¹ <https://storycorps.org/about/>

¹² <https://storycorps.org/discover/>

Stories are indeed powerful. The more opportunities the church can create for elders to share their stories with younger generations, the more that power is unleashed. And one never knows how the Holy Spirit will enter into the midst of it all to generate faith in the hearer! That God continues to speak to us through others is part of the divine mystery! But we can imagine that those listening to the stories of elders will be encouraged and bolstered as they hear the elder share the joys and challenges of their own faith journey.

It can be incredibly powerful, for example, to hear how God showed up in the most difficult of circumstances...to hear how the community of faith surrounded an individual in a time of significant loss...to hear that doubt is a natural part of faith and that *everyone* wonders, from time to time, where God is in the midst of the world's (or their own) pain...to hear how an individual has encountered God through Scripture or through the voice of another...to hear how knowing that God has claimed them forever has made a the difference in an individual's life.

One of the challenges the church faces, as noted earlier, is how to facilitate storytelling by elders in light of our culture's value of youthfulness. Most of us tend to think about the aging process in terms of the *losses* that accompany it. But there are many positive qualities associated with elderhood! A study undertaken by the *MacArthur Foundation Research Network on an Aging Society* found that assets such as the following increase with age:¹³

Reflected experience	Wisdom
Social values	Emotional regulation
Mentorship	Flexible time
Patience	Big-picture perspective
Storytelling	Sense of humor
Moral courage	Spiritual insight

¹³ Martinson, 82.

A quick look at this list is all it takes to see just how much elders have to offer! By this stage, for example, they have not only accumulated wisdom, spiritual insight, and a healthy perspective about what really matters in life, but they are willing to share these qualities through mentorships and storytelling – and most elders have the flexibility in their schedules to more easily do so!

I fear that unless the church commits to creating intentional ways for elders to share their stories with younger generations, we will unwittingly be joining our voices to society's reverberating message – that elders simply don't have as much to offer as younger people. The truth is, of course, that their contributions are rich beyond measure. But we may have to go to greater lengths to help others recognize this. Martinson asserts:

It's important to identify and celebrate what elders are already doing, to get the word out, to challenge the powerless old people myth, to chronicle the work of elders over time, and to inspire others to embrace their capacity to enrich their own lives and contribute to the common good.¹⁴

In his book, *Falling Upward*, author Richard Rohr talks about the wonderful sense of freedom that comes when one reaches elderhood and the desire to “give back” for the sake of future generations. Through this beautiful and compelling illustration, one can imagine the richness of elders' stories and the wisdom that can be gleaned from them:

At this stage...quite simply, my desire and effort – every day – is to pay back, to give back to the world a bit of what I have received. I now realize that I have been gratuitously given to – from the universe, from society, and from God. I try now, as Elizabeth Seton said, to “live simply so that others can simply live.” Erick Erickson calls someone at this stage a “generative” person, one who is eager and able to generate life from his or her own abundance and for the benefit of following generations. Because such people have built a good container, they are able to “contain” more and more truth, more and more neighbors, more and broader vision, more and more of a mysterious and outpouring God.¹⁵

¹⁴ Martinson, 155

¹⁵ Rohr, 121.

Of course, not every elder has the gift of words or the spiritual insight of Richard Rohr. But that is beside the point. Every person has their own story to tell, in their own words. And only God knows how God will use the power of that story in the life of the one who tells it – and in the life of the one who is privileged enough to hear it.

Part 3: The Role of the Church in Storytelling

The Christian faith powerfully undergirds the promise of elderhood, of a third, transitional productive chapter of the human life cycle. Not only is this good news for twenty-first-century elders, it is good news for faith communities as well. Congregations can turn to faithful elders for hope, inspiration, and strength. Rather than simply lamenting the growing numbers of elders in their midst, communities of faith can actively draw on their wisdom and deep faith.¹⁶

There are countless ways in which congregations could foster a culture of storytelling and facilitate the sharing of stories by elders. Of the sampling of ideas that follow, some require more effort than others. Yet none of them depend upon a full-time staff person dedicated solely to developing and implementing a robust “elderhood program.” Besides, the reality is that few congregations, unless they are large and prosperous, are likely to invest in such a position. This is why I believe it’s important to find relatively simple ways for elders’ stories to be told. Elders themselves could play a key role in this process. In fact, Martinson suggests that *elders* take the ball and run with it! “I propose that elders draw early, middle, and late elders together with children, adolescents, and emerging middle and older adults into generative conversations to explore intergenerational approaches and new ways of addressing foundational life issues.”¹⁷ Not

¹⁶ Martinson, 59-60

¹⁷ Martinson, 144

only could this address the question of who might lead this effort, but asking *elders* to take it on would help ensure ownership while affirming their leadership capabilities.

