

# [Article] Bible Storytelling and Healing Communities

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## Introduction

As Oral Strategies specialists with the Seed Company, my husband and I work with people in Asia, Ethiopia, and the Pacific to train teams of mother-tongue storytellers from communities who do not yet have access to the Bible in their language. During story-crafting sessions, storytellers internalize Bible stories through visualization exercises and literary analysis, thereby moving beyond merely reciting a memorized text. After crafting the stories according to their cultural style of oral communication, the teams return home to tell the stories as part of a variety of ministry settings, with goals of evangelism, discipleship, worship, Bible education, training other storytellers, and engaging children and youth in church activities and multilingual education classes. Later in this article, I will discuss the Esther Projects, which focus on women training women as storytellers to give them opportunities to be involved in ministry and grow in their faith.



A storyteller from the Ubir people of Papua New Guinea  
(Photo by Jim Stahl)

Over the years, we have seen Bible storytelling lead to physical, emotional, spiritual, and relational healing for individuals and communities. In most cases, the teams organize supportive communities that bring people



together from different Christian denominations, languages, and ethnicities, and sometimes even religions.<sup>1</sup>

Our challenge is twofold: equipping these storytellers with the background knowledge to identify people who are suffering, and then providing them with Bible storytelling tools to help these sufferers on the path of healing. With this end in mind, I write this article for Bible storytellers all over the world, with the hope of introducing them to the theory behind the power of storytelling, the structure of personal stories, and the methods we use to support others at the intersection of stories and healing.

## Power of storytelling

Most people tell stories, at least informally, because people enjoy both telling and hearing stories. Stories grab our attention and are easy to recall. Tapping into this primary human mode of sharing information and inspiring the imagination, we tell stories

- to establish relationships and build community. We communicate in a personal way when we share our stories, and in the process we build trust and empathy with each other.
- to share what is important to us and what we don't want to forget. We tell stories to educate others about our social values, expectations, and collective wisdom (Danoff 2006).
- to make sense of what confuses or troubles us. Humans search for answers to how the world came into being and why it is the way it is. In this search, storytelling can help us find resolution and healing (Thompson 2010, xiv).

Many people around the world, whether Christians or not, include stories from the Bible as part of their repertoire.

### Storytelling establishes relationships and builds community

We not only tell and retell stories, but we are actually *living* our stories together with everyone with whom we share similar events or experiences (Schank 1995, 12). We rehearse or retell significant stories at family gatherings to reestablish our bonds, whether those stories bring us joy or remind us of painful times. When we meet new people, we tell stories about our past to cultivate new relationships, and we live new experiences together that unite us through common stories. Depending on how close a relationship becomes, we may reach a point where the mere mention of a key phrase—"the bike ride," or "the time you ordered

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<sup>1</sup> See Stahl 2016.

scrapple for lunch”—triggers everyone’s memory of the story, connecting those thoughts to the current situation. During times of national celebration, such as an independence day or a national leader’s birthday, people retell the historical stories that bind a nation together.

The stories of Jesus’s death and resurrection serve as identity stories binding Christians together into a community of believers. Many church traditions accompany the sacrament of communion with telling the story of the Passover feast Jesus celebrated with his disciples the night he was betrayed. Likewise, the retelling of the Christmas and Easter stories forms a significant part of a Christian’s faith, connecting Christians around the world. In the United States, Bible stories have become foundational to culture even beyond the Christian community. Expressions taken from biblical stories permeate everyday idiomatic American English: “The handwriting is on the wall,” “He’s acting like a good Samaritan,” “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

### **Share what is important and what we don’t want to forget**

Every person maintains a repertoire of stories that can be told and retold, and since people tend to tell stories about what’s important to them, their stories are good indicators of their values. People may tell their children about ancestors who achieved success according to family or social values, such as the first ancestor to receive a college degree; other family lore may be kept hidden, or told as warnings. The fables people tell children reflect the values of society, such as the lessons of “Snow White” that demonstrate the benefits of hard work, or good triumphing over evil. As the United States struggles with racism, some people remind us of the stories of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks. Such hero stories inspire people, influencing them to change the way they live.

