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I Fell in Love with Stories – And Then Forgot How to Listen

Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream – making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is the very essence of dreams . . .

Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

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Since I can remember, I have been hopelessly in love with stories. Maybe you are too. As a boy I always had my head in a book and then for most of my adult life I have been a writer.

As a youngster I would go to the library with my mum and read. I'd do it every afternoon after school. Reading with my mum defined our relationship – and this nurturing of her quirky, imaginative son has shaped my life.

Over the years, some of the most real people I have ever met have been in novels. Novels have influenced me and changed me and given me insights into the lives of others.

Stirring tales of quest and adventure like *Lord of the Rings*¹ got me through some tough times when I was growing up. As a teenager, Jimmy Porter in John Osborne's game-changing play *Look Back in Anger*² felt to me like my own twin brother. Later, magical realism swept me away, and the great American novels worked their scope, pace and magic.

I loved stories because they seemed to give *my* life shape. They allowed me to escape my current situation and they transported my imagination.

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OUR PRECIOUS LIVES

As I grew older, I began to enjoy listening to the stories other people told me about themselves. My family was alive with stories. There were grandmother's stories of a deprived and brutal childhood in London's East End, stories of the war and stories of relatives. Plus, we owned the local hardware shop in my home town of Northolt on the far outskirts of London. So we'd have a procession of people coming in and chatting to my parents with stories ranging from the funny and incredible to the poignant and tragic.

My parents always had time to listen and to make a person a cup of tea. It was part of the life of the shop. It helped that my parents did not judge those who told us their tales.

I think I knew from early on that when someone tells you the story of their life, you see them differently. You begin to see the contours and vistas of their narrative and their experience. You see the dark and light corners that make up a person.

When someone tells you the story of their life, you see them differently.

In the New Testament it is the little autobiographical details that we learn about the disciples that helps us to see them as real people and not simply actors or

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mouthpieces. When we realize that Peter, the rock of the church, had his very rocky moments, we begin to warm to him. When he manages to get everything wrong on the mountain of transfiguration, we see a person rather like ourselves – able to open mouth and insert foot. When we notice that he seemed to want to be liked and that this led him into all kinds of trouble, then we see his vulnerability, and this makes us more open to what he has to say.

And then there is the most fully drawn of all the characters in the Bible – Paul. When we realize that Paul suffered terrible moments of emotional depression – real ups and downs – we see him as more than simply the person who wrote those complicated letters. And we also begin to see the sometimes complicated dynamic between him (the one-time persecutor wracked with a knowledge of what he did) and the rest of the apostles (eyewitnesses and more part of the in-crowd).

When we know the backstory, we begin to realize that other people are just as complicated as we are. This is especially true if that story is told with honesty and helps us to understand what makes the person tick, what is, and has been, important to them and how they became the person they are. How do they make sense of themselves and the chapters of their life? When we know this, then we can develop

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deep friendships built on mutual trust. At the very least we might be able to forgive them if they are unreasonable, grumpy or difficult.

In my ministry as a priest I began to come into contact with people's stories. Indeed, as with doctors, we are privileged to be the keepers of stories. That is what people have to offer us. People trust us with them. I quickly became aware that there are some seriously lonely people. Some people who I talk to seem to speak to no other loving souls all week. They cannot believe that things have got as bad as this.

But there was a time when I forgot to listen

I wasn't always a priest. In fact, for much of my adult life I was working in commerce. And for many years, I ran a brand agency that started out as a venture in my spare room and became something of a sensation. By some odd alchemy everything I touched seemed to turn to gold.

When I was running my brand agency, I only seemed to meet people who were buzzy and who were surrounded by equally successful friends. I was always busy and everyone I knew was busy. I lived what can only be called a gilded life. I travelled first class. I only used taxis and never took the bus. I got on

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planes and was a consultant around the world. I had staff and ran an organization that was successful and rather glamorous. I had travelled a long way from the anxious and timid comprehensive school boy who worked in his mum and dad's shop.

At times I had to pinch myself. But perhaps I did not pinch myself enough. I was losing contact with my roots. I was no longer the boy from Northolt – at least, I didn't feel that I was.

