

Making sense of the pandemic's effect on us

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With more than half a million deaths in this country alone, who has not been touched by the COVID-19 pandemic?

The unseen lines of connection have been skewed or even severed as our once familiar communities have been crippled. In the aftermath, there's a deep need to rebuild the bridges that connect us to one another.

As the social rules of personal distancing are lifted and we emerge in an altered world, what can we do to make sense of this very weird year?

One method of rebuilding our communities is through the power of intentional narrative practices—telling our stories.

Telling our stories

All of life is a story. Story is a way of seeing, a way of organizing experience, and a way of making sense of life. We are a meaning-making people who experience the pendulum of life between experience and reflection. Things happen, and we ponder their meaning. When significant events occur, we go deep, seeking to know why those events have such power in us.

How do we interpret the unplanned events that shape and redirect our lives? What happens when the normal course of life is altered? What do we do with the interruption that takes over our life's story?

It can be the simplest of things. It can be the intrusion no one sees coming. No matter. When life's direction is broken, the whole of life takes a new

turn.

James Loder, professor of pastoral theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, was known for his research about convictional moments—any event that forced an inner change in outlook or commitment. He came to describe these unexpected events as “transforming moments.”

Loder experienced a mystical encounter with the divine as he lingered between life and death that marked his life from that moment forward. This event became a transforming moment that altered his outlook, his willingness to follow the mysterious promptings of the slender threads, and led him down paths he never before would have followed in his inner world of perceiving.

Some have been only minimally affected by the pandemic, while others have had deep experiences, so deep they have been changed. The past and the future met at the intersection of viral suffering and the threat of death, and they are rebuilding their lives.

We’re all archaeologists of our stories, mining them for meaning. We’re cartographers of a past life making maps of the journey we’ve taken, connecting all the dots as we’re able to understand. They are the broken shards, fragmented remembrances memory has left to our care. Telling our stories helps connect the fragments and give them meaning.

Listen to your life

In his memoir *Now and Then*, Frederick Buechner describes the invitation to explore our stories this way: “Listen to your life. All moments are key moments.”

Listen to your life. Take in the extraordinary commonness of all those stories, not in the hope of inflating them into memories that did not actually

happen, but to draw closer to them in the hope of plunging their depths and consequently to deepen the stories.

Buechner's invitation is extended to us all, for those who are curious enough to explore them. Buechner sees this task clearly: "It seems to me that no matter who you are, and no matter how eloquent or otherwise, if you tell your story with sufficient candor and concreteness, it will be an interesting story and in some sense a universal story."

Forming a reflection group

If you wish to explore the meaning of this past year and a half, you could form a reflection group that shares your wish to explore your experiences.

- Commit to the process and to one another.

Make a clear commitment to engage this with purpose. Clarify the commitment: When and where will we meet? Perhaps the group could commit to a series of conversations—three to four gatherings—to give the process a chance to succeed.

- Adhere to the Parker Palmer agreements.

I recommend using what many informally call the Parker Palmer Rules for group conversations: "No Fixing, No Saving, No Advising, No Setting Anyone Straight."

Palmer's book, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward the Undivided Life*, is aimed squarely at groups that wish to share their stories with one another in ways that advocate for greater listening and understanding.

- Practice asking "not knowing," or curious, questions.

A storyteller tells a tale, and miraculously, we all become expert observers. No matter the complexity of the story and the dilemma the storyteller

faces, we have all the answers.

Quite simply, taking a not-knowing position is asking curious questions that have no preconceived ideas or theories about what outcome might be achieved.

The power of taking a not-knowing position is the nature of the conversation remains open to the storyteller to explore new alternative meanings. Stories are given room to thicken, deepened by using curious questions, rather than shut down by solutions with little meaning.

- Seek the “relentless optimism” that supports the narrative practice.

Relentless optimism is a stated goal that the one sharing can seek to understand their concerns, aided by a wish to find outcomes where one might experience growth and recognize a hopeful sense of maturity.

This atmosphere of optimism is based on the notion our stories may be challenging, complicated and daunting to our sense of wholeness.

An intentional narrative practice is any opportunity a community takes that gives time and space for people to gather and tell their stories. The gift of community is nurtured and strengthened when we tell one another our stories.

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