



THIS IS MY STORY...THIS IS MY SONG!

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Twelve of us sat comfortably in big comfy chairs and couches listening to each one tell his or her spiritual story. It was a small group retreat in a lovely bed and breakfast in an historic, alluring seaside community. Our first night together began with after dinner snacks and cold soda. A few attendees were friends with one another; several had little or no knowledge of the group gathered, so we began our time with friendly hellos and introductions. We introduced our one and only activity for the first night together, telling our stories, to begin the self-disclosing process of "getting to know you." We suspected that a few attendees might be a bit shy in sharing their lives with a new group of people, a natural dynamic, so we assured them that it would be a fun activity. Passing out 8.5x14" white paper and piles of colored pens, we invited the attendees to describe four or five spiritual highs and lows in their lives. The idea was well-received, and a sense of enthusiasm permeated the group.

Before dismissing them to create their masterpieces, I whipped out my best attempt at art, a production of strange looking stick people, a slight resemblance of a church, cross, and a not so realistic sketch of Christ. An artist I am not! Being the retreat leader and modeling the assignment was an important step. A sense of safety suddenly prevailed. "That I can do!" was the response, and off they went to their areas of choice.

Twenty minutes later, we gathered back to our comfortable spaces. Again, I briefly repeated my spiritual journey experiences. I discussed the strange-looking stick people and the numerous question marks for all the unanswered questions that had plagued me and filled me with fears. The ups, downs, discoveries, joys, and sorrows through my pilgrimage into and throughout my discovery of faith in Jesus Christ were briefly described. It was the beginning of a powerful night of sharing, telling our stories, glorifying God, and becoming encouraged sojourners on a pilgrimage. The next hour or so was filled with laughter, tears, amazement, suspense, and the joy of hearing how God had intervened in the life of each person in the room. (I learned a lot about a few people that I thought I knew really well.) Being from a large city church, there was significant diversity among our attendees. I was thrilled with the Asian-looking stick people some had used to illustrate their lives. It was such fun! Many stories were illustrated with magnificent art and many (like mine) with simple lines but powerful stories. Suddenly, we had bonded through discovery and self-disclosure that would motivate and sustain the remaining weekend and into the future.

One of the important goals and necessities of creating healthy, authentic Christian community in the small group arena is to provide time and encouragement for people to tell their stories. One of the dangers and prevalent scenarios of many small groups is the lack of meaningful, personal knowledge of other group members. Members tend to wear masks with the fear of not being accepted if others know their struggles. The small group functions as a learning venue only and remains in the first stage of group life, superficial in self-disclosure. Remaining in stage one of personal sharing prevents the trust level from becoming strong. The environment does not lend itself to truth-telling, and accountability for blending belief and behavior, where truth and life intersect, rarely happens.

The goal of your small group is to have each person tell their life story. This happens best through initial spiritual autobiographies and on going, well-constructed Bible study questions. If you do not have the opportunity for a weekend retreat where many stories can be heard, allowing one or two members to share each week begins the process. If the focus of your small group time together is only answering thoughtful questions pertaining to the Scripture of your study, personal lives and stories are left untold. As your group travels around the bases of group development, telling life stories becomes a critical exercise in motivating the members in achieving significant group spiritual maturity. In remembering to be sensitive in the questions you ask, a group member will share safe answers at first and eventually take a risk with the more personal and uncomfortable questions. Whatever the case may be, telling your story allows others in the group to receive a snapshot from the photo album of your life.

People love to tell their stories, particularly when they know they are in a safe and accepting environment! The younger generation, Busters and Bridgers, are particularly interested in hearing and sharing. Building meaningful relationships are a priority in seeking out how they will spend the little free time represented in their busy lives. What an opportunity for removing masks, letting others get to know the real you, and to be encouraged by people with similar stories. When group members (including the leaders) have struggled, endured grief, trusted God, and rejoiced in God's presence, regardless of the outcome, an awesome life story develops resulting in a powerful testimony to the faithfulness of God.

