



*The New Storytellers*

Alastair J. Roberts

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2016

*A Development*  
*in our*  
*Discourse*

*Millennial Memoirs*

**B**iographical works have always been an essential part of Christians' reading, and one of the principal ways in which the Church has been exposed to the pedagogical example of the saints. While biography traditionally tended chiefly to take the form of hagiography, focusing upon the lives of canonized saints, Protestantism encouraged the fuller flowering of works attending to a broader range of faithful Christian lives.

One important recent trend in Christian, and particularly evangelical, biography has a number of distinctive features, perhaps the primary one being a focus upon *autobiography* and personal memoir: most of the authors in question write primarily about themselves and their own experiences. The second striking feature is the youth of the authors. The phenomenon of persons, a majority of whom are under thirty-five, writing memoirs and autobiographies seems surprising in itself, especially when one considers that few of these individuals were widely known before writing those memoirs.

These are not lives that would typically seem to be inviting subject matter for biographical treatment.

Despite these seemingly unpromising characteristics, many of these writers have won a ready and deeply appreciative readership for themselves. Their memoirs are typically written in a highly engaging manner and are warmly received by readers who identify strongly with their writers and the experiences recorded in them. Through their ability to connect with their readers at a very personal level these memoirists have considerable influence over the faith of their peers and the upcoming generation. For many young readers they may be like slightly older siblings in the faith, spiritually streetwise individuals who will teach them the ropes, speak on their behalf, and stick up for them against any that try to attack them. For a number of readers of their peer groups and older, they are people whose experiences resonate with and validate their own. The extensive presence and engagement of many of these writers on social media encourages the formation of communities around them and a very close identification between writer and readers.

The influence of these writers is considerable and in many instances it has been powerfully used for good, providing accessible and welcome guidance and examples to readers whose particular concerns and struggles—often largely generational in character—aren't being adequately addressed by their churches' teaching. For many readers, these memoirs introduce them to friendly and approachable fellow travellers on paths that may otherwise have been lonely and isolating for them, people who have experienced difficulties like theirs and found their way through to a better place. I am sure that, as a genre, such youthful spiritual memoirs have rescued many a young person's faith.

A connection between theological reflection and autobiographical narrative or memoir is hardly a new phenomenon; Augustine's *Confessions* is just one of many examples of this from the Christian tradition. However, while such as Augustine places his 'story' into a robustly theological frame, for our contemporary Christian storytellers, this pattern tends to be reversed. Rather than relating their stories in a more detached and 'objective' fashion and subjecting their stories and sense of self to rigorous theological judgment, their stories are often told with an affective immediacy and left largely unexposed to searching theological analysis. The narratives tend to be first-person accounts of the untidy processes by which new understandings emerged through experience, rather than retrospective recounting of personal histories framed by and assessed through the lens of mature theological judgment and Christian wisdom, with the greater objectivity made possible by the presence of intervening decades.

In their affective immediacy, they might find some of their roots in the particularly evangelical tradition of the 'personal testimony', in which the teller recounts the way that God has worked in their life. However, these new storytellers do not only relate their private and personal experience of God's grace but treat their wider personal experience as a privileged vantage point from which to reflect upon evangelicalism and Christianity more extensively. Their stories are also typically about movements to and from *specific forms* of Christianity, rather than stories of coming to faith as such. Examples of memoirs within this genre from the last few years include Rachel Held Evans' *Faith Unraveled*, Nadia Bolz-Weber's *Pastrix*, Lauren Winner's *Still: Notes on a Mid-Faith Crisis*, a follow-up to her earlier memoir *Girl Meets God*, Addie

Zierman's *When We Were On Fire*, Jonathan Merritt's *Jesus Is Better Than You Imagined*, Elizabeth Esther's *Girl at the End of the World*, Micha Boyett's *Found*, Jason Boyett's *O Me of Little Faith*, Allison Vesterfelt's *Packing Light*, Matthew Paul Turner's *Churched*, Preston Yancey's *Tables in the Wilderness*, Emily Wierenga's *Atlas Girl*, and Michelle DeRusha's *Spiritual Misfit*. Forthcoming and more recently released titles such as Amber Haines' *Wind in the Hollow*, Emily Wierenga's *Making it Home*, Sarah Bessey's *Out of Sorts*, and Vicky Beeching's projected memoir for HarperCollins suggest that the genre is not about to die out any time soon.

The intimate personal story is also the site of choice from which to discuss questions of faith, Christian practice, and Church. Even books that aren't explicitly concerned with autobiographical subject matter are frequently framed by memoir for many of this new breed of published writers. Whether writing about feminism and the role of women (e.g. Sarah Bessey's *Jesus Feminist* and Rachel Held Evans' *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*), Church and the sacraments (e.g. Rachel Held Evans' *Searching For Sunday*), or sexual ethics and LGBT identity (e.g. Dianna Anderson's *Damaged Goods*), these writers frequently place considerable accent upon the personal narrative.

### *The Lives of Unexceptional Saints*

The driving principle of the hagiographies of the past was the imitation of Christ: like the impossible airbrushed bodies gracing the covers of contemporary popular magazines, stylized and de-individualized lives of the saints were set forth to be reflected upon and emulated, powerful yet unapproachable icons of the shape of ideal Christ-like life. Later Protestant biographies typically took for their subjects peculiarly faithful

lives, lives of heroic figures of the faith such as David Brainerd, Martin Luther, Hudson Taylor, or William Carey. Protestantism also had its martyrologies such as John Foxe's immensely popular and influential *Actes and Monuments* (more popularly known as *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*).

While much more individualized than many of their Catholic predecessors, Protestant biographers often didn't shake the hagiographers' penchant for concealing the faults, imperfections, and often extreme eccentricities of their subjects, frequently papering over theologically or morally embarrassing features or episodes of the lives they recorded. As the primary purpose of their works was to present figures worthy of imitation and courageous Christian deeds rewarding of reflection, theirs were often not 'warts and all' portraits.

If the biographies and hagiographies of the past were generally of exceptional lives and chiefly designed to encourage imitation, this new crop of autobiographies and memoirs take quite a contrasting approach. No longer relating to us from an austere and forbidding distance, these lives are studiously anti-hagiographical in character, typically accentuating the faults and failings of their subjects. This is not typically an expression of the penitent self-loathing lament of those looking back at former lives of dissipation or the unsparing self-examination of those subjecting their lives to the testing of God's truth. Rather, relatability, approachability, and a cosy intimacy between reader and writer is substituted for spiritual iconicity, lives that studiously avoid leaving us feel spiritually inadequate for exceptional lives as patterns for reflection and imitation.

The focus of these spiritual autobiographies tends to be on the flawed lives of their doubting and uncertain protagonists. Many of these works are tales of how, provoked by the experience of doubt, the obstinate contours of uncooperative

humanness, and the sense of a stifled need for self-realization, their writers sought to find a form of Christian faith more true to and accommodating of these personal realities. Iconicity isn't entirely abandoned for these writers, however. Malala Yousafzai's words are apt in this context: 'I tell my story, not because it is unique. But because it is not. It is the story of many.' One of the most immediate things to strike me when listening to [Nish Weiseth discussing](#) her book on the subject of Christian storytelling, *Speak: How Your Story Can Change the World*, for instance, was the degree to which it claims to channel a supposed generational consciousness:

I am a part of a generation that is searching. We're searching for God, we're searching for significance, and we're searching for community.

I am part of a generation that is on the brink. We're leaving church, we have seen bridges being burned, and we're tired of heated rhetoric. *I'm* tired of heated rhetoric.

Writers like Rachel Held Evans [consistently assume](#) the mantle of mouthpieces for the constituency of 'Millennials'. The largely unexceptional character of the subjects of these evangelical memoirs is central to their point: these lives are 'icons' of experiences that are widely shared, 'voices of a generation.'