Storytelling through mentoring

One way in which the stories of elders can be shared is through *mentoring*. When we hear this term, we usually imagine an older individual paired with a younger person for the purpose of the elder offering their guidance, encouragement and acquired wisdom. And this is certainly one aspect of mentoring. Elders, by virtue of their vast life experiences have many “life lessons” they can share on a wide variety of topics – work and play, family and friendships, successes and failures, hopes and dreams, faith and doubt.

Joan Chittister affirms the value that elders can offer: “We are the only icons of aging that younger people will get to meet. What we show them as we go gives them a model of what they, too, can strive for. We show them the way to the fullness of life.”¹⁸

It should be noted, though, that elders can also benefit from the mentoring relationship! Parker Palmer cherishes his experiences working with people decades younger than him. “Without these relationships across the generations,” he says, “my life would have been so much poorer, and my aging would have been deprived of a source of vitality.”¹⁹ But the young often underestimate – or are completely unaware of – the gifts they have for elders:

*They rarely understand, for example, that when they approach an older person for mentoring, they assuage our fear that we’re over the hill and out of the game, that younger folks regard us as irrelevant. Few people in their twenties know the power of saying to someone like me – who’s seen twenty nearly four times – ‘I want to learn from you.’ The young also bring gifts of energy, vision, and hope that hard experience has stolen from me, often without my knowing it.*²⁰

¹⁸ Chittister, Joan. *The Gift of Years: Growing Older Gracefully*. (Katonah, NY: BlueBridge, 2008), 23-24.

¹⁹ Palmer, Parker J. *On the Brink of Everything: Grace, Gravity, and Getting Old*. (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2018), 31.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 35-36

Mentoring can take place in a variety of ways and for various periods of time. One elder I spoke to told me about being a mentor, along with her husband, to a younger couple at their church. There were four other couples (in their sixties and seventies), each paired with a younger couple (who ranged from mid-thirties to early fifties). Everyone had committed to a 10-session Bible study during which they met on a weekly basis. At each session, after an initial time for refreshments, informal conversation, and an overview of the evening's topic, they broke into their mentor partnerships and discussed the readings they had completed for that session.

There were thought-provoking questions around the biblical text and additional questions that helped evoke deeper conversation and elicit meaningful stories. The elder I spoke to said that she and her husband were able to share some of the heartaches and struggles they had experienced in their marriage and family and how ultimately, God brought them out on the other side. When she told me this, I remarked that their testimony to God's faithfulness must have been a powerful thing for the younger couple to hear. She responded candidly:

Yes – I think it was. But it was also a powerful experience for my husband and me just to be reminded again that God has always been there for us! And just so you know, through those ten weeks together, I think we learned as much from our younger couple as they did from us!

Mentoring can also be very meaningful in the context of Confirmation, youth or young adult faith formation. In our church, the final phase of the process for Confirmation (or the Affirmation of Baptism) is called "Own Your Faith" and is explained as follows:

Your parents did their part to fulfill the promises they made at your baptism to the best of their ability. Now it's your turn. In a sense, you have been "borrowing" your parents' faith while you've been a child. Now that you are entering high school it is time for you to step back from it all and ask yourself a very important question, "Is this really MY faith?" "Do I really believe this, or is this just something my parents wanted me to do?"²¹

²¹ <http://www.grace-andover.org/get-connected/youth-ministries/own-your-faith/>

As part of “Own Your Faith,” each 9th grader is paired with a mentor of his or her own choosing. It could be a grandparent, aunt or uncle, or an elder in the church who has volunteered to meet with the student on a monthly basis to grapple with thought-provoking questions related to the life of faith. (See appendix for sample questions.) The student and mentor both benefit from this relationship, personally and in terms of their faith development, and these relationships are often sustained well into the future.

