

# The Importance of Stories

*The universe is made of stories, not of atoms. – Muriel Rekeyser*

Conversation partner and religious sociologist **Diane Butler Bass** discussed the importance of narrative leadership:

*Throughout my research on vital mainline churches, both clergy and congregational leaders were storytellers. They knew their own faith stories, they knew the stories of their congregations, they knew their tradition's stories, and they knew the larger Christian and biblical stories. They exhibited ease and comfort in sharing these stories and invited others into a variety of stories in natural and authentic ways. In the process, they opened paths for other people to learn and tell stories of faith. And they ably moved between personal, congregational, and biblical stories to create worlds of spiritual and theological meaning. They intuited the power of story to rearrange people's lives—using story in much the same way Jesus did—and to open windows to spiritual realities and alternative paths that sometimes escape life's more mundane interpretations.*

*And, of course, storytelling leaders have the ability to change the story in which they exercise leadership! Scripts can be rewritten. A good leader will be able to move a congregation away from deadening and fear-filled stories, like that of the Titanic, toward life-giving possibilities of faithful adventure.*

— from “Living the Story,” *Alban Weekly*, 1/22/2007

Conversation partner and author **Tim Egan** commented on the importance of “story” in our region:

*I think we are better readers and storytellers because of our climate. I'll tell you a little anecdote about that. I once asked a theater director why there was so much theater in the Northwest — and there really is, per person, more in these cities than anywhere — and he said, “Well, that's very simple. In a dark climate people like to go into a cave and tell stories.”*

Tim Egan also pointed out that the Northwest is lacking an overarching narrative:

*This is the problem the Northwest has. Every family, every country, every region needs [some] sort of a defining animating narrative. You pass it onto your children and you can live your life within the arch of your narrative. The Northwest doesn't have a regional narrative. The South has it. New England has it. The Plains have it ... We don't have [a regional narrative.]. We really don't... So, the struggle of people in [this region] is finding a narrative you can inhabit. If you find something you can inhabit you can live your life comfortably. That's where religion really makes a big difference because it helps to give people something they can inhabit — a story they can inhabit. Most people in the Northwest don't have one. They've shed one.*

— from Salmon Nation Project discussion with Timothy Egan, June 5, 2006

Conversation partner **Martha Gies** wrote the book *Up All Night*, which tells the stories of over 20 people who work the graveyard shift in Portland, Oregon. She found simply listening to people share their stories changed them:

*For me the overtly religious experience of [writing Up All Night] was ... living out my belief of the human worth and human dignity of everybody. It was life-changing for some [of the people I interviewed]. For [me]*

to come in and ask about the story of their life and their dreams and how their work relates to that and to record it and to write it in a book and invite them and their family to come to the book readings—there were 25 book readings—was very important to them. Some of them changed jobs, interestingly enough. Some of them had been doing [the same work] for years and changed jobs....

**Question: As a result of your interview you think they changed jobs?**

*I think so because they heard themselves say things like, “Martha, what I really want to do is ... but so far I’m doing...” And when I called them up a couple of years later and said the book is being published they were doing that thing [they wanted to do].*

Martha also commented on how good liturgy relates to story-telling:

**Question: If our liturgy is storytelling how do we do that the best here [in the Northwest]? How do we do storytelling and story listening as a religious practice in a fairly formal setting to help connect the yearnings we are talking about and the meanings that we want to make in this region?**

*... the very best liturgy I’ve ever got to be a part of ... was done in St. Joseph’s [Catholic Church] and it was where we ... were acting out story as a group. For instance, we did Easter vigil starting with a bonfire in front of the church ... in one of those big barrels, after which we lit candles and we took them into a dark church. And the baptisms were timed so that the first sunlight came in through the rose window and struck where the [baptism font] was placed. You know, if everybody is doing that together you don’t have to say a word. Another thing that they did [on Christ the King Sunday was that] they came into a dark church with banners flying in a long procession as somebody backstage rolled the lights on. It is a big church. But as those banners came in the lights rolled on, and I get goose bumps thinking about it. Or, on Good Friday we had a cross that was as long as an entire pew, and we’d pass it hand-over-hand ... I would take all kinds of people there to touch that cross and to realize that if all of you don’t hold that cross it is going to drop on your head. You don’t have to say a word. So, there is a lot of participatory story.*

—from Salmon Nation Project discussion with Martha Gies, Oct. 23, 2006

Commenting on a statement by Timothy Egan that “water is the master architect of the Pacific Northwest,” project participant **Laurie Larson Caesar** reflects about water as symbol and its role in our Northwest and Lutheran story:

*Water as a possible symbol for our region intrigues me. Water drizzles on us for at least six months a year, flows abundantly in the Western half of our states, has fed us for dozens of generations, drove the Corps of Discovery to despair in the winter of 1805, has become the central motif of stickers in public school bathrooms (“Save Water for the Salmon!”), and sits at the heart of the political issue of the area – fishing rights, irrigation rights, salmon and dams. Water also flows through the heart our Christian tradition. Immersion into water is one of our primary sacraments; it is spiritual renewal, God’s action, entrance into Christ’s death and new life, and deeper connection with a new community with a new way of being. What would it look like if we took our connection to all water more seriously as Lutheran Christians? New rituals, new prayers, new garments ... In Beaverton, for example, in the Fanno Creek watershed, what would happen if we baptized new Christians in that stream? Or at least water taken from that stream? Would we be more directly connected to the annual SOLV clean-up of that body of water? How might our faith and life be transformed? And might it speak to our many neighbors if we were articulate about that connection, explicit about our own history of “wild holiness.”*