### ***Evangelicalism and the Millennial Experience***

Most of these memoirs recount a common experience of growing up in the context of American folk evangelicalism as a member of the Millennial generation, and the attempt to reconcile generational identities and concerns with the evangelicalism of the authors' childhoods. In a [superb essay](#) on

the subject of evangelical Millennial memoirs, Jake Meador discusses some of their shared threads and themes. These memoirs represent many different attempts to hold onto, come to terms with, salvage, or reassess faith beyond the constrictive frameworks and dysfunctionality of the popular evangelicalisms of the writers' childhoods. The youth of the writers is in no small measure a result of a generational breach, a conviction that the form of evangelicalism provided by their parents' generation and in which they were raised is inadequate to accommodate their developing experiences and identities and that some alternative must be found.

In uncharted realms where the well-trodden paths of established evangelical traditions are no longer to be found, these spiritual memoirs are the itineraries of wanderers estranged from, abandoned by, or unguided by a former generation in the faith. For many spiritually orphaned wanderers, these itineraries are the surest guides to faith in their disorienting cultural and generational contexts, and their authors the pioneers of a new path for Christian identity in the twenty-first century.

Although the genre isn't exclusive to it, the spiritual memoir of the Millennial is arguably the genre that forms the backbone of popular post-evangelical self-understanding. Post-evangelicalism in many quarters predominantly articulates itself against the implicit foil of childhood experience of and exposure to evangelical faith and church. What most post-evangelicals share in common is dissatisfaction or disillusionment with their evangelical upbringing, some deep personal wounds, and a cynicism or suspicion about traditional evangelicalism, its politicization, its authority figures, and their modes of leadership. This is overwhelmingly a movement of spiritual wanderers, refugees, and migrants, defined by

experiences of alienation, experiences that can often represent the unifying force of the movement. The result is often a movement galvanized more by a sense of what it rejects, opposes, and what it has left behind than by any sense of the direction it is headed or the positive truths and modes of discipleship that it is committed to and which distinguish it.

### *The New Storytellers*

Beyond this new crop of memoirists is a much broader phenomenon, involving many online writers and bloggers, and many readers and followers who share their *ethos*. Indeed, the voices of many of the published memoirists mentioned above were first cradled in the world of blogging and social media and many of them enjoy their level of popularity in large measure on account of their high profile and extensive engagement on social media. Without the Internet, it is hard to imagine this movement existing in anything like the manner that it does today. The Internet is integral to establishing its voices (many of whom might never have been published in the past), to reaching its audience, to the formation of its communities, and to its modes of interaction and engagement. This movement is distinguished by its strong emphasis upon ‘storytelling’.

In *Speak*, Nish Weiseth shares her experience of hearing and meeting Ann Voskamp, who told her audience, ‘Give me your story, not your sermon.’ Making a point that is common to many arguments in favour of such storytelling, the [video advertising the book](#) draws attention to Jesus’ use of transformative stories during his earthly ministry and suggests that we should be storytellers like him, telling our own stories. Defining the term for the purposes of her book, Weiseth writes:

Here, *story* is the vulnerable sharing of your life experiences with others. It includes everything from the relationships you have with others today to the awkward moments in high school that you can't erase from your memory, no matter how hard you try. Your story includes how and where you grew up and the impact they both had on your life. It also refers to the mistakes you've made along the way. Sharing your story allows others to glimpse how you've been shaped, what matters to you, and why it matters.

...The walls of isolation we build around ourselves, believing we are the only ones who feel a certain way, come tumbling down when we're vulnerable and honest with each other about both our struggles and our victories. When I am brave enough to share my story, I'm actually reaching out to you, allowing you to cross over whatever divide is between us. By vulnerably offering you my hand, I'm building a bridge between us through my story.

It should be observed that the 'story' being considered here is a very specific form of story: the personal narrative. Weiseth started a site, *A Deeper Story*, now closed, where various writers could share their personal narratives as a means of addressing 'some of the most troublesome topics found on the collision course between Christianity and culture.' These stories could challenge, inspire, or lead readers to rejoice or mourn; her site had an impact upon many of its readers' lives, providing the basis for a community of shared loves and concerns.

As a site, *A Deeper Story* was one instance of a far broader phenomenon of online 'storytellers'. These storytellers frequently adopt a confessional tone, confiding truths about themselves to their readers. They share their doubts, their

hopes, their visions, their anger, their weaknesses, their failings, their sorrows and their joys. For such self-disclosure they are richly rewarded with many devoted fans, who 'relate' to them and are drawn to their vulnerability. They are characterized as 'brave' and 'courageous' for their 'rawness', 'authenticity' and 'honesty' in telling their stories. Typical reactions to their writings are excited expressions of emotional resonance, demonstrative and enthusiastic approval, claims of weeping, etc.

As these persons tell their stories, others resonate with them and tell their own stories too. Around these shared stories communities are formed, the personal spaces formed by individual stories expanding into shared communal spaces. What I believe we are currently witnessing is an extension of the domain of such spaces, as they assert themselves as a new governing context for theological reflection. The rise of the social web has powerfully facilitated this development.

Many of the new storytellers are representative of a stridently anti-elitist and democratizing movement. The restriction of the theological conversation to trained academics or church leaders or the privileging of them within it is vociferously resisted. As a number of these writers are reacting against abusive and dominating expressions of church leadership, any challenge to their positions from such leaders can be experienced as an oppressive and authoritarian attempt to 'silence' their voices. Having a 'story' is what qualifies one to speak. Everyone has a story, everyone's story should be told, everyone must tell their own story, and stories are 'sacred'. A person's story is inviolable, integral to their human dignity; to make objective moral statements that challenge a person's story is to dehumanize them.

## *The Centrality of Empathy*

A core value for many of these new storytellers is *empathy*. ‘Truthful’ discourse—as ‘truth’ is closely associated with personal narrative—depends upon our capacity to feel other people’s feelings, to share their perspectives, and to communicate our own in a manner that ‘resonates’ with them. Emotional resonance is a primary condition of shared truth, the means by which the ‘truth’ of my story can be owned as your ‘truth’ too. The strong emphasis upon empathy often comes with an equally strong antipathy towards anything that does not emotionally resonate or which hurts one’s sensitivities or those of the people with whom one empathizes.

Empathy is the virtue that corresponds to the ‘vulnerability’ required to tell one’s story ([Brené Brown](#) is a good person to read for an articulation of many of the values and convictions driving this storytelling movement). Without a context of empathy and affirmation, people won’t feel safe to share their stories, which undermines the entire discourse. Whether explicitly insisted upon or not, some sort of emphasis upon ‘safe spaces’ is usually a natural feature of contexts that prioritize the sharing of personal story. Any context or person that does not feel appropriately validating and affirming of my personhood—of my story—may be suspected of hate, a ‘phobia’, or some other pathology and may provoke a fierce reaction: [‘my humanity is not subject to your moral reasoning!’](#)

In such contexts, people are often disinclined to make absolute truth claims, even when they believe them. The robust assertiveness of such truth claims generally does not mix well with the gentleness required in contexts where people are sharing their vulnerability. Behind the move to storytelling and first person narrative as primary genres of Millennial Christian discourse is often the instinctive suspicion of or discomfort

with the forcefulness of truth claims and their potential for judgment and exclusion. Telling a story that may resonate with others is a far more palatable mode of ‘truth-telling’.

### *Rhetorical Styles*

It should come as no surprise that, with their emphases upon personal narrative, emotional resonance, and empathy, the new storytellers gravitate to certain forms of rhetoric over others. Forms of rhetoric that convey a cosy intimacy between writer and reader and which foreground the rawness, intensity, and immediacy of shared emotions are privileged and encouraged. A successful piece is one that makes a strong emotional ‘impression’ and the primary element of persuasion within this mode of discourse tends to be emotional resonance. Such writing principally appeals to people’s feelings and impressions and encourages people to process the things that they read primarily emotionally, rather than with their reasoning.