Storytelling in worship

Elders could be called upon to share their faith story in the context of worship. This might take place during the Sunday morning worship service or perhaps as part of mid-week worship during the seasons of Advent or Lent.

Erika Marksbury, senior pastor of First Baptist Church of McMinnville, Oregon, tells about her congregation learning to integrate storytelling and testimony in worship. The practice began as part of the church’s 150th anniversary in 2017. But as people heard others share their stories, they have been inspired to share their own, and so the practice has continued.²²

Marksbury explains that it was easy for the congregation to see its history as a story God had been telling the McMinnville community for 150 years. But it was more challenging for the congregation to think of itself as part of the ongoing story that God is still telling:

*Our own lives, faith journeys, weekly worship, committee work, volunteer service, and dinner group conversation are all, also, the story of this church, right now. They are stories of formation and growth, forgiveness and reconciliation, intimacy and community, challenge and call. They are stories of good news, and we are learning to tell them.*²³

²² Huyser-Honig, Joan. (2018, June 26). Storytelling and Testimony in Christian Worship. Retrieved from <https://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/storytelling-and-testimony-in-christian-worship>

²³ Ibid

First Baptist has found that telling stories within the context of the worship experience has had the broadest reach. The storytelling theme is woven into sermons, songs, quilting, testimonies and other worship activities throughout the whole year.²⁴

Storytelling through newsletters, devotional booklets, and websites

Needless to say, regardless of how inspiring it may be to hear someone tell their faith story during a worship service, many people (elders included!) will never feel comfortable sharing theirs in front of a large (or even small) group of people. How can the church help ensure that *their* stories are heard? One way is to capture these elders' stories and publish them in newsletters, devotional booklets or on the church website. Some people will need no prompting to write their faith story. Others may find it helpful to follow a template or respond to guided questions. Still others will prefer to be interviewed while the interviewer or third person captures their responses.

Whatever the process, publishing elders' stories in print would not only provide a means of capturing those stories that might not be told orally; they also have the potential to reach a broad audience and can be referred to on more than one occasion.

Storytelling through oral history interviews

Lisa Gollin, an ethnographer who specializes in oral history interviews with elders on cultural practices, offers a step-by-step guide for interviewing elders and eliciting their stories. "As our connections to the past and guides for the future," Gollin says, "elders offer us an

²⁴ Ibid

invaluable gift by sharing their life experiences, knowledge and insights.”²⁵ The benefits of these elder interviews, she says, extend far and wide:

There are a myriad of benefits for the senior storyteller, family and community members who are the beneficiaries of the audio or video recording, book, cookbook, family tree, tribute, website or other material that comes out of an oral history interaction. Interviewing itself is a fun and intimate activity that strengthens the bonds between storytellers and those asking questions. It can reduce an elder’s sense of isolation and provide an opportunity, particularly for those struggling with memory loss, to review life experiences and revitalize one’s sense of self. Research has shown that a strong family narrative may be the secret ingredient to more effective, resilient and happy families. As reported in the New York Times, children who know more about their family’s history – the peaks and valleys tend to do better when faced with their own challenges, and enjoy a greater sense of control over their lives.²⁶

Oral history interviews could be an exciting way to hear elders’ stories and, if the elder has a long history with the congregation, such an interview could also provide rich insights into God’s continued work in and through the community of faith.

Storytelling through games

Who could resist an invitation to a “Dinner & Game Night” event? This is one idea for bringing people of various ages together with the intent of creating space for them to hear each other’s stories. I recently learned of two games that I think could be very helpful for this purpose. One of the games, *LifeStories*, was apparently popular years ago and the other, *The Storymatic Rememory* appeared on the market just recently. Both games, as their titles imply, are intended to elicit stories. *LifeStories* achieves this through the use of cards with such memory-joggers as:

²⁵ Gollin, Lisa. (2014, September). The Power of Sharing Life Stories: A Step by Step Guide and Resources for Interviewing Our Elders. Retrieved from <https://www.senioradvisor.com/blog/2014/09/the-power-of-sharing-life-stories-a-step-by-step-guide-and-resources-for-interviewing-our-elders/>

²⁶ Ibid.