The Bible is full of stories of God’s love for his creation and his strategy of reconciliation for a creation that has been spoiled by sin. Jesus’s parables of the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan are popular stories among Christians and non-Christians alike. Many people are captivated by the Bible stories that fill them with hope in a troubled and difficult world.

### **Make sense of what confuses or troubles us**

Cognitive scientist Kendall Haven says that the human mind struggles with dissonance and will continue to process a story containing this dissonance, searching for a resolution that makes sense (35). Consider evidence of this behavior when people share stories that begin “I saw the most *incredible* thing today,” or “You won’t believe how *bizarre* my experience was today.” One way people elucidate meaning from confusion is to retell

the story, each time adjusting it to include details or alternative perspectives that may shed new light on the issue. For example, people have told and retold their stories of the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, seeking resolution as they work through the pain of loss and the questions of survival.

People often use Bible stories to work out how to respond to the challenging situations in their lives. The story of the Good Samaritan might provide direction for someone unsure how to respond to people who use ethnic stereotypes maliciously. A pastor was called into a prison to speak with a young man who was despondent to the point of not eating. He shared the parable of the Prodigal Son, a reminder of God's amazing grace toward those who struggle with a sense of failure or condemnation from others. The young man responded for the first time in weeks. This same story brought relief to a woman battling anger toward a brother who had gotten in trouble gambling.

On the other hand, some stories in the Bible seem unsettling, such as the story of God calling Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, or the account of Jesus responding to the Syro-Phoenician woman in a manner that questions whether or not to help her. Even as they struggle to reconcile the images in the stories with their understanding of a loving and just God, people continue to tell these stories and reflect on the mystery and unpredictable character of Jesus. These challenging stories may even reassure people of God's enduring compassion, giving them hope that he understands the struggles of life today.



A storyteller from the Banna people of Ethiopia  
(Photo by Jim Stahl)

### Structure of personal stories of pain and difficulties

Scientific understandings of the mind support everyday observations that storytelling helps people make sense of what troubles them. Cognitive scientists tell us that the human brain comprises a variety of centers that keep the body functioning: feeling emotions, solving problems, innovating, communicating, allowing for impulsive reactions to certain stimuli, and carrying out all the

other amazing capabilities of human beings. Humans function best when the neural networks between the various centers work correctly, but trauma may disrupt these connections. Of particular concern, a gap may



form between the factual and emotional processing aspects of our brain, or unhealthy pathways may be established, leaving the person prone to anxiety and rehearsing unhealthy messages in his or her mind. Storytelling provides one way toward healing.

Curt Thompson writes that “One of the wonderfully mysterious outcomes of storytelling and listening is their capacity to enable our . . . modes of processing to integrate” (2010, 137). He goes on to indicate the healing importance of being able to tell the story of pain to an empathetic listener: “A person who listens empathetically and responsively as someone else tells his or her story is able to validate the storyteller and, through questions and musing, arouse that individual’s curiosity so he or she will consider alternative ways to imagine his or her story” (137).

The process of telling personal, difficult stories influences the transformation of the storytellers themselves. But it takes effort to shape the stories to avoid communicating only scandal or self-congratulations (Niemi and Ellis 2006, 21–23). The storyteller decides whether to tell a traumatic story as a comedy that includes lighthearted moments, or as a tragedy that focuses primarily on the pain. The storyteller also bears the responsibilities of not overwhelming the listener with too much raw emotion and bringing the story to an appropriate resolution, whether testifying to deliverance or endurance.

The storyteller’s choices in telling a difficult story shed light on personal transformation. In *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness and Ethics*, Arthur Frank explains six structures commonly found in telling difficult personal stories, understanding that the shape and content of a story shifts with each telling. Although Frank is primarily addressing incidents of physical illnesses and the accompanying emotional and psychological issues, his conclusions are also appropriate for issues related to emotional and psychological challenges without physical illness:

- **Chaos Narrative.** The storyteller expresses raw emotions and fragmented events with little coherence. For some people caught in this type of experience, the season passes and they learn to structure their narrative in another way. For others, the chaos does not end.
- **Restitution Narrative.** Some people may adopt the narrative of the institution from which they are seeking help. For example, they may describe a doctor’s prognosis and treatment plan but not include the personal details. Some may give what they feel to be the appropriate “church” explanation for the situation in which they find themselves.