Writing that focuses upon fostering emotional resonance with the reader and creating an emotional impression will typically have a rather different character from writing that seeks to persuade through careful and developed argument. Whereas reasoned argumentation requires the articulation of sustained lines of thought, writing focused upon emotional impression and resonance will often be much more fragmented and disjointed in style. Short articles, brief sentences, single sentence paragraphs, frequent bolded or italicized statements, or fragmented statements are all characteristic of the latter form of writing.

The distinction that Voskamp and Weiseth draw between the ‘sermon’ and the ‘story’ is also worth recalling here. The sermon is a more confrontational mode of rhetoric: the

preacher stands over against the congregation and authoritatively addresses them with God's revelation. It is a form of rhetoric that manifests a hierarchy and places us in subjection to an authority and truth beyond us. By contrast, the personal story is non-confrontational in character. It declares personal truths, without imposing them upon others. It doesn't command, challenge, or judge. Rather, it invites others to see the world from our perspective and, perhaps, to discover that it is a perspective that they could take too.

It is also radically democratic and egalitarian, as everyone has their own story. The right of everyone to their own story also serves to protect us from the threat of fundamental challenge and questioning by others. For an audience wounded by and disillusioned with all the traditional sermon and the world that it belongs to represent, a move towards the alternative rhetorical form of the 'story' may be a welcome relief.

One essential dimension of the new storytellers phenomenon is a recasting of the relationship between writers and their readership. In part, this is a product of the way that the Internet is used today. The Internet has made possible much greater and more direct interaction, engagement, and connection between writer and readers, decreasing the power of publishers as intermediaries between two. It has made reading itself more of a collective experience, has made readers themselves one of the most powerful engines of publicity, and has provided writers and readers with the means to form shared communities. Within this new writing ecology, readers can enjoy a great sense of ownership of and investment in certain writers and of belonging to a community that they could have done in the past.

These new storytellers disclose themselves to their readers in a chatty and informal manner, presuming an atmosphere of privileged intimacy and friendship, and their readers typically respond in kind. Sarah Bessey provides a fairly characteristic example of the ‘cosiness’ of the new storytellers’ rhetoric in the opening paragraphs of her book, *Jesus Feminist*:

Here, let’s do this. Let’s try to lay down our ideas, our neatly organized Bible verses, our carefully crafted arguments. Let’s take a break from sitting across from each other in this stuffy room.

Let’s head outside. I want us to sit around a fire pit ringed with stones and watch the moon move over the Pacific. I want us to drink good red wine, dig our toes into the cool sand, and wrap up in cozy sweaters. We’ll feel the cold of the evening steal across the water soon, and the mountains are resting with their hands folded.

The ideal reader is cast as the writer’s close friend and confidant, a member of their clique. Following this reimagining of the reader-writer relationship, the rhetorical habits of such friendship cliques often become characteristic for the new storytellers. High levels of emotional expressiveness, regular employment of hyperbole, a familiar and confiding tone, mutual affirmation and protectiveness, common use of first person plural statements, along with the sharing of outrage, and a frequently dismissive and snarky posture towards those outside of the coterie are all examples of forms these habits can take.

We frequently comment upon the content and manner of our Christian discourse, yet considerably less upon its form.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps we believe that the form of our discourse is fairly ambivalent: provided that our content is correct, we can be indifferent to the form within which it is presented. Yet, when we look closer, it is easy to see our content, manner, and form exerting subtle influences upon each other. While we should not overstate this mutual influence—neither content nor form, for instance, *determine* each other—it is imperative that we are alert to it.

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<sup>1</sup> For our purposes here, the ‘content’ of our discourse can be defined as the truth claims that are more overtly advanced or asserted within it. The ‘manner’ of our discourse relates to the ways that we participate in this discourse as moral, rational, and affective agents, the virtues that we manifest, the habits that we develop, etc. By the ‘form’ of our discourse, I am referring to the more structural dimensions of discourse that we adopt or conform to, to the media with or within which we communicate, to the modes of discourse and genres that we employ, to the character of our language, to the institutions that give shape to our conversations, etc.

# *Where the Story Begins*

## *The Rise of 'Narrative'*

*N*arrative' has been a growing focus of much theology, especially since the advent of post-liberalism. In many respects this renewed interest has proved salutary. It has reacquainted us with the significance of the narrative form of the biblical text, which was always in danger of being obscured within more modern forms of Christian thought, whether conservative or liberal. It has also deepened the interaction and tightened the connection between biblical and systematic theology, not least in its encouragement of theological reading of Scripture.

One of the things that came with post-liberalism and related movements was a challenging of the supposed objectivity of reason. Post-modern theological movements like post-liberalism are more alert to the way in which we carry out our thinking within traditions, communities, and from distinct personal vantage points. Once again, there is much that is salutary and necessary within such a corrective to traditions that are insufficiently alert to the many cultural assumptions

that they are unwittingly bringing to their study of theology and Scripture.

This ideological context has certain things in common with the growing emphasis upon personal narrative in popular Christian theological discourse. Appreciation of the rootedness of reason in contexts and traditions has encouraged focused attention upon the ways that cultural identities surrounding race, gender, and sexuality colour our reading of Scripture. The contextual theologies that have resulted from this attention—feminist, queer, black, etc.—have often exhibited such pronounced emphasis upon the stories and identities of certain groups that the *public* character of theological discourse has been placed in a degree of jeopardy. When our identities, contexts, and vantage points are perceived to be so implicated in our theologies—or, conversely, when our theologies are perceived to be so enmeshed in our identities, contexts, and vantage points—it can become nigh impossible for us to be claimed by and to articulate [truths that stand beyond and over any particular perspective](#).

There are areas of overlap and a degree of homology between this more ideological emphasis upon the particular vantage point and the growing popular use of personal narrative as a vantage point for theological reflection. Even though it occasionally looks to contextual theologies for ideological scaffolding, I believe the rise of the personal ‘story’ movement in popular theology finds its primary causes elsewhere. Furthermore, although the shift in mode of discourse we are exploring is often attended and justified by an emphasis upon the narrative form of Scripture itself—an emphasis it seemingly shares in common with post-liberal theology—Scripture is *not* written in the mode of a personal story. Indeed, under closer inspection, Scripture bears little

resemblance to the genre of choice of the new storytellers. The strength of vague buzzwords such as ‘narrative’ and ‘story’ in certain Christian circles does lead to an indiscriminate and often uncritical welcome being extended to many trends under their name, however.

### *The Role of New Media*

My suspicion is that a primary impetus for the rise of the new storytellers is found in the development of new media. It is within the context and ecosystem of online social media that they find their principal environment.

The Internet provides an alternative to traditional modes of publishing, enabling people to establish reputations and audiences for themselves as writers, long before they ever sign a contract with a publisher. With the general absence of restrictions to publishing online, budding Christian writers no longer need depend to the same extent upon establishing their names within their churches, denominations, and offline Christian communities or organizations. There are now alternative paths by which to come to public awareness, bypassing many institutional structures altogether. These routes are much more accessible for persons who are marginalized or unestablished within their offline contexts, who can establish their own online networks and publicize voices of their own. These routes may also be far more accommodating of lack of theological education, a limited scope of expertise, youthful inexperience, and lower levels of Christian commitment than more traditional avenues. This empowers many people who would previously have struggled to gain access to public Christian discourse to become part of the conversation.

The Internet makes possible the removal of middlemen such as editors and publishers between the author's voice and their readers, heightening the immediacy of the connection between the two. A blogger can give their immediate, authentic, vulnerable, and unexpurgated opinions on matters, removing the interposition of time, editing, and other agencies that would diminish the 'intimacy' of a relationship in which writers share news from their personal lives, their emotional reactions to events, their hopes and their fears with their audiences.