- Name something or someone who influenced you in choosing your vocation/work.
- Tell about a time you were shown an act of kindness that you didn't expect.
- What is a favorite memory you have of a grandparent?
- What effect does nature have on your faith?
- Tell about a time when you were angry with God.

The Storymatic Rememory game also uses cards, but the cards do not contain specific questions. Instead, the player draws one card from each of three different stacks and tells a story based on the cards she draws. The combinations are almost endless, but as an example, a player's three cards might be: *grandparent*, *summer*, and *celebration*. What memory comes to mind based on these words?

I was curious to test the effectiveness of this game, so I recently invited four women (all elders) from my Bible study group to play it while I observed. It was amazing to see how quickly each person was able to think of a story based on the cards she had drawn. Only once did one of the women have trouble integrating all three words. Since there are no hard and fast rules for this game (the objective, after all, is to uncover stories), the other three women gave her permission to throw one of the cards out and tell a story based on the two that remained in her hand.

This game was fun, engaging, and effective at eliciting many stories that would probably not have been told otherwise. Some of the stories were poignant and others humorous, and all of them gave us more insight into those telling them.

Storytelling through exploring the Bible

A former colleague told me that before her congregation presented new Bibles to their third graders, the Bibles were given to the parents (without their child knowing) with a request to underline passages that were especially meaningful to them. The parents were also invited, if

they so wished, to ask other significant people in their child's life – e.g. older siblings, grandparents, and baptismal sponsors – to do the same. Each person used a different color pen, and the names of those who underlined passages (and their corresponding colors) were listed on a page inside the Bible.

I found this to be a very moving practice, and I imagine that it leads to some wonderful conversations about faith as a child asks his grandfather, for example, why a particular passage is so meaningful to him. I wonder if this practice could be adapted for use as an intergenerational activity in the church. Following a meal, participants could gather in groups of four or five and each could talk about a scripture passage they find especially meaningful to, questions they have about a specific biblical text or story, or a time they felt God speaking to them through scripture.

Another possible activity around the theme of “exploring the Bible” might be for everyone to read a story together and then, in small groups, talk about what stood out for them. Questions could prompt the discussion. For example, if the story was the parable of the Prodigal Son, the questions might include: *When in your life have you felt like the prodigal son? The older brother? The father?*

Obviously, consideration needs to be given to the activities and questions to ensure they are appropriate for the youngest participants. That said, I think conversations that spring from the biblical narrative have great potential for eliciting rich and meaningful faith stories from elders that can profoundly impact those who hear them.

Storytelling through working together

There are many possibilities to hear the stories of elders through intergenerational activities sponsored by the church. The more events there are that welcome people of all ages,

the more likely that stories will naturally be told as elders, children, and everyone in-between spend time together and build relationships with one another. Working together to plant a garden, clean up a local park, or prepare and serve a meal at church are a few examples of activities that could draw children, adults, and elders all together while providing opportunities for stories to be shared.

“Organic storytelling”

Pat Hendricks, Director of Adult Faith Formation at Nativity Lutheran Church in St. Anthony, Minnesota, has found that stories seem to naturally unfold as long as the right “space” is provided – a casual and safe environment; a few thought-provoking questions; and last but not least, hot coffee and a cookie or pastry to go along with it!²⁷

The church’s gathering area, adjacent to the sanctuary, provides a warm, welcoming space while offering plenty of room for people to congregate around tables. Occasionally on Sunday mornings while some people are worshiping in the sanctuary, others will gather in this space to discuss questions about faith and life. Hendricks practices asking good, open-ended questions, such as:

- What were some of the blessings/challenges you experienced this past week?
- Where have you seen God at work recently?
- How is your faith different today that it was five years ago?

Stories are also told in the context of events where story-telling isn’t even the main objective! For example, in response to requests for help in getting organized, Hendricks arranged a three-part series on “de-cluttering” and brought in an expert for the first two sessions. The last session featured a panel of Nativity members who had recently undertaken the huge task of

²⁷ At my request, Pat Henricks graciously met with me at Nativity Lutheran Church on April 23, 2019.

going through their parents' belongings (either because their parents had died or because they had transitioned to a facility offering more care).

Sixty people came to glean tips on de-cluttering and becoming better organized. But in the process, as they talked about not wanting to give up their mother's china, or their children's artwork, or their grandfather's rusty tools, rich and meaningful stories were shared.