- **Quest Narrative.** In telling their stories, some people search for meaning for their suffering. They reflect on their experience to find the purpose for troubles they faced. They may be eager to share the lessons they have learned so that others are spared what they suffered.
- **Life-as-Normal Narrative.** The person narrates his or her life as if there is no problem.
- **Borrow Narrative.** The teller shares personal experience by identifying with and telling another person's narrative.
- **Broken Narrative.** Some people may be so broken they are unable to share their own story and need somebody else to help them tell it.

Guided by Frank's categories of personal stories, listeners can identify clues about the stage of the person's healing, and then come alongside the person to take steps toward promoting healing. For example, when people are able to begin telling their difficult stories as a quest narrative, they are struggling to find purpose behind the pain. This process requires telling and retelling the story and cannot be rushed or given a deadline for completion. (See the Appendix for more details on how to interact with storytellers within each kind of story structure.)

### **Storytelling and resiliency**

Many things—including natural disasters, poverty, illness, loss of loved ones, conflict, and abuse—can have a detrimental effect on people's emotional and spiritual well-being. Before we address the question of how storytelling, and in particular Bible storytelling, may affect our emotional or spiritual health, we'll look at what experts have discovered about people who have successfully survived extremely difficult circumstances.

Research shows that several factors contribute to the human capacity for developing resiliency, or the ability to adjust to change and regain stability in crisis. Emmy E. Werner, a developmental psychiatrist in the 1950s, with a team from the University of California, Berkeley, conducted a 40-year study of children with alcoholic parents, discovering that a tight-knit community, stable role models, and a strong belief in the ability to solve problems helped the children succeed (Oaklander 2015, 38).

Steven Southwick, professor of psychiatry at Yale School of Medicine, and Dennis Charney of Icahn School of Medicine, also developed a list of tips for becoming resilient, including these top four:

- develop a core set of beliefs that nothing can shake,
- try to find meaning in whatever stressful or traumatic thing has happened,

- try to maintain a positive outlook, and
- take cues from someone who is especially resilient. (Oaklander 2015, 42)

Storytelling and the development of resiliency share a number of key factors, such as being part of a tight-knit community, having a strong faith, and finding meaning in the difficult times of our lives. Richard F. Mollica, a Harvard Medical School professor of psychiatry, who has spent decades helping victims of many forms of violence, writes about the art of storytelling:

The foundation of storytelling is the capacity of human beings to empathically listen to the suffering of others, an act that is therapeutic for the storyteller and beneficial to the listener. Not only can storytelling establish a human connection with others, abolishing the isolation caused by violence, it can also enhance the biological extinction of traumatic memories and hasten the psychological recovery of a traumatized person. These positive outcomes emerge from the biological miracle of empathy. (115)

Mollica affirms three social activities as key to helping a person heal: meaningful work, acts of altruism, and spiritual expressions (165). For some people, meaningful work and acts of altruism may involve sharing one's story of survival in one or more art forms so that others benefit from the experience (125). Coaching may help them learn to tell their story in a manner that can be well-received by the listeners without overwhelming them with traumatic images and emotions and therefore causing them to withdraw (123). Mollica doesn't elaborate on factors of spiritual expression most effective for promoting healing, but our experience with Bible storytelling indicates transformation through finding the intersection between God's stories and their personal or communal stories. Adding prayer to the experience often brings about further healing. Building on this research, in the following sections I show how Bible storytelling can strengthen some of the most recognized factors in resiliency.

### **Developing resiliency requires the support of a tight-knit community**

Some of the female Bible storytellers in an Esther project recently shared that the project has helped them form relationships that they'd never considered possible. One woman explained that having good stories to share and then being willing to listen to other people's stories has created opportunities to talk with people of other faiths. She is amazed at the level of trust they have built as they spend time sharing personal and biblical stories together. One young unmarried woman, who previously had no status within her community, has become recognized as a leader in a community of people who are eager to hear the Bible stories and pray with each other.