For a movement that relies heavily upon the bond and resonance between the voice of the writer and the reader, the Internet is a powerful means for direct interaction and engagement between the two. In the current form of the Internet, readers are frequently the primary means of publicizing authors, as they share their material. The Internet also makes it possible for readers to form communities around their favourite writers, in a manner that was seldom possible prior to its advent.

Blogs and social networks such as Facebook invite and facilitate an 'intimatization' of our discourse, chiefly by 'intimatizing' the means and sites of our publication and expression. Although some may regard these as an extension of the 'public square', I believe that they are more accurately characterized as extended and enhanced *personal spaces*. In contrast to the public square, these spaces are akin to extensions built onto our homes, into which we invite people. As personal spaces, we set and enforce the rules, we determine the tone, we generally choose the topics of conversation, and we seek to maintain the sort of inviting and intimate atmosphere that one might find in a more domestic context. Blogs are generally not a public square. Rather, individuals own

their personal blogs and blogs are treated by many principally as a medium for the expression and communication of their selves. Likewise, Facebook is a network within which we share with our 'friends'.

As personal spaces are locations of self-expression and the sharing of our identities, the presence of dissent and opposition within them can be experienced as deeply threatening. Consequently, people feel the need for their personal or communal spaces to be safe spaces. In contrast to the public square, where perspectives are in theory contestable and we must argue for and justify their presence to a wider society, in such personal or communal spaces viewpoints can be shielded from criticism or challenge. The non-confrontational story and an emphasis upon empathy, emotional resonance, and anti-elitist egalitarianism go very naturally together with such environments. Although these media cannot easily sustain the more agonistic modes of discourse characteristic of most Christian theological discussion, they are very hospitable media for the forms of discourse favoured by the new storytellers.

The social web, its social networks, and our mobile devices produce hyper-connected communities, [within which dissent is not easily sustained](#). By removing or diminishing differentiating factors between people (the body, physical space, time, divisions between different realms of action and community, boundaries between social groups, etc.) our prevailing uses of our media have had the effect of bringing us very close together, into far more immediate, and hence emotionally reactive, forms of engagement. Furthermore, in a hyper-connected society, a person's sense of self will likely be much more dependent upon and vulnerable to their communities, not least because it will chiefly be forged through social interaction, rather than in independence-forming realms of

solitude and privacy. This drives a felt need for safe spaces, non-confrontational discourse, empathy, and emotional resonance.

Where they are far fewer differentiating factors between people, media that tend to encourage impatience and inattentiveness, and the extreme speeding up of interactions, without significant corrective steering, our discourse will naturally tend to become reactive and driven by emotional impressions. [Steve Wasserman writes](#):

It is a striking irony, as Leon Wieseltier has noted, that with the arrival of the Internet, “a medium of communication with no limitations of physical space, everything on it has to be in six hundred words.” The Internet, he said, is the first means of communication invented by humankind that privileges one’s first thoughts as one’s best thoughts. And he rightly observed that if “value is a function of scarcity,” then “what is most scarce in our culture is long, thoughtful, patient, deliberate analysis of questions that do not have obvious or easy answers.” Time is required to think through difficult questions. Patience is a condition of genuine intellection. The thinking mind, the creating mind, said Wieseltier, should not be rushed. “And where the mind is rushed and made frenetic, neither thought nor creativity will ensue. What you will most likely get is conformity and banality. Writing is not typed talking.”

When our processes of publicizing depend so heavily upon ‘frictionless’—and frequently reactive—actions such as ‘sharing’, ‘liking’, and ‘retweeting’, the result is a public discourse largely driven by the unthinking immediacy of

emotional impressions and within which ‘herd dynamics’ start to dominate. While this hobbles much traditional Christian discourse—which requires a much more ‘aerated’ context within which to function naturally—it a perfect element for the new storytellers.

One final point about the effect of media: [I have argued](#) in the past that a veering away from *logos* towards overwhelmingly *pathos*-based argumentation most likely is in large part a result of the fact that most persons in our society have been raised on a heavy diet of advertising. The similarities that I have already mentioned between the rhetorical habits of the new storytellers and those of advertisers are not accidental. If we are raised on advertising, it is easy to absorb the belief that one persuades principally by appealing to people’s feelings and impressions and they have also learned that one processes primarily through feelings and impressions. This ‘education’ is far more powerfully formative than the limited experience that they have of engaging with classic texts and extended arguments. Also, given the popularity of reader response approaches to interacting with texts in many quarters, the skills of careful interpretation are seldom deeply formed.

### ***The ‘First-Person Industrial Complex’***

In an [article for Slate](#), Laura Bennett describes the ‘first-person industrial complex’, which encourages writers of mediocre talent to write essays that are painfully self-revealing for the consumption of a voyeuristic public that has demonstrated its appetite for such pieces. The rise of this genre online, Bennett suggests, is click-driven: first-person essays offer the rawness and ‘authenticity’ that can ‘jolt an increasingly jaded Internet to attention.’ She observes, ‘despite the wide-ranging hardship these pieces catalog, they also share

a tendency to reach for the universal even as they dig into the acutely personal.’ The first-person narrative provides an attractive means to attract people’s attention to and to frame the discussion of broader issues: the personal is ‘dressed up’ in the ‘language of the political.’

The first-person narrative has some masterful practitioners. Having mentioned some of these, Bennett proceeds to observe that they are

like a different literary species alongside most of the content of today’s teeming first-person verticals, and not just because they feel so much more fully incubated and carefully conceived. Even when they are graphic and raw, their self-revelations are strategically dispensed. They don’t merely assert the universality of their experience; they arrive at it by guiding us through the precise arc of their self-reckoning. In fact, the defining trait of the best first-person writing is exactly what is missing from so much of the new crop: self-awareness.

Some of the most skilful contemporary employment of the first-person perspective is found in the work of the Norwegian novelist Karl Ove Knausgård’s *Min Kamp*. Knausgård’s work has garnered glowing plaudits from literary critics and has enthralled readers around the world. Knausgård’s attentiveness to the subtle contours of a life, his perceptiveness to the salient themes of our existence, his unsparing exposure of his actions, thoughts, and experiences, and his capacity to observe himself set him apart from the host of writers who lack his gift and stomach for keen-eyed and unflinching self-scrutiny in public. While it has won him an adoring public, Knausgård’s ruthless disclosure has alienated him from many who were formerly his

closest friends and relations. Knausgård illustrates how an uncompromising commitment to telling one's story can come at considerable personal cost.

In [an insightful essay](#), Elizabeth Stoker Bruenig remarks upon different instances of confessional literature and the purposes that they have sought to achieve: Augustine's *Confessions* 'was about reconciling a man with his neighbors and to God'; Rousseau was about 'healing society'; De Quincey represented a failed attempt at a 'cautionary tale'; Knausgård is about '[scrupulous attention](#)' to the threads and folds in the frayed fabric of our lives. To such instances of confession, Bruenig adds a peculiarly gendered genre of contemporary confessional literature, one within which young women 'perform the details of their own lives in public.' She relates this to the public's desire for the display of young female subjectivity, suggesting that it represents 'a kind of commodification of confession.' Yet these contemporary female confessions typically fare poorly when compared to earlier iterations of the genre:

Contemporary female soul-searchers like Emily Gould and Marie Calloway can trace their writing back to the work of confessional poets like Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. Such writing has been for many women an obvious arena in which to explore not only their inner lives but also the nature of femininity itself, so it is not surprising that today the form seems in many ways dominated by women, both as producers and consumers. But today's women confessional writers often appear to be at pains to stave off the bracing, grave tone of their poet forebears. Earnest and dire are out; ironic and wry are in.