OPPORTUNITIES TO “TELL STORIES”

Sharing questions

Sharing questions should begin a Bible study time. They are basically questions that help others get to know each other. There are many resources available for sharing question ideas. Initially, it is fun and informative to ask safe questions such as “favorite foods, items you would grab if your house was burning down, or how you spend your day or leisure time.” This is information that helps to shape your story. Continually using that level of question will not, however, move your group into a more trusting, truth-telling environment that would include their likes, dislikes, experiences, goals, struggles, and dreams. There needs to be a consistent and natural progression from the safe questions about a person’s history into the more risk-taking questions about their present or future situation that help people see where their stories intersect God’s story. For instance, if you are studying Luke 15 and want to open with a sharing question that warms people up for meaningful discussion, instead of asking what their favorite sport is, try asking a question like:

- *Think of a time when you were really lost! Briefly describe the emotions you experienced.*

Not everyone will respond, and only a few need to answer. Now you have not only had fun hearing stories and learned a bit more about a group member’s life, but you have made a segue into the theme of Luke 15, the experience of being lost. Using the word “briefly” or giving a short example yourself will help send a message that you are not looking for long responses. If the group is developing a higher trust level, you might ask:

- *To whom do you better relate - the prodigal son or the older brother? Why?*

You have asked a question that raises the risk of self-disclosure and truth telling, moving your group to increased intimacy as they relate their life story to God’s story.

Observation and interpretation questions

Many guidebook questions omit interesting, truth-revealing, well-constructed sharing questions. Make an effort to include your own ideas and disperse them throughout the discussion as you discover and respond to God’s truth. Observing places, people, time passage, and conversations in Scripture allows powerful personal interaction. Common questions include the who, what, where, when, why, and how about God’s Word and often leave out personal interaction from group participation. Try asking story-telling questions like:

- *How would you have reacted to this comment Jesus made if you had been one of His listeners? In what way can you respond today to the question or comment Jesus made to the group?*
- *What does the author want you to understand in this passage? Is there a similar problem you are facing in your life today? If you feel comfortable, please briefly share the situation.*

Personal opinions and experiences are bound to be shared, and the group should continue to mature through the stages of growth in a truth-telling, safe, but accountable atmosphere. This often happens by storytelling!

Application questions

One of the great weaknesses of many small group meetings is being able to stay on track with the goals and purposes of the group life. If you have designated times for specific group ingredients like fellowship, prayer, and discussion and do not watch the clock, segments are bound to be neglected. Often groups do not have enough time to drive home the application of the Scripture. It is critical that the “so what” or the potential impact of the Scripture in the lives of the group members is included. Ask story-telling questions like:

- *What one thing will you do differently this week because you have studied this Scripture? In what way will that one step help you with some of the concerns you recently expressed to us as a group?*
- *Interact with the word “lost.” In what way are you feeling lost this week?*

You have asked effective sharing questions that help people to tell their stories. By increasing the risk in sharing questions, members continue telling their stories concerning how God is working in their lives. However, it takes a trusting environment, however!

Spiritual Autobiographies

Try using a guidebook such as *Spiritual Storytelling*, by Richard Peace, in which each group member is encouraged to revisit and record his/her spiritual pilgrimage. These spiritual autobiographies can be shared in the group meetings over a period of time, and it is good preparation for being able to share the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit outside of the group setting. These can be as simple as time lines or as intense as serious creative drawings. In either case, they will be powerful story-telling tools. Try utilizing the four or five spiritual highs and lows through drawings such as described earlier in the small group retreat example.

People like to tell their stories! Give your group ample opportunity to build this exciting and powerful element into your group time. Remember that small group gatherings are not just opportunities to accumulate knowledge of the Scriptures, but opportunities for members to share their stories about how they have interacted and have been challenged by God’s Word and the life transformation they have experienced. Storytelling moves groups through knowing, loving, serving, admonishing, and celebrating one another, the attributes for developing an authentic spiritual community that glorifies God.