In Ethiopia, four teams of Bible storytellers came together to carry out a Bible storytelling project. The teams came from four language communities, some of which are currently undergoing conflicts. During the first few days of the initial workshop, the storytellers were told to share stories that would help others to know something important about them as a community. It was clear that the storytellers were not familiar with the important stories of the other groups and were very interested to hear them. Next, they told near-death experiences, and some of the participants shared how they had nearly died as a result of conflicts with people from the other group, or as women in the power of men with ill intentions. I noticed that the participants went from sitting in their small groups, quite separate from the other groups, to forming one large group. Participants mingled with members of other teams, even interacting with the team from a language community known for being aggressive and hostile. In the process of telling the Bible stories and their own stories, the storytellers found confidence as a group to share the Bible stories with community leaders who were previously hostile to them as Christians. As a result, some of these leaders are now supportive of the storytelling work.

We also saw the benefits of a supportive, tight-knit community demonstrated in Papua New Guinea. Members of three different languages worked together to present the “Birth of Moses” story in traditional song and dance. The chanting was performed in one language, the pattern and tune came from another, and the whole performance was led by a “caller” from the third language group. This was an event of unprecedented cooperation, since these three tribes proudly maintain their distinct community identity through their chanting and dance styles, typically imposing severe restrictions on who can participate and to what extent. At the heart of all these communities has been the commitment to share both personal and Bible stories.

### **Belief system**

Mollica claims that “When the traumatized inner self is thrown into chaos by violence, spirituality can prevent a total disintegration of the person” (176). Bible stories help people identify strongly held values, internalize new perspectives, and solidify their beliefs. Many times during Bible story–crafting workshops, or after sharing a Bible story in a worship service, people will search for an opportunity to say, “This Bible story is *my* story.” Whether a Bible story is shared to pastoralists in southern Ethiopia, subsistence farmers in Papua New Guinea, theology students in urban South Asia, or business people in Texas, the listeners find the stories relevant for their lives.



Asking the simple question, “Which Bible story that you heard this week is your favorite?” allows people to share intimate personal stories in which they confess heartache, sins, traumas, and conflicts. After listening to the story of Cain and Abel, one young woman confessed to her mother of having suicidal thoughts. She told her mother that she realized killing herself would not please God. Her mother was surprised by the confession and thrilled for the open conversation and the opportunity to help her daughter.

Participating in the telling or hearing of Bible stories presented in different media and various art forms is an invitation to say that we, too, are part of God’s story. We are all part of his creation, and while the human condition of sin separates us from his glory, we can all be part of his strategy for the gospel story of reconciliation to be told unto the ends of the earth. Several storytellers have shared that though they couldn’t be pastors or Bible teachers, they were happy to tell Bible stories as their ministry.

### **Finding meaning in trauma or crises**

One danger when we retell stories of events that trouble us is that we can tell the stories with so much pain-laden emotion that we alienate others who find it too difficult to listen to the story repeatedly. Their negative reactions may cause us to spiral deeper into depression or rage. One effective way to resolve some of the pain and confusion is to interweave our stories with Bible stories.

Learning the story of Ruth and Naomi prompted several South Asian women to reconcile with their mothers-in-law or daughters-in-law. At another workshop, two storytellers, one from Papua New Guinea and one from South Asia, reported that couples who were determined to end their marriages changed their minds after hearing the story of God creating man and woman in Genesis 2. In both cases the spouses asked each other for forgiveness and committed to working out their differences. In one marriage the man publicly pledged to be faithful to his wife, and in the other marriage the young man publicly pledged not to divorce his wife, even if she did not have a baby.

Other people have been greatly encouraged by Hannah’s story (1 Samuel 1) or the story of Jesus healing the woman who was sick for 12 years (Mark 5). Some people expressed joy and comfort that God listens and responds to prayers. Hearing the story of Cain killing his brother Abel has brought some people to tears, and many listeners express wonder at God’s amazing mercy toward Cain in this story. As one woman shared after hearing the story of the Prodigal Son, “Jesus must have been talking about God as the father, because no human father could possibly be so loving.”