Yet there is a cost to the calibration of a confession's tone to the prejudices of its hearers. Namely, one begins to wonder what else has been adjusted. Like Augustine, Plath may not have been telling the whole truth in her work, but one could never doubt that she meant what she said. But the "I" position, coupled with the very personal and very weighty, now demands a particular tone. If intimacy and authenticity are the ultimate goals of confession, these stories are in a sense drained of both.

The contemporary gendered confessional genre has thus been shaped under the influence of online patterns of consumption and a mass audience's appetite for the disclosure of female subjectivities: it is, Bruenig suggests, 'confession as a consumer product.'

Such first-person accounts now also serve to frame topical and political issues in a manner that commonly short-circuits the processes of self-examination and deep attentiveness. While they may proclaim their aspirations to the often unforgiving virtues of intimacy and authenticity, they may shrink back from the unsettling and painful task of uncompromising self-narration to the safe distance of relatability and surd-less stories that are easily metabolized into ideologically validating 'takes'.

### *A Shift in Interpretation and Dialogue*

In concert with, and fuelled by, the shifts mentioned above there has been a change in posture towards both interpretation and dialogue. The change in the case of interpretation takes the form of a privatization of meaning. Interpretation, as more traditionally understood, seeks to grasp the meaning of texts as something distinct from us. It is a task that calls us to move

beyond the immediacy of our own prejudices and personal feelings and to grapple with something distinct from and resistant to ourselves. Meaning is primarily external and interpretation is the process by which we become attentive and receptive to this. By contrast, with the privileging of the personal and affective realm and a context that favours immediacy, *impression* starts to displace interpretation. Meaning is no longer primarily external and publicly accessible, but retreats into the affective realm of the self. The primary meaning of a text starts to become what it ‘feels like’ to me, what it looks like ‘from my perspective’, what it ‘means to me’, or what I ‘hear it to be saying.’

As meaning so retreats, texts and words can cease to have public meaning and authority, because they mean different things to different people. ‘Interpretations’—which are really subjective impressions—are increasingly immune to public judgment and challenge. It is not accidental that one will often find statements badly misrepresented in such a context: how people ‘hear’ someone, something radically contingent upon the nature of their affective posture towards the person in question, can take priority over the objective reality of the person’s actual words.

This shift will also tend to produce resistance to more traditional modes of discourse that are more confrontational, authoritative, undemocratic, and which place an emphasis upon public and objective meaning that must be contended for. For many younger generations, such forms of discourse will seem potentially threatening and quite incongruous with the way that their educational and cultural formation has trained them to think and interact.

### *A Crisis in Evangelical Experience and Authority*

In many cases, the new storytellers' movement exposes past and continuing failures of evangelical churches and contexts in the formation of new generations. In particular, many churches have failed to steer the hearts of its young people through the treacherous straits of adolescence into mature adult faith. Many evangelical churches have been hostile environments for thoughtful and questioning young people. They haven't provided wise and clear guidance on the sexual and moral issues that are increasingly pressing concerns for young people, nor given them the wisdom to deal with the temptations that face them. They have left many women feeling like second class citizens in the kingdom of God. They have often been unloving and unsupportive contexts for young LGBT persons struggling to reconcile seemingly opposing elements of their identities.

A further impetus for the new storytellers has been the catastrophic collapse of trust in the authority and credibility of evangelical church leaders. This collapse has occurred through such things as the exposure and publicizing of the sins, abuses, and cover-ups of evangelical churches and leaders, not least as the Internet has provided voices that would previously have been marginalized and suppressed with the means by which to connect with others with similar experiences. In a hyper-connected climate that thrives on outrage, the likelihood that any given scandal will receive attention far beyond the context within which it occurred is increased a hundredfold. In this environment, people are much less prepared to trust church leaders. Also, as young people now function within the broadening and rapidly shifting contexts opened up by the Internet, pastors and church leaders of an older generation will increasingly seem out of touch with their social realities and

their poorly informed attempts to speak into these will often only harm their credibility.

The multitude of contrasting positions that young people will be exposed to within their social environments in the Internet Age also means that their church leaders' voices will increasingly have to vie for their attention with the voices of many others and will no longer enjoy the same degree of control over their spiritual formation. As young people are directly exposed to so many clashing opinions, private interpretation will gradually tend to displace or undermine public and ecclesial authorities. They will find themselves in the position of picking and choosing between different voices claiming to speak with authority and, without clear criteria or training by which to do so, their cultural prejudices will often have to perform this role. The hyper-democratic character of discourse online will also undermine the authority of ordained church leaders, placing them on the same plane as everyone else and, on account of the undifferentiating character of the Internet, habituating us to seeing the person, rather than the office. The Internet can also encourage the rise of a sort of theological populism, where theological questions are implicitly deemed to be settled by popular vote.

The challenge to evangelicalism from such developments does not originate within a *theological* shift (although they can produce such shifts), but in cultural and technological shifts and within the aporiae and abuses within people's evangelical formation. Many of these young people are telling stories because, even though many of them lack theological competence, their stories seem to provide clear evidence of systemic *pastoral* failings in evangelicalism, failings that themselves seem to be clear evidence of the failure of the theology that underlies them, perhaps especially as it relates to

women and LGBT persons. Not only has evangelicalism not rung true in the experience of many, it has produced immense damage in many people's lives and their stories are the evidence of this.

The hostility that can often be expressed towards the dominance of theologically trained and ordained voices in Christian conversation is fostered by the belief that such voices have systemically silenced the challenge of such persons and are motivated by power rather than truth. Evangelicalism's emphasis upon correct doctrine over people's stories is considered to have been and to remain a means of oppression and must therefore be opposed. To remedy this, we are told that we must listen to the voices of the marginalized and oppressed and produce theologies that accommodate and validate their experiences.

Many young people can become alienated from evangelical church leaders, no longer sure that these figures are acting in their best interests. In such a climate, it is unsurprising that millennials will often turn to their peers for guidance and direction. The empathetic storytellers among them, with whose stories they resonate, seem to be far more trustworthy and genuine. Even those who have not rejected evangelical teaching and authorities will often feel disoriented. Hearing others' personal stories assists them in navigating this uncertain and uncharted terrain.

# *The Holes* *in the* *Story*

## *Moving Towards Criticism*

To this point, I have been describing the people I have styled ‘the new storytellers’. I hope that I have given some sense of the forces that motivate them, and of the genuine needs to which the movement responds. At this point, I will turn to some criticisms. I am criticizing the dominance of certain habits of thought that I believe are contrary to faithful and healthy Christian thought when afforded such controlling power. What I am criticizing here is *not* a genre or manner of writing, but the prominence given to such a genre and mode of writing to the obscuring or exclusion of others. There are a number of millennial writers of spiritual memoirs who have demonstrated their capacity to write such works without succumbing to the more general dangerous ways of thinking that often accompany them, persons for whom the spiritual memoir is just one genre among many others, rather than reflecting the dominating framework of their thought.

### *The Privileging of Story over Theology*

To the degree theological concerns register within the writing of the new storytellers, they are often situated principally within the affective frames of personal narratives. That is, theological concerns are almost invariably viewed primarily in terms of the more immediate subjective needs, desires, impressions, concerns, moral instincts, feelings, doubts, and hopes of the storytellers. As the personal story is given so much weight, it is difficult for theology to pose any great challenge to it or fundamentally to reframe it, decentering the individual. Rather, theology will tend to be drawn around it.

Not only are theological concerns *framed* by personal narrative, theological concerns often only *register* to the degree that they directly impinge upon personal identities. Within such a context, people will seldom be drawn to contemplate or reflect upon the reality and truth of God as it exceeds immediate relevance to their experience and identities. They will run the real risk of becoming preoccupied with a theology drawn around the idol of their own identities, experience, and ideologies.