Congregations can provide activities to foster well-springs of quality relationships among the generations, trusting relationships that transmit faith and enrich the quality of life for both the young and elders In a world of often age-segregated daily existence faith communities are well situated to regularly set the messy tables where dialogue and common action can bring all generations together to promote their common good. These intergenerational activities and the resulting relationship building can help congregations celebrate elders' lives as well as promote stronger ministry both for elders and for the larger mission of the congregation.²⁸

Conclusion

“The relationship between elders and their congregations clearly holds great promise for enriching elders' lives and strengthening elders' congregations.”²⁹ Clearly, one of the primary means by which we can nurture relationships between elders and others in the church is through storytelling. For this reason, I believe it is critically important that church leaders commit to fostering a storytelling culture and to facilitating a variety of ways for individual stories to be woven into the tapestry of the congregation's larger story.

²⁸ Martinson, 262.

²⁹ Martinson, 253.

Recently, I preached on a text about forgiveness. And in that sermon, I told my own story about learning to forgive a supervising pastor who had sexually assaulted me some 30 years ago. In preparing my sermon, I began to doubt if this was the right thing to do. This would be the first time I would ever tell my story publicly. Would I have the courage and emotional stamina to do it? In light of the “Me, too” movement, would it be construed as political? Would my story conjure up painful memories for some in the congregation? Would it be harmful to the church to reveal that the perpetrator was a member of the clergy?

I sought the counsel of our wise, compassionate senior pastor. I don’t think I’ll ever forget his words: “What people are hungry for more than anything else in the church is *authenticity*.” That statement helped me to see my fears in a new light. Since I preached that sermon, several men have affirmed me for telling my story, and more than a handful of women have expressed their gratitude because, they said, hearing my story reminded them that they are not alone. As a soon-to-be “early elder,” I told a story that apparently had a powerful impact not only on people of my generation but younger generations, as well. I am humbled and grateful.

My senior pastor is right. People are hungry for authenticity. And if we, as leaders in the church, can be as authentic as possible – as we preach, as we teach, as we work side by side with members of the faith community – we will be helping to create an environment where people feel free to tell their stories. And as they do, God will surely use them in ways we cannot even imagine.

*O God, from my youth you have taught me,
And I still proclaim your wondrous deeds.
So even to old age and gray hairs,
O God, do not forsake me,
Until I proclaim your might
To all the generations to come.*

(Psalm 71:17-18, NRSV)

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APPENDIX

(From *Own Your Faith*, Grace Lutheran Church – Andover, Minnesota)

February 2019: The Big Idea - Who is Jesus for you?

The writers of the Apostle's Creed responded to the question "Who is Jesus" with the following:

"I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried; he descended into Hell. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead."

This month students and mentors will spend time wondering about who Jesus is for them, what their relationship with Jesus is like and who Jesus is for the world. We will seek understanding by examining Biblical texts and hearing personal stories from people and their relationship with Jesus.

Watch the videos of Brene Brown, Bono, and Nadia Bolz-Webber who each talk about who Jesus is to them. Students and mentors answer the following:

- What of these three videos did you like the most? Why is that?
- Who do you think described their understanding of Jesus best?
- What one made the most sense to you?
- If you could ask Brene, Bono or Nadia a question, what would it be?
- What video presented the most "problematic" understanding of Jesus?

I am...

In the Gospel John, Jesus gives us 7 statements proclaiming who he is to and for the world through metaphors. They are known as the seven "I am" statements. Look at six of them below. These statements can be interpreted in many ways. What can we learn about Jesus from each of these six statements?

Some Questions to discuss at the end:

- What does it mean to follow Jesus today? Is that different from Biblical times? 1000 years ago? 100 years ago?
- What did you think of Jesus when you were a kid?
- How has your understanding of Jesus changed?
- What "I am" statement do you like the most?
- What gives the best understanding of who Jesus is?

The Most Important Question You'll Ever Be Asked...
Luke 9:18-20

Once, when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" They answered, "John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen." He said to them, "But who do *you* say that I am?" Peter answered, "The Messiah of God."

Now, how would you answer that question?

Who do you say that Jesus is, and why does it matter?