In some cases, such as trying to find meaning after a family member commits suicide, the answer people have found in the Bible stories is that they may never know why it happened, but they have heard so many stories of God's love and grace that they can trust God to hold the answers.

### **Keeping a positive or hopeful outlook**

Many of the stories of the Bible talk about honor instead of shame, choosing acts of peace rather than retaliation, and seeing God's radical love and forgiveness when we deserve punishment. Sharing these stories goes a long way toward keeping a positive outlook.

The centerpiece of our faith, Jesus's resurrection, communicates a message of hope when everything seems to have failed dismally. Even after his brutal death on the cross, when it seemed everyone had deserted him, the resurrected Jesus appeared to his followers and commanded them to share the good news of his resurrection and his kingdom. In story after story, Jesus frequently blesses the people who were healed, speaking encouraging words to them: "Go in peace!" "Your faith has made you well," or "Your sins are forgiven."

While David and Naomi and Job each lamented to God about their circumstances, they continued to address God and to search for his answers and blessings. The model they offer us is to cry out to God in our pain while reaffirming our commitment to trust in him through trials, hoping for a better future. In fact, the Bible is full of stories that mirror the messiness of real life; however, the promises of God's abiding presence and care also run throughout these stories.

### **Finding an appropriate role model**

We can find role models through stories. Telling a good story draws the listener into the experience, using verbal imagery and other artistic communication techniques to stimulate the emotions that accompany the events of the story. Not all characters in stories are necessarily good role models. Plato's *Republic* (2 and 3) advocates censoring storytellers to protect young minds from bad influences. Plato understood that the power of stories is not based entirely on logical reasoning (Denning, n.d.). After a story is told, most people can readily talk about which character or characters they identified with or which they did not like and why.

The Bible is full of role models that inspire us to live better lives. One workshop participant learned to tell the story of creation from Genesis 2 and declared afterward that he realized that the men of his community needed to find a better way to talk about women. Students in a Bible college responded to the story of Jesus

healing the paralytic man: impressed with the faith of the four friends who lowered the paralyzed man through the roof to receive help from Jesus, they committed to being more compassionate towards others.

### **Tools for Bible storytellers developing healing communities**

Part of the power of telling Bible stories is the ease with which we can identify with the characters and events of the stories, since the stories portray life with its highs and lows, emotions, conflicts, successes, and failures. With the help of Kathie Watters, an International Scripture Engagement Consultant with SIL International, I added a component to an Oral Bible Storytelling project to equip women storytellers to develop and foster healing communities. In storytelling projects, the core activity that draws people together in community is telling and hearing Bible stories. As people learn the Bible stories and grow in their faith, they reflect on their own lives, discovering lingering pain, previously unrecognized successes, unresolved conflicts, and the shame from their own poor choices. In the Esther project many of the women storytellers and people in their communities began experiencing healing and maturing through the storytelling and discussions. People who have suffered significant losses may need more time and help to tell their own stories and to heal from the emotional wounds.

### **Recognizing somebody suffering from emotional wounds**

People suffering from significant emotional wounds often display odd or pronounced behaviors: sleep or eating disorders; unusual or excessive emotional displays; drug abuse; talking about dying; over-working; or withdrawing from social contact (Hill et al. 2016). In some cases, the reason for these actions may be clear to all involved. In other cases, the reason may be obscure because the traumatic event may have happened years ago, may have occurred in secret, or is still occurring in secret. Either way, the behaviors make us suspect that the person may be grieving a significant loss and suffering from the emotional wound the loss has created. For example, somebody may be dying of an incurable disease, and so may talk frequently about death. The emotional wounds may be the result of grieving a loss in the future.

As I've trained storytellers, the first step was for storytellers to recognize that people in the Bible exhibited some of these behaviors. Hannah cried frequently and refused to eat. Naomi was angry or depressed, and when the people of Bethlehem came out to greet her she told them to call her Mara, "bitter"; then she complained to God. Absalom hated his half-brother for having raped his sister (2 Samuel 13:22), and spent two years plotting revenge.