The difficulty of exposing their stories to the testing principles of theology is heightened by the youth of the writers. They haven't yet been afforded the clarifying distance from their most formative experiences possessed by more mature memoirists (Stanley Hauerwas' *Hannah's Child* is a recent example of such a mature spiritual or theological memoir, C.S. Lewis' *Surprised by Joy* and John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* are two older ones). If we are to assess our lives theologically we will first need to establish the conditions by which our experience can be rendered the *object* of analysis. Although it never ceases to be *our* experience, it must be sufficiently detached from the immediacy of our current selves

that we can stand over against it. The capacity to objectify our own experience doesn't come naturally and is especially rarely found among the young, as we do not have the naturally differentiating factor of time on our side in this respect.

For such young writers, any memoir will also tend to be a very provisional account of their lives, subject to potentially considerable reassessment and revision. Whatever wine of experience one finds in such works is going to be of extremely recent vintage. Some of these writers have produced a number of autobiographically flavoured works in succession, each one narrating a chapter of a life that is still characterized by a surprising degree of instability or volatility.

### *The Problems with Empathy*

Though routinely praised, empathy is by nature an ambivalent trait and any heavy dependence upon it will tend to produce profoundly unhealthy results. Because empathy is a [focusing and parochial trait](#), highly susceptible to unhealthy [ingroup-outgroup dynamics](#), those who are primarily driven by it often have their moral perspective deeply skewed. The more one empathizes with a particular party, the less able one typically becomes to recognize the force and legitimacy of competing perspectives (and the more likely one is to feel antipathy towards them) or of an overarching moral framework.

The empathy of the new storytellers tends to constrain their vision and capacity to understand alternative perspectives, narrowing the horizons of interest, concern, and enquiry. A truth that lies beyond and that can lay claim to or relativize our identities retreats from view. Little can attain to the escape velocity from the orbit of personal stories or break open claustrophobic horizons to a greater reality and truth beyond.

An emphasis upon empathy will tend to produce ugly polarizations as people emotionally identify so intensely with some positions that they are swallowed up by their immediacy, unable to see any bigger picture.

A focus upon empathy also routinely sacrifices truth to sensitivities, finding it difficult to countenance anything that might make people we identify with feel hurt. As I've [observed elsewhere](#):

Such an ethic is concerned about anything that might negatively impact upon people's feelings. This negative impact can take a number of forms. None of us should be made to feel judged, condemned, or defiled on account of our actions, nor should we be allowed to feel that we are suffering the just consequences of past sinful actions. As much as humanly possible, we should all be affirmed and validated in our choices and stories. It is unreasonable to hold people to standards that are painful and unpleasant and especially wrong to maintain that someone has a very demanding moral duty when we have no personal experience of their position. Instead of harsh and judgmental language such as 'sin' and 'fornication', we need to be prepared to adopt softer and more therapeutic terms, palliating the unpleasant feeling of shame, and, rather than speaking of God's claim upon us, which can seem demanding and subject us to external judgment and potentially coercion, speak of virtue in terms of the language of self-realization, authenticity, and being all that we can be.

For such an ethic, the sin of non-marital sex takes a backseat to the sin of 'slut-shaming'. Far, far worse than having sex outside of marriage is the possibility that one

should be made to feel really bad, impure, judged, or subject to long term adverse consequences on account of that fact...

The more that empathy is foregrounded, the more sensitivities will be given preference over truth or morality. When it becomes imperative that sensitive people not be discomforted by truth or by the claims of morality, our ethics and our discourse concerning truth will hedge itself in ever more qualifiers, or retreat to limp statements about personal preference: 'I feel the practice of Christian chastity is good for me, but your mileage might vary.' Higher norms, principles, values, or realities should not be permitted to impose themselves upon our feelings.

It is important to recognize that Scripture frequently challenges the instinct of empathy, calling judges not to be swayed by pity when enacting God's laws, and condemning leaders who allowed their sense of truth, justice, and obedience to be swayed by emotional ties. The clarity and reality of something—and of Someone—beyond ourselves that claims our loyalties and our lives, of morality and reality that takes priority over our feelings, will only be retained as we resist the sort of excessive empathy for which causing people emotional discomfort is the deepest concern.

[Edwin Friedman](#) highlights further problems with an overvaluation of empathy, especially as it relates to the dynamics of groups.<sup>2</sup> He observes the way that an emphasis upon empathy takes the place of any emphasis upon responsibility and how it is manipulated by the 'sensitive' to make groups without moral nerve adapt to them. The appeal to

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<sup>2</sup> Edwin Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York, NY: Seabury Books, 2007) 132-138.

empathy can close down any uncomfortable movement in the direction of greater responsibility before it begins. Friedman argues that, unless leaders develop a higher threshold for other people's supposed 'pain', the sensitivities of the hyper-sensitive will be used to engage the herding mechanism of the group and shut down any process by which people might be moved towards healthy growth. The more sensitive we become to other people's discomfort and the more that we allow this sensitivity to prevent us from doing or saying anything that might be unpleasant for them, the more we will incentivize their regression into an ever thinner skinned state.

Friedman makes clear that he is not criticizing *caring* for and about others, not is he advocating *harming* others (which is not the same thing as *hurting* them). Rather, he is making apparent the difference between care—which aims at healthy growth and responsibility—and empathy—which tends to value people's feelings to the detriment of all else.

In the long run, empathy can be profoundly *uncaring*: when we are so concerned about *our* pain threshold for other people's discomfort we cease to seek their personal and moral well-being and growth. Growth doesn't typically occur without challenge, or without a measure of discomfort. As Proverbs 27:6 implies, friends can cause us pain for our good, while affirmation and kisses can arise from such an indifference to our well-being that the giver is to be regarded as our enemy.

The overvaluation of empathy can produce a regime of 'niceness'. 'Niceness' is agreeable, inoffensive, tolerant, affirming, inclusive. It never says no, it doesn't draw lines, it doesn't exclude, it never denies. It values feelings over the character of action and intention. The demand for 'niceness' is a means of disqualifying, dismissing, and discrediting without the need for careful engagement and the regime of niceness is

enforced by a host of online ‘hall monitors’ poised to punish the slightest infraction. If someone doesn’t use the correct terminology, says something that might potentially be ‘offensive’ or ‘triggering’, they can be frozen out of the conversation.

The extreme emphasis upon empathy and niceness and the focus on personal story can all arise from a sort of emotional entitlement, the belief that the world should adjust itself to individuals’ sensitivities and perspectives. When so elevated the effect is the arresting of growth and a regression into immaturity and self-centredness.

Merely surrendering ourselves to the passion of empathy is a very dangerous course to take. The alternative to empathy is not callousness but the cultivation of a compassionate moral posture towards people. In contrast to empathy, a compassionate moral posture is not an emotive reaction, governed by the feelings of other parties, as these relate to our low pain threshold for their discomfort. Rather it is a loving and responsive posture that addresses itself principally to the good of other persons, not to their feelings. It doesn’t ignore our emotional reaction of empathy, but nor does it just follow it. As in the case of feelings more generally, empathy is ‘evidence’ to be tested and weighed in the process of careful deliberation. A compassionate moral posture is also one that recognizes the parochial character of empathy and seeks to cultivate compassion for people with whom we cannot easily naturally resonate. Here it is moral reflection and deliberation that directs and cultivates the passions, rather than the passions directing morality.