Looking back on those years I now see that my view of life was unrealistic and insulting to those less fortunate than myself. The stories I heard and the stories I told were shallow. And during this time, I stopped reading for pleasure. I didn't read a work of fiction for years. In spare moments I wondered where the boy who loved books had gone.

But even in those years, I was not quite lost. Not quite. Because deep in my own heart I was unhappy and restless. By the end of this period I felt trapped and desperate to find meaning. I think that most of the people I knew during this period were trapped also.

I had a moment of epiphany. I was desperate for a break, exhausted and low. My wife had been very ill and life was so tough that I did not know where to turn. We booked a holiday. It was the first holiday for

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eighteen months and the first break since my wife's illness. I got a call from a client on the morning before we went away. They were insistent that I go in to help them. I explained about the holiday, but that carried no weight.

At 9.30 p.m. I was in an office on my own, way outside London. I had missed my holiday. I had no way of getting home and my clients had left without telling me. I realized that in my working life, no one really cared about me and my family and that I was simply a well-paid hired hand. When I had outgrown my usefulness that would be that. I knew that life had to offer more than this.

The story of my conversion to Christianity in my early forties is for another time. The giving up of my life as an entrepreneur and businessman is for another time also. But one of the products of becoming a Christian, and later a priest, was that I began to hear the stories of those who had no one else to tell them to. My ear became tuned to a different beat. I began to see a side of the world that I had been insulated from.

Reconnecting

When I became a priest, I began to become attached to stories again. I began to think that we have to

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reclaim them and see them as the bedrock of the Christian Way, of a healthy society and of our own health and wellbeing.

My church is named after that great northern saint, Cuthbert. He led a revival of the faith and is known as the 'fire of the north'. His uniqueness came down to the way he would visit local settlements, most of them pagan and poor and would spend time simply sitting and listening to the stories of the families who lived there. They loved him for it. He was a good advert for the faith, and many of those he took time to listen to became Christians.

I realized that life becomes impossible when we have no one who wants to listen to our stories, or we find it hard to tell our story – because of trauma, grief or violence.

Many of the older people we have worked with at my church had stopped telling their stories because no one seemed interested. They also, I think, felt embarrassed to be left so alone. They never imagined, when they were bringing up their families, had good jobs and the world seemed full of possibility, that one day they would be surrounded by the memories of friends who had moved or died and that they would be just another elder with no one to talk to.

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Baby boomers probably expected the good and so-cial times to go on forever. They did not expect to be left alone.

Family members have sometimes heard all the old tales and don't want another dose of nostalgia. It is easy to lose interest in a parent's story of their youth when you've heard it countless times before.

Learning to listen to stories and to tell them has transformed my ministry and my faith. It has helped me reconnect with a part of myself that I feared I had lost.

It all began when I was new into my first role as a parish priest and when I was dragged along to a talk I didn't want to go to. I was shocked into thinking again about what I had been called to do.

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Study questions

1. *Over the years, some of the most real people I have ever met have been in novels. Novels have influenced me and changed me and given me insights into the lives of others.*

Which characters in novels and books (including the Bible) have influenced you? Why did/do they have such a powerful impact?

2. *I think I knew from early on that when someone tells you the story of their life, you see them differently. You begin to see the contours and vistas of their narrative and their experience.*

How has hearing a person's story changed the way you think of them? How do the biographical details that we see in the Bible help us to see the characters in a more rounded way? How would you describe, for instance, a character like Paul? What do we know about his life and how might that have shaped his ministry and thoughts?

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3. *Many of the older people we have worked with at my church had stopped telling their stories because no one seemed interested. They also, I think, felt embarrassed to be left so alone.*

How does this make you feel? What groups do you think find it hard to be heard? What might Jesus say about these forgotten groups?

4. *Learning to listen to stories and to tell them has transformed my ministry and my faith. It has helped me reconnect with a part of myself that I feared I had lost.*

How can listening to stories transform our faith? What stories of faith and life have you heard that have helped to strengthen your faith or helped you to see your faith a little differently?

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Prayer

Please give us opportunities to hear the stories of those who feel left out. Help us to feel more empathy for the struggles and difficulties of those people we come into contact with – especially those who we find difficult and challenging.