After recognizing these signs as typical of those suffering emotional wounds in the Bible stories, the women then tell their own stories of tragedy and reflected on the signs of emotional wounds in their own lives. As appropriate, they shared their personal stories with each other and talked about how they tend to respond to emotional pain.

The next step was to begin recognizing similar behaviors in others who might be experiencing emotional wounds, understanding that some people take a long time to heal and some people never do heal but may remain with a festering wound throughout their lives. It's not our responsibility nor is it within our power to heal somebody; however, we are called to have compassion on others and to love and encourage them as they go through the process of healing wherever we find them on this journey.

### **How to love and encourage those who are suffering from emotional wounds**

One of the benefits of a Bible storytelling project is to build close-knit communities in which people are encouraged to reflect on their own stories in light of the Bible stories. Bible stories point to God's love toward his people, describing ways to honor God and bring blessing. In the process, the community members find healing for past hurts and develop resiliency as they learn what it means to be part of God's kingdom.

Bible storytellers can offer significant gifts to those who are suffering:

1. ***Listen to their stories.*** In the story-crafting workshops, people practice listening with appreciation to others' personal stories of difficult experiences. They identify signs of possible emotional wounds revealed in the stories. Guidelines are observed—we do not criticize, fix, ridicule, or gossip about other people's stories; we listen with patience and our undivided attention (Hill et al. 2016).
2. ***Share an appropriate Bible story.*** Rather than preaching, the participants learn to select a story that offers hope and a Christian alternative as a model of what could be. Storytellers will often tell the story of Jesus healing the sick woman (Mark 5) to inspire hope in people who are suffering.
3. ***Express feelings by crying together or singing laments.*** The storytellers learned that, in order to heal, people must be allowed, and in some cases helped, to grieve. This takes time, hard work, and may not be a very comfortable process. One way to help people grieve is to show them that God created us with the capacity to cry and that we can tell him our troubles, expressing pain through laments.
4. ***Pray.*** We seldom have to convince people of the importance of individual or corporate prayer (Hill et al. 2016). The women storytellers learned from Hannah that God accepts our prayers in which we express our pain and suffering. They learned from Naomi that at times we speak to God indirectly by



sharing our thoughts and feelings with others. Initially, the women were nervous about Naomi's behavior in complaining about her life and saying that God "brought her back [to Bethlehem] empty." On the other hand, later Naomi praised God when she acknowledged his leading Ruth to the field of Boaz to gather barley. Through this process the women discovered that they could help others both by verbally processing and praying with them.

5. **Small acts of kindness.** Each of the four gifts listed above can be considered an act of kindness. Each gift helps develop caring relationships and allows people who are suffering to voice their painful stories. Other ideas include giving a gift of time, attention, words of praise or comfort, food, or money.

The book *Healing the Wounds of Trauma* suggests further participatory, adult-learning activities that teach the concepts outlined above to oral learners. Watters's workshop notes show how they were integrated with oral storytelling.

## Conclusion

I've discovered that much of what I witness through the telling of both personal and Bible stories relates to what others have explained about the processes of healing and developing resiliency. I'm encouraged, having seen so many people blessed by telling and hearing stories. Spurred on by tangible results, my hope is that Bible storytelling will not only promote healing among communities but also equip individuals and communities with practical tools for developing resiliency, helping them face the challenges that life brings and find healing from their suffering.

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## Appendix

### Restitution narrative

Arthur Frank suggests that this is the most common type of personal narrative, told with the hope and assumption that complete restoration should be achievable. For example, until very recently cancer was to be “cured,” not lived with; health care workers did not consider the patient’s wishes about how to die with dignity, but made decisions focused on the patient’s complete healing. The storyline of this type of narrative is taken from the medical institution so that the person describes tests, symptoms, and treatments that have been explained and administered by the medical professionals. Rather than sharing his or her own perspectives and emotions, the person gives the medical team’s prognosis and predicted outcome. Telling only this type of illness narrative does little for the person facing terminal or chronic illness or who will have lasting changes due to the illness. This type of story does not help the family and friends address the stresses they face as they live through the ill person’s trials, since they are expected to live life under the pretense that everything will soon be “normal” (Frank 2013, 75–96).