## *The Shrinking of Truth*

I mentioned above the danger of our statements of truth and morality being reduced to statements of personal experience. This is particularly concerning when we are speaking about the Christian faith. For instance, Rachel Held Evans writes:

I often wonder if the role of the clergy in this age is not to dispense information or guard the prestige of their authority, but rather to *go first*, to volunteer the truth about their sins, their dreams, their failures, and their fears in order to free others to do the same.<sup>3</sup>

‘Volunteering the truth about their sins’ is rather different from telling the truth about sin more generally. The clergy are no longer so much those especially entrusted with upholding and communicating God’s truth, but those who communicate their own truths in a liberating manner. Sharing one’s autobiographical truth in hope that it might resonate with others is quite a different thing from sharing a Truth to which we all must submit, a Reality greater than all of our personal narratives, a Story that relativizes all of our stories, and a One who lays claim to our allegiance. As the Apostle Paul declares in 2 Corinthians 4:5: ‘For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus’ sake.’

None of this is to deny the value of personal testimony and narrative in its own place, just the claim that its place is at the centre of the picture. We will often struggle to believe all that

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<sup>3</sup> Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2015) 112.

God has revealed about himself. The temptation is to reduce God and his revelation to a size that our stories can accommodate, to ‘pick and choose’, to reject the biblical texts and teachings that scandalize us, rather than wrestling with them. Christian truth is much bigger than our stories can handle. The centring of Christian faith on our personal stories runs a constant risk of pursuing, less a Christianity that recognizes doubt as a feature of the continuing process of the life of sanctification and proclaims the reality of a Saviour who can help our unbelief, than a [Christianity that is shrunk to the size of our weak faith.](#)

The systematic prioritizing of the reader’s subjective and ideological point of view, only valuing texts to the degree that they are useful to its ends, is a danger for such personal story or identity driven approaches. Texts become the plastic dummies of ventriloquized ideologies, are cannibalized for serviceable parts, or are deconstructed and read against themselves, rather than serving as independent voices in critical conversation with their readers. With the emphasis upon the personal story and the subjective identity and interests of the reader, the new storytellers tend to indulge in readings of Scripture that are characterized by highly selective ‘picking and choosing’ or which are overwhelmingly driven and constrained by the personal interests and oriented around the personal identities and ideologies of the interpreters.<sup>4</sup> The

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<sup>4</sup> As Rachel Held Evans argues, *everyone* picks and chooses when they read Scripture: the important matter is *how* we pick and choose. She argues that we must ‘creatively interpret with love’ (Rachel Held Evans, *A Year of Biblical Womanhood* [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012] 296). Such a hermeneutic affords Scripture little room to challenge our preconceptions of ‘love’.

result is that Scripture cannot easily function as an authoritative voice over against them.

As personal narrative starts to provide the frame for ‘truth’ and the means by which we ‘pick and choose’ what to believe, it can be easy to elide truth with power. In a situation of pervasive interpretative pluralism, we may feel ourselves to be thrown back upon private choice in interpretation, without any genuine authority out there to command our obedience. Where authority and clear public truth is lacking, the vacuum will have to be filled by power, by the projection of our wills in acts of choice.

One encounters this assumption to various degrees among the new storytellers. When such an intense relationship is drawn between identity and theology, the latter flowing so naturally from the former, unwelcome *truth* claims will understandably be highly susceptible to being judged as *power* claims, advancing the private interests of those who have a particular identity (typically white cisgender, heterosexual males). Associated with this can be a hermeneutic of suspicion, whereby people regard claims made by certain groups as if they usually dissembled the true driving forces of hatred, fear, violence, and a desire to dominate. When criticism is primarily perceived as personal attack and when truth claims are perceived as veiled attempts to control, receptive dialogue between people of sharply differing positions becomes exceedingly difficult.

The emphasis on story over objective and public truth can also give rise to an obsession with ‘tone’. Because affective posture is so important for the new storytellers and their ilk, as readers and interlocutors they will always be deeply invested in the occult divination of the supposed ‘tone’ of others. The importance given to affective posture means that, once you

have been deemed to be without empathy, there is hardly anything that you can write that can dislodge the impression, as every word you write will meet a jaundiced eye and every criticism you make can be immediately dismissed.

### *Why we Shouldn't Trust Our Stories*

Our stories told from inside are not necessarily trustworthy. Slavoj Žižek observes:

The first lesson of psychoanalysis here is that this “richness of inner life” is fundamentally fake: it is a screen, a false distance, whose function is, as it were, to save my appearance. ... The experience we have of our lives from within, the story we tell ourselves about ourselves in order to account for what we are doing, is thus a lie—the truth lies rather outside, in what we do.<sup>5</sup>

Žižek's description of our personal narratives—'the story we tell ourselves about ourselves in order to account for what we are doing'—is an exceedingly important one. As I [observe elsewhere](#):

First, 'our story' is not some eternal truth, but an account told by interested and unreliable narrators—*ourselves*—and should be handled very carefully as a result. Second, not only are we the narrators of our own stories but we are also the primary hearers—it is a story we 'tell ourselves about ourselves.' We are the ones most easily and typically deceived (usually willingly) by our own unreliable narration. Third, it is a story told 'in order to account for

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<sup>5</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *First As Tragedy, Then As Farce* (London: Verso, 2009) 40.

what we are doing.’ As such it is a story typically designed to help us live with ourselves and our actions. It is usually a rationalization, an attempt to make sense of our actions retrospectively, in a manner that acts as a defence against the harshness of the ethical or rational judgment that they might otherwise provoke.

Recognizing the character of personal stories is imperative. We can easily deceive ourselves with our stories. They are not the unvarnished truth. They are not merely the brute ‘facts’ but are interpretations and constructions, interpretations and constructions that should not be preserved from cross-examination or challenge. If we focus wholly upon the immediacy of our personal story as narrated from within, we will regularly be highly subject to the blinding effects of our self-empathy, our reluctance to subject our actions to the painful scrutiny of more absolute external standards or perspectives. We often like to portray our internal selves with rich colours in order to deflect attention from the far less flattering cold reality of our external actions.

The morally blinding potential of the first-person perspective and the elevation of empathy is well illustrated by infidelity’s recurring presence in romantic movies. Critically acclaimed Oscar-winning movies such as *Titanic*, *The English Patient*, *Brokeback Mountain*, *The Bridges of Madison County*, all have infidelity or adultery as a key element. However, the audience seldom registers the wickedness of and the immense damage caused by the protagonists’ actions because they are so absorbed in their first-person perspective and the intensity of their love. For this first-person perspective, adopted through the film-makers’ co-option of our empathic instinct, sin will be rationalized and wronged parties will tend to be painted in a

negative light in order to make us feel better about the sins committed against them by our heroes. If we were to step back from the first-person framing, resist the pull upon our empathy, and look at matters more objectively, we might be appalled.

### *Lack of Differentiation*

Careful thought about our stories invariably requires some capacity to distance oneself from the immediacy of the first person perspective, to stand outside of our prior experience and judge it more objectively. Where such immediacy hasn't been overcome, problems spring up. For instance, the emotional power that the experiences of our upbringing have over us encourages in post-evangelicalism an understandable tendency to a highly *reactive* engagement with an evangelicalism chiefly identified with its rather caricatured populist and juvenile forms, rather than a *responsive* and *responsible* engagement with evangelicalism in its more carefully articulated and mature expressions. The latter sort of engagement is difficult for those who cannot establish sufficient personal and emotional distance from the movement and their own experiences within it.

As they foreground and heighten sensitivities, the new storytellers run a risk of becoming highly emotionally reactive. Where it is imperative for people that they feel that their feelings and the feelings of the people they identify with are empathized with, attempts to call those positions into question will often excite offence-taking, outrage, recriminations, and tone-policing. It is difficult to 'feel understood' when one is being disagreed with. When the positions that I present are inextricably intertwined with my 'story', which is in turn inextricably bound up with my personhood, challenges to my

positions are perceived to be an attack upon my very self. Unfortunately, in such situations, issues will soon become surrounded by an emotional shield of sensitivities, making conversation nearly impossible.

