

## PREFACE

Everyone is a storyteller. I didn't say that everyone *could be* a storyteller; everyone already *is* a storyteller, whether he or she realizes and acknowledges it or not. After forty years of telling stories and helping other people tell stories, I have learned this fact. From the first time a baby grunts and reaches for a cookie before he has finished his pureed green beans, he has begun to tell a story (albeit nonverbally) of choice and desire. When a parent asks a child what happened today at school and refuses to take "Nuthin!" for an answer, the child begins to frame her experience as a narrative. The astute parent knows that persistently asking the question, "Then what happened?" helps drive the sequence of events that become the story of the day. Stories arise at bedtime when a parent or grandparent opens a book and reads aloud or turns off the light and creates a world of historical or completely imaginary characters and events, a world in which both teller and listener take part until one or the other falls asleep. Stories erupt around the dinner table with the words, "You won't believe what happened at work today." Or they emerge slowly, accompanied by, "Did I ever tell you about the time . . . ?"

Human beings live in story like fish live in water. We literally experience our lives as a narrative—not as a series of random events but as a sequence of connected occasions

and experiences stitched together in narrative form. In this way, our experiences take on coherence and meaning. We learn to understand the world, other people, and God through a narrative lens. We also live surrounded by God like the very air we breathe, often invisible to us but absolutely necessary for life. This is why Paul can say to those gathered at the Temple of Athena that God is the one in which we live and move and have our being. (See Acts 17:28.) For this reason, when we speak of our experiences of God, we most often tell stories. Telling stories is not only a way of framing our understanding of the world and the people around us but also the means by which we speak of our divine encounters as well.

During the past fifty years, the art of storytelling has received renewed interest and appreciation. Storytelling festivals have sprung up all over the world, and with them, a class of performer known as the “professional storyteller” has emerged. Professional storytellers make their living traveling and telling stories in schools, theaters, churches, and other venues. Most of these performers are quite gifted, work hard at their craft, and deserve the attention and fees they receive. But I have noticed an unintended shadow side to the emergence of the “professional storyteller.”

Throughout history, storytelling has been a popular art, something practiced by a wide variety of people in numerous and various settings. Of course some, because of their gifts, became associated with the artful telling of stories, but this identification didn’t mean that the craft of storytelling belonged to the professional. The shadow of the professionalization of storytelling is revealed when people who otherwise might offer stories to their class at school, to their congregation at church, or to their children or grandchildren at home, choose not to. They say, “Since I can’t tell

a story like (insert name of professional storyteller), I won't tell one at all." Let me be clear: The people who make their living by telling stories do not intend to discourage others from doing so. In fact, the storytellers I know want their listeners to discover and tell their own stories. Even so, a storyteller's best efforts at encouraging others can have the unintended opposite effect.

The first thing we need to do is reclaim storytelling as an art form for amateurs. People who love stories can be taught to tell them. Their audience may be two youngsters who are fighting sleep with all their might or a classroom of second graders or a family gathered around a table during the holidays. The size of the audience is not what makes the storyteller!

The first book I had published, *Friends for Life*, consisted of fifty-two stories that could be used in worship. A short time after its publication, I met with a colleague who was the editor of denominational resources. He told me that he had read the book, which pleased me, but then he added that he was disappointed in it. When I asked him to explain, he said, "I knew you had been telling stories for a while and were supposed to be pretty good at it. As I read your book, though, I kept thinking this doesn't seem so hard. Even I could do this." All I could say to him in response was, "Did you ever consider that I intended for you to think exactly that?"

So if after reading *Spoken into Being*, readers go away with the impression that I am especially gifted or an exceptionally accomplished storyteller, then I have failed to convince them that anyone can be a storyteller. But if readers say, "That's not so hard; I can do that," then, in some large measure, I will feel that this book has accomplished its intended task. I hope to help readers recognize the gifts

they already possess for telling stories and to encourage them to use those gifts. Maybe they'll even pick up skills in the craft of storytelling along the way.

This book includes retellings of the first two Creation stories in Genesis. Like an overture played before a musical play, the first Creation story provides themes that will be discussed later and will set a tone for the rest of the book. One important reason that I believe all human beings have the capability to be storytellers is because each of us is stamped with the image of God, who spoke the entire universe into being as a story. God's story of Creation sets the standard for all stories that have ever been told and will ever be told. The places, people, and objects that make up every story we tell were present in that first story of Creation. My retelling of the second Creation story, which lies between chapters 2 and 3, will serve as an interlude to set the tone for the latter portion of the book.

In this book, I will take readers on a journey through a series of experiences from my own life. In part, I tell these stories to remind us of our shared experiences, but these stories also introduce me to the readers. Most importantly, however, I hope these stories will serve as an invitation for readers to tell their own stories, using the storytelling prompts at the end of each section. Together, we will discover our sacred stories and the settings, people, and objects that reveal their sacredness to us. We will ask ourselves, *Where are my sacred places? Who has helped me experience God? What holy relics hold importance in my life?* The storytelling prompts are designed to allow the reader to tell his or her own stories in response to the stories I tell.

Stories from scripture and from our own life experiences can be framed in many ways. The two Creation stories at the beginning of Genesis explain in different—some

would say contradictory—ways how the universe and human beings came to be. Upon first glance, these two stories offer divergent conclusions about the state of the world and humanity. We frequently find ourselves in such a paradox, living between two different stories that express disparate truths about our world and how we are to understand it. The tension elicited by these seemingly contradictory stories forms the creative environment from which other stories emerge—stories that take us beyond the paradox created by the original narratives.

Sometimes this tension emerges when stories of fear collide with stories of fantasy. When we err on the side of fear, we find ourselves feeling trapped in a single narrative from which we cannot escape and for which we cannot imagine a good ending. When we err on the side of fantasy, we attempt to create an idealized future, a utopian dream that can never be realized fully. When we can embrace the tension that lies between fear and fantasy, holding the two together and refusing to collapse our life story in one direction or the other, we allow for a creative integration of the two that moves us beyond immobilizing, anxiety-producing fear and unrealizable flights of fantasy. When we make the trek beyond fear and fantasy, we move toward the realm of faith. Stories from scripture provide a guide for navigating the extremes of fear and fantasy and lead us toward the mysterious territory of faith. To that effect, later chapters will explore the Joseph saga from Genesis 37–50 and one of Jesus' better known parables, mining both narratives for examples of how we can move beyond stories of fear and fantasy and toward divine encounters fueled by stories of faith.

We can't avoid being formed by stories. Narrative is so all-encompassing that rarely are we consciously aware we are surrounded by it. According to the first Creation

story in Genesis, the entire universe is a story being told by God. The stories that capture our attention form us into the persons we are now and shape who we will become in the future. But first, we must ask ourselves, *Which stories will we allow to shape our lives? Will our stories encompass “great distances, and starlight”? Will they be stories of “deep delight,” as Robert Penn Warren’s poem suggests? Will we live our lives built on a narrative of faith and restoration?* Come on the journey with me, and let’s answer these questions together.

### *Storytelling Prompts*

1. Who, if anyone, told you stories when you were young? Did he or she create the stories, offer stories from his or her own life, or tell folk or fairy tales? Who, if anyone, read to you when you were young? What do you recall about that experience? How did you feel toward the teller? If you can remember the stories, share them with others.
2. With whom do you share your own stories—with your children or grandchildren, with your Sunday school class or small group, with friends and family around the dinner table? How does it feel to be the teller of a story? How do you feel toward those who listen? What prompts you to tell stories?