I suggest that another possible example for the restitution narrative is when the storyteller shares his or her personal story as dictated by a religious institution or the social norms that often have well-known models of the ideal man or woman. These models epitomize the way all members of those institutions or societies should live successfully, and so the role models and institutional narratives provide positive incentive and appropriate direction for facing challenges. For others, however, the ideal is not achievable and only increases the sense of failure.

### Chaos narrative

As Frank describes this type of story structure, it is more of a non-story lacking a coherent plot, indicating that the person telling the story is out of control and is being overwhelmed by his or her troubles. The words and expressions that the storyteller uses express raw emotions and gaping wounds. In fact, the voice of the teller is lost in the chaos and suffering.

The chaos stories are difficult to listen to because they are hard to follow, since there is no coherent storyline. They are also difficult to listen to since the stories are threatening for the listeners who may find themselves seeking distance, not wanting to imagine that such suffering could possibly touch them.

But it is ethically and morally important to permit people to tell their chaos stories, recognizing that quite often they cannot be fixed or easily improved. Living in chaos is no way to live; however, there are some complex situations that are dehumanizing and beyond simple solutions. To deny the story is to deny the person telling and living the story. For some people, this type of chaos may be for a season, and once that season is past, they may reflect on their experience, making sense of their pain and discovering what has helped them to heal, in the process finding a different way to tell the story. For others, caught in unremitting poverty or decades-long war, the chaos does not end.

### **Quest narrative**

The quest story uses the metaphor of a journey for viewing and describing illness, at the end of which the teller is changed, bearing the “scars” of the illness journey. Following Joseph Campbell’s work on defining the hero, the teller of a quest narrative is the hero who seeks to find meaning in the trials. For some, their quest story simply answers the questions of how they survived the ordeal and the suffering. Others seek to determine the lesson that they learned and wish to share it so that others can avoid some of the problems that they faced. And others wish to redefine themselves, carefully explaining how they have changed and grown from the experience.

The illness stories that are most often published as biographies are the quest stories. The person who has suffered typically experiences healing or recovery by sharing their story. They may find dignity in shaping the story and telling it as they want to tell it. The potential danger of using this type of illness story is that the tellers may imagine themselves as too grand a hero, having been so completely transformed by the experience that they assume themselves to be invincible or beyond the reach of future suffering (Frank 2013, 115–36).

Quest storytellers not only find the meaning or the purpose for the suffering, but they also carefully craft their story as a testimony or witness to inform others. This is one of the key factors that scholars have defined as essential for developing resiliency in times of crises.

### **Life-as-normal narrative**

Frank defines this type of illness story as an effort of the ill person to hide or ignore the illness. So, in fact, their personal narrative does not include reference to the trouble or any suffering. There may be extenuating circumstances in which the teller chooses this type of story for honorable reasons. For example, a parent may



need to remain strong and stable for very young children or other vulnerable family members, and so they decide to carry on as if the illness or trouble did not happen. However, suppressing serious illness or severe trauma could result in making the illness or reaction worse and it inhibits any positive impact to both the teller and the listener that would come from communicating the story to others (Frank 2013, 193–97).

### **Borrow narrative**

Some people borrow fragments or whole stories in order to tell experiences for which they may not be able to find words to express. Cheryl Mattingly, an anthropologist who studied children with chronic illnesses, found that children benefited from identifying with a favorite superhero or cartoon character and telling their own film story in which they impersonate this character (180). Some healthcare workers have discovered the value of giving the sick children the freedom and creative space to reinvent the hero stories to tell their own story, and some will participate with the children in the drama (Frank 2013, 197–201).

### **Broken narrative**

This type of illness story requires the collaboration of someone else, usually because the ill person is unable to speak, and cannot find the words and organize them in clear communication, or has memory impairment. Frank carefully explains that the work of the co-storyteller is not to create the content of the ill person's story but to uphold the "moral personhood" of the person who is incapacitated. This is done through a sequence of questions to which the ill person responds with fragmented utterances or cues after which the co-storyteller pieces the cues, and possibly the memories, together in a recognizable story (Frank 2013, 201–4).