In the context of online discourse, where differentiation has broken down or been weakened on many fronts, and discourse isn't very aerated, herd dynamics will take hold and the passions—outrage, empathy, resentment, etc.—will overwhelm reflection and deliberation.

### *The Need for Public and Confrontational Discourse*

Intimate personal spaces operate differently from public spaces. Public spaces don't belong to any particular individual. They are arenas which we can enter and participate in, but from which we can periodically retreat to private, personal spaces. Because they represent a non-intimate and bounded arena of discourse, public spaces are very useful sites for directly tackling differences of opinion that would be highly threatening in a more personal space.

The new storytellers privileging of personal narrative frequently comes with resistance to the manner of public discourse. Sensitivities are appealed to as reason to curtail public discourse, lest it 'trigger' vulnerable participants. Rather than exposing people to unsettling challenge, we must carry out our conversations in a 'safe space', where everyone can vulnerably share their personal story. The privileging of personal narrative and sensitivities squeezes out challenging public discourse from two directions. On the one hand, it is insisted that public discourse must be inclusive, that people must tell their personal narratives, and that we should not address issues in which others are implicated in their absence. On the other hand, it is insisted that public discourse must be

carefully policed to ensure that it is safe and sensitive to these persons. As they claim to be ‘dehumanized’ or triggered by voices that challenge their personal narratives and the identities bound up in them contrary voices are often disqualified from speaking or muzzled.

Public spaces call us to *public* conversation. Public conversation differs from private and personal conversation in summoning people beyond the immediacy of their own particularity and self-expression to relate positions together within a broader and more universal ‘horizon’. Hans-Georg Gadamer observes: ‘To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion.’<sup>6</sup> Gadamer distinguishes this process from ‘the empathy of one individual for another’ or from ‘subordinating another person to our own standards.’<sup>7</sup> He identifies the way that many people operate in terms of ‘closed horizons,’ for which the other party’s vantage point is always so ‘factored into’ what he is trying to say that his voice cannot move beyond the cultural, social, and material conditions from which it arose to speak truth to different vantage points. This falsely insulates us from voices that might unsettle or relativize our own perspectives. ‘Pervasive interpretative pluralism’ becomes a particularly acute problem when interpretations can no longer be publicly contested. At least when the meaning of texts was perceived to be more public we could weed out and discredit bad interpretations through disputation.

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<sup>6</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (second edition), translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 304.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

Gadamer's focus in these passages is upon horizons within history, but similar principles apply to public conversation, which calls us to venture without the cloistered walls of our own self-expression and identity groupings to situate ourselves within a broader horizon alongside others. As we do this, that which is most immediate to us will no longer enjoy such determining power over our thought and we will become more alert to truth that exceeds our vantage points. Within the larger context, although it never ceases to exert a powerful influence upon us, our personal perspectives—and personal perspectives more generally—no longer enjoy the same privilege. Although we are *situated* within the immediacy of a particular historical and personal horizon, we are not *imprisoned* within it, but can expand and change that horizon, 'fusing' it with others, chiefly through encounter and engagement with different vantage points upon truth that exceeds us all.

The recognition that, while we all have a particular vantage point, we are not imprisoned by it and we need to move beyond the immediacy of our own situatedness to operate in terms of a more universal horizon is of considerable importance. This exposes the radical limitations of an approach that is narrowly fixated upon the immediacy of personal narratives and empathic identifications.

Public and confrontational discourse is a means by which societies seek to operate within a more universal horizon. Such discourse takes cognizance of particular vantage points, but presses us to articulate such vantage points in a way that overcomes the distorting refractions of what is nearest to us, not least our personal narratives and empathic identifications. Operating within a more universal horizon isn't a straightforward affair, but requires discipline of us.

Most people are limited in the degree to which they are equipped to participate in such discourse. This is one of the reasons why traditional discourse does not adopt an egalitarian form. Rather, discourse is differentiated in character. For instance, in a law court personal stories and vantage points are heeded as testimony is given. These vantage points are then subjected to questioning and cross-examination as legal representatives try to place such stories within a broader horizon. Judges, juries, legal representatives, eyewitnesses, defendants, expert witnesses, reporters, and other figures all play differentiated roles in a complex and multifaceted conversation that is designed to produce a just judgment. The limitations of personal narrative are recognized by the structure and exposed in the course of the conversation.

Much the same thing is required of us in our theological conversation as Christians. While we do need to hear the witness of those who are personally invested, we also need to expose them to the scrutiny and questioning of a greater horizon of truth. We need rigorous theological argumentation and careful judgment by people who *aren't* immediately personally invested and who are less likely to have their vision distorted by personal interest or empathy. We need to resist the overvaluation of the first-person perspective or identity-driven accounts of truth. We need to foster public discourses committed to the pursuit of truth through mutual challenge, discourses that routinely unsettle and discomfort us, as these are primary contexts of personal and societal growth and maturation.

# *The End of the Story*

## *Summing Up*

*I*n this booklet, I have characterized and criticized the new storytellers. Although their sensibilities are widely shared within our society and have considerable traction, I have argued for the need to call them into question. I have maintained that the new storytellers' elevation of the first-person perspective, emphasis upon empathy, and stress upon niceness, self-evidently justified though they may seem to many of our contemporaries, are in fact seriously and sometimes fundamentally misguided. I have argued for the importance of establishing modes and contexts of discourse that relativize personal narrative and subject it to the discipline and challenge of more public, objective, and universal truth and reason. Our stories are not 'sacred', nor are they a straightforward expression of our humanity. While they should be attended to and while we should recognize the dignity of every person as God's creation, personal narratives should not be immune to challenge or questioning.

On the other hand, it is imperative that churches and Christian leaders attend to the phenomenon of the new

storytellers, not merely as some error to be refuted, but as an attempt to engage as Christians within a very different social and cultural environment. It is important to see the way in which the phenomenon arises in part from a generational breach within churches, one due in no small measure to the historic and ongoing failings of evangelicalism and its leaders. In identifying the weaknesses and errors, we must also recognize the good in the movement. Although they are, as I hope I have demonstrated, especially vulnerable to certain serious failings, the spiritual memoirs of young evangelicals can also do much good.

It is essential that pastors appreciate the significance of such storytellers and the communities that are formed around them: in the relatability of the storytellers and the emotional immediacy of the communities that surround them, many people are finding something that they believe to be lacking in their churches. The influence of many of these storytellers upon others, especially upon young Christian women, now dwarfs that of most pastors. As Christians we need strong communities of fellow travellers in our faith and, where churches have not provided these, it is entirely unsurprising that people should turn elsewhere to find them. We need contact with lives worth emulating and the presence and assistance of others within the day to day path of discipleship. Where churches have not been places of love, support, protection, gentleness, and faithful compassion, but have been characterized by domineering authority, inattentiveness and indifference to people and their needs, and abuse and its concealment, the draw of empathetic, egalitarian, non-confrontational, and affirming communities will naturally be considerable. Rather than brushing off or condemning the movement, we must weigh it wisely, praise it where

appropriate, while more purposefully addressing the needs that it reveals.

Finally, recognition of the restrictive frame of the personal narrative should drive us towards a greater appreciation of and acquaintance with the One in terms of whose Story all other stories must be retold and from which all other stories must take their bearings. While God is not subject to the passion of 'empathy', he comes to us with love, compassion, and kindness. He comes to save us from the lies that we tell ourselves about ourselves in order to account for what we are doing and to give us a new way of telling our stories. As we are caught up in a Story far bigger than ourselves we can also discover a new way of relating to others, one that depends not upon our limited capacity for empathy and instinctive mutual emotional resonance, but upon the unity that we can share in Christ and the way that all are comprehended in God's purposes. Such a form of storytelling is liberating and expansive, as obstacles between identity groups are traversed by the rushing wind of God's renewing Spirit, when it is no longer we who live but Christ who lives